The Painted Woman

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/19026049.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Rape/Non-Con, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: F/M, Gen, Multi
Fandom: Outlander Series - Diana Gabaldon, Outlander (TV), Star Trek: Alternate Original Series (Movies), Star Trek, Outlander (TV) RPF, Outlander & Related Fanpics
Relationship: Jamie Fraser/Original Female Character(s)

Series: Part 1 of Red Jamie and the Painted Lady
Stats: Published: 2019-05-30 Updated: 2019-08-06 Chapters: 18/? Words: 222003

The Painted Woman

by BL4CKB377Y

Summary

So, what prompted this fic was, I always wanted to see how this story would play out from the perspective of an unmarried, badass soldier/warrior woman/femme fatale from the 23rd century who had a dark past and scars of her own. What would happen if she suddenly found
herself in the midst of an era and a people who oppressed her from all sides, and only one man who seemed to be able to see her for what and who she was?

(Honestly, this story is mostly selfish fluff on my part so if you don't like it... SORRY NOT SORRY!)

Notes

Zahra is a partially-canon, mostly original content character of mine from a Star Trek RPG I used to play. She's been through a helluva lot in her life. She is a former Orion Syndicate slave/trained assassin, turned Starfleet ally. A decorated war veteran and highly respected Starfleet officer. Close personal friend to Captain James Kirk. She is a master escapist, and a knowledgeable herbologist/botanist. She has Advanced Combat and Survival training, as well as being a certified field medic.

If you'd like to check her out for some basic back story, you may visit this site: https://enterprise.ghannet.com/viewtopic.php?f=197&t=11069&p=1255673&#p318743

See the end of the work for more notes.
Outlander

Chapter Summary

What happens when a warrior woman from the 23rd century finds herself shot back over 500 years into Earth's past with naught but her wits and the clothes on her back?

Zahra was on vacation. Clarification, she was forcibly on vacation. Counselor’s orders. Mandatory RnR. She supposed she couldn’t blame her counselor for taking such action. With so many traumatic events that had happened to her in succession, one right after the other, Zahra had been beyond stressed out and suffering from major PTSD on top of her already existing PTSD.

Just to break it down a little for you:

- There’d been the planet ending drama with Nero and his armada that she’d been right in the center of on Enterprise.
- Then, there was the whole John Harrison/Admiral Marcus incident, where the Enterprise had been all but destroyed, and she had lost her first/only love, Rick, in the process.
- Then Kai, her best friend/brother in arms, had been tortured and almost died in some insane alien prison.
- After that, she and Kai had been kidnapped by her former ‘master’ Jargen, wherein she had been brutally tortured for several days; not just physically, but mentally and spiritually as well.
- The discovery that her childhood friend Fade was alive was soon after that rocked her to her core, as she’d thought she’d seen him die when she was a child and they were still in Jargen’s midst.
- She and her lover N’ko had been stranded on some crazy ice planet together and almost died.
- Fresh out of medbay from that, some weird phenomenon had reverted her back to her child self wherein she had been made to relive all the horrors of her youth in the span of a month as memories flooded in and out of her mind as she de-aged then aged back.
- Following that, she’d had a heart shattering break up with N’ko.
- Then she’d been the victim of some alien entity on Oscinda that had invaded her mind and made her live through a horrible nightmare where she’d killed her best friend. Even if it had turned out to just be a dream, it had been as traumatizing and horrific as the real thing.
- Then the tragedy on Altamid and Yorktown happened where she’d lost almost everything.
- She’d flown back to Earth with Jim and Kai after that, only to discover that her ‘long lost grandmother’ had basically sent her and her mother to their deaths when Zahra was but a bean in her mother’s womb. Her mother hadn’t had to die. She didn't have to have a father who never knew she existed.
- Then, because of her history, she’d been recruited by Starfleet Intelligence who wanted her to go deep undercover to infiltrate an Orion Syndicate smuggling ring and apparently no other candidate was qualified for the job, nor did anyone else possess her particular background and expertise. She had accepted the assignment out of duty and obligation, and had to suffer through six months of pain and memories and things she never thought she would have to face again.

In other words… DRAMA! DRAMA! DRAMA!

All of these things had happened over the span of five years with little to no breaks in between. It
was like Zahra had just been living through one traumatic event after the other. Nonstop. It was no wonder after returning from her last op, she had found herself in a really bad place; emotionally, mentally, spiritually. She was in definite, serious need of some time off. The problem was that Zahra never took time off, at least not willingly. So she had, in essence, been given an ultimatum; either she could take some time off to decompress and come back for a psych evaluation, or she could resign from Starfleet altogether. Starfleet was her life. It was all she had. To lose it would be like losing herself, so... she’d taken the mandatory r’n’r.

Her first stop had been to her father’s mansion in Sydney where she’d spent about a week with him and her step-family, just getting to know each other better and actually trying to be a family. Her step-brother was almost her same age, and he was super sarcastic and witty and she enjoyed his company immensely. Her half-sister was a total hellcat, and a daddy’s girl, and she thoroughly loved having an older-sister, probably just as much as Zahra had loved having a younger one. They were both more tomboyish than girly and the younger girl absolutely adored Zahra’s hedgehog Mr. Prickles. So much so, that when Zahra planned to leave the following week on the all-expenses paid vacation her father was sending her on, she had no problems leaving her precious hedgie in the care of her youngest sibling.

She had tried to decline the vacation package Adam, her father, had offered her but the man had been insistent. He was trying to make up for all the years he’d missed, and even after she had reminded him they had plenty of time to do that, he had still insisted she take the weekend getaway to pamper herself for once. So, after she had run out of arguments, Zahra had taken the offer. She didn’t exactly know what Scotland had stuck out to her. Adam had given her several options. She supposed it was just the way in which he talked about it, and the pictures of the city and the inn she would be staying in. It was a small city, a tiny cozy inn, as opposed to the other metropolis, huge resort type places that had been on the list. This quaint little getaway in a small town was definitely more up her alley. The romantic mysticism of the place was both enchanting and alluring. Hell, the entire country was steeped in so much history, tradition, and beauty, it was like a place out of time. Inevitably, it wasn’t too difficult a decision for her to make, so she’d booked the trip.

The small country town her father had recommended was called Inverness and she would be staying at a delightfully cozy bed and breakfast that Adam and her step-mother, Gwen, had stayed at before. It was at said B and B that Zahra had met Mrs. Bard, who ran the small inn, and a local Pastor Donnely who actually owned it; it had been passed down to him through generations.

After checking in and settling her bags in her room, Zahra had chatted a bit with her hosts over tea and biscuits, where Pastor Donnely had regaled the attentive Zahra with tales of the history of their town and the lands nearby. They’d shared more idle chit chat and history over supper. At her own insistence, Zahra helped Mrs. Bard clean up from dinner before retiring to her room for the night. She’d been restless pretty much all day, but the weariness of travel had her eyelids heavy and she’d fallen fast asleep.

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The next morning Zahra arose early, thanks to a strict internal alarm clock, and so she helped Mrs. Bard make breakfast. They ate the meal together at the kitchen table before Zahra packed her messenger bag with a few necessities and departed with a small group for a guided tour across the countryside. They were shown several local landmarks, like Crainsmuir, and Culloden Moor. The most prominent landmark was the Mountain peak called Cocknammon rock where apparently, long ago when the British and the Highlanders were not all that friendly with one another, the British used to stage ambushes there for the Scottish militia. Zahra could admit she knew very little about Scottish history other than what she had personally ready, and Pastor Donnely had told her about the day before, but she did know that Scotland and England had a long history of war and oppression… The
same could be said about a lot of countries and civilizations, though, couldn't it?

The main destination on the tour had been the ruins of Castle Leoch. It was there Zahra was left to explore a little on her own, with or separate from the rest of the group. The majority of her day was spent exploring the castle grounds where she’d walked the halls and found an old apothecary/healer’s room to explore. She'd then ascended the winding stairs and peaked out the tallest tower. Overall, she had enjoyed the tour immensely, and was already falling in love with everything about this land. It was so beautiful and lush, and steeped in so much history and intrigue it was very alluring and almost provocative.

The tour had lasted most of the day and, when she returned to the inn that evening, the adventure apparently wasn’t over. Zahra was invited by Mrs. Bard herself to attend the Autumn harvest festival in the countryside. The Samhain festival of Druids they’d called it and these ‘druide’ had actually invited everyone to watch one of their ‘rituals’. The place they gathered at was called Craigh Na Dun and Zahra likened it to a smaller Stonehenge. There was a circle of rocks, and one large stone in the center. Mrs. Bard told her it was a focal sight for nature's magic and power; a very mystical and spiritual place.

It was dark, almost pitch black, when a trail of lights came into view and wound their way through the stones. Faeries they were called, and they performed some sort of ritual or ceremony, with music, lights, and dancing. The dancing was Zahra’s favorite part; hands down. She could imagine maybe once upon a time this would have been a very hush hush, unspeakable thing but now the culture, the religion was celebrated and it was beautiful. It all spoke to Zahra in a very surreal, spiritual way she couldn’t describe. Like it was pulling at something inside of her in a way that made her heart swell in her chest and had her itching to join in the dance as if she belonged there. It was so beautiful it brought tears to her eyes, and then she regretted it when it was over.

When she returned to the Inn with Mrs. Bard that night, after she’d retired to her room, she’d fallen asleep quickly and slept like the dead. For the first time in years, her dreams were pleasant and not plagued by horrors.

The next day, Zahra was left to explore the city and country on her own without a guide. A breakfast and some light shopping, she found herself itching to revisit the circle at Craigh Na Dun. She received a packed lunch from Mrs. Bard before she rented a Vespa from a local dealer which she used to ride out to the stones. When she arrived at Craig na Dun, she brought her messenger bag with hiking essential with her but left the bike behind as she hiked up the hillside to the circle of stones.

Once there, she glided her hands across one of the outer stones, and smiled. She could almost hear the music from the night before and when she closed her eyes she could vividly recall the dancing fairies with their lights. After only a moment, she started moving in some of the very same ways they had, dancing and twirling around and between the stones. She was laughing and smiling by the end of it and hadn't noticed the way the wind had picked up with how she was moving…

The sound of heavy thunder, like a drumbeat, startled her. She gasped and gripped at her chest, eyes opening wide before she covered her ears. Despite the wind, the skies were clear as day. The thunder she learned, however, was not coming from the sky.

Her heart was beating a tattoo in her chest as she gazed at the tall standing stone in the center. Then, just like she'd been drawn into the dance, she felt pulled toward that stone by some deep compulsion and need. Her feet moved almost of their own volition and she reached out her palms just before she touched the surface.
Now, Zahra had experienced pain before, unspeakable levels of it. Vertigo. High g-force. Non-gravity. Free-falling. You name it... But, even if you combined every single one of those sensations together it still would not be enough to describe or compare to what she experienced after she touched that stone, before the world went dark.

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She awoke who knew how much later. The sky was still light above her but the ground was now at her back. It was chillier than she remembered before she passed out, making her glad she'd worn her favorite leather jacket. She eventually pulled herself to stand and backed away from the stone cautiously until she turned and ran back towards the road and her waiting Vespa beyond... The only problem was that when she got to where she knew the road and her bike were supposed to be... Both were gone... "What--"

Gunshots suddenly rang out nearby, and, by instinct, Zahra ducked to the ground. When she heard it again, she got up and started running through the trees; trees that were much denser than she remembered on her way in. The shots continued to follow and haunt her until she finally saw where they were coming from. Two men in kilts (was that what they were called?) being chased by three men in... red coats? What the fuck? Had she missed the memo about the historical reenactment going on today?

Another gunshot rang out, this time fired in her direction, and she gasped when the dirt to the right of her foot exploded. Live ammunition? Not a historical reenactment then? Zahra looked up and saw one of the Redcoats coming after her, reloading his rifle all the while. Her eyes widened and her fight or flight instincts kicked in as she took off in the opposite direction.

She didn't know how long or how far she'd been running before she came upon a clearing with another Redcoat kneeling near a stream. Zahra paused; afraid to move; afraid to speak. She felt like a deer caught at the end of a scope... The man turned around then and Zahra looked left then right, trying to see if she could escape.

“Greetings, madam," he said in a very posh British accent. He stood and let his eyes roam over her, curious, intent, lascivious. She could feel his gaze linger on the tattoos he could see on her wrists, the thick army boots on her feet, the cropped cut of her hair. "Where did you come from?" he asked after a moment.

Zahra swallowed hard, trying not to shift under that gaze. She didn't know how to answer his question, but she took a few calming breaths. Panicking would not do her any good at the moment, so she fell back on her training for such a time when one finds themselves in hostile territory, in the presence of someone whom she did not know was friend or foe. "Lieutenant Leeloo Zahra of the USS Enterprise."

The man had no reaction to that except to give her a crooked smirk while his tongue leisurely licked at his bottom lip. "Really?" he said, disbelieving, and his eyes darkened.

Zahra knew that look and what it usually entailed, so she turned to run, but her reaction was not fast enough. He was quicker and had her dangerously pinned to the rock behind her with a sword at her throat. An actual fucking sword! To Zahra's credit she didn't cry out or anything, only glared murderous daggers into his eyes as she inhaled and exhaled out her nose.

"Do you've any idea the penalty for posing as a man, let alone attempting to carry the rank of an officer in His Majesty's army?" the man asked with an angry bite.

His Majesty's army? This was so fucked up. This had to be a dream. It had to be. She was gonna
wake up here any moment. The woman tried to struggle free but she felt the blade of his sword press into her neck, and the pain confirmed that this in fact was no dream. His sword had drawn blood she could feel dripping down her neck and she inhaled sharply through her nose before he spoke again, "Now, you will tell me exactly who you are, and what you’re doing here, or I will cut your throat!"

"Eat shit, asshole!" She spat angrily, before she actually spit in his face. Probably not the best idea to aggravate the man with a blade at your throat, but she never said she was smart.

Furious now, the man pressed his sword closer and grabbed her face. "You have a whore's mouth... Shall we see what else of you is befitting of that title?"

He attempted to turn her around, next, but Zahra lifted her knee which swiftly connected hard with his groin. When the man cringed, doubling over in pain, she punched him in the jaw and was about to shove him away from her but, suddenly, one of the men in tartan jumped onto his back then smashed a rock over his head.

"Y'all right?" The bearded man asked her in a thick brogue, reaching out his hand. Zahra just stared at him, uncertain. "Come w'meh," he said.

Of course, Zahra had no desire to go with him at all, and she wanted to keep her feet firmly planted, but his very strong grip on her arm and the gunshots ringing out behind her had her feet moving for her, of their own will. She was starting to hate them for doing that.

She ended up following the man to wherever he would lead her, running almost on auto-pilot at this point. It had begun to drizzle by the time they eventually arrived at the man’s intended destination, which seemed to be a small cottage in the middle of the woods. Not creepy at all, right?

Zahra stopped in the road, staring at the cottage in thought. She was freezing, not that she’d ever tell him that, and the cottage was the first sign of shelter they had seen all afternoon. McGruff grabbed her by the elbow, again causing her to look at his hand, then up into his face. "C'mon, lass," he said urgently. Zahra wondered how easy it would be to break his hand and run? Where would she run, though? She didn't know this place... She didn't know this--time. Yeah, she'd come to that conclusion a short while back. Believe it or not, being shot back in time wasn’t the weirdest thing that has ever happened to her. She'd probably count it among the top five; right up there with Sex Pollen planet, and retro-aging into a child then back into an adult again.

She glanced at the cabin once more. The fact that she was freezing, and the additional firm squeeze and tug on her arm seemed to make up her mind for her. A moment later, she was following McGruff up the hill and inside the cabin. The chill almost immediately dissipated in the warmth of the small cabin, but inside she was greeted by at least a half a dozen more men in kilts, which made an entirely different sort of chill race up her spine. She was outnumbered now and was wishing she had broken McGruff’s hand and taken her chances on the road, but it was too late now. Hindsight being 20/20 and all that. Fuck.

She saw a few of the men by the fire, fussing over someone who was injured by the sound and look of it. She heard them debating whether or not to leave him behind, because apparently his injury was too severe to allow him to ride a horse. She caught a couple of the men staring at her and speaking in a language Zahra didn't recognize. She could understand tones, gazes, and gestures well enough, though, to get the idea of what they were saying. One man, older than the rest, harder, meaner, bolder, intervened on her behalf, admonishing the other two for their lude threats and saying he didn't condone rape. Lovely. For that, and that alone, he earned a mite of her respect.

The older man approached her then. "Wha's yer name, lass?" Mr. Clean, who she assumed was their leader, asked her softly.
Zahra swallowed before answering, this time leaving out the rank part. "Zahra," she said, at which the man just cocked his eyebrow at her, questioning, but nodded.

McGruff, the one who'd saved her by the river, moved over to assess the injured one by the fire, and Zahra listened to them talk about shoving the bone back into place. So he had a dislocated shoulder, then? Zahra had suffered many of those in her life. Helped set a few even. It was an easy fix, but if they tried just shoving it back in they were gonna break his arm, and that was not so easy.

"Wait!"

James Fraser had experienced more than his fair share of pain in his short life. A dislocated shoulder hurt badly, but he was thankful that it was just that; until he realized he was more than useless with his arm just dangling there. Jamie had settled near the fire, his shirt discarded as it was covered in blood anyways. Those who knew him made sure to not let their eyes linger on the scars across his back. Not everyone knew where they came from and if they did, they said nothing of the matter. What happened in the past, was in the past— at least he pretended to play at that.

The door swinging open caught everyone's attention, and Jamie shivered lightly at the cool breeze. His eyes landed on the woman his companions were making less than proper remarks about. Jamie winced as he tried to shift a bit, his eyes also falling on the strange woman. Her exact features were hard to make out in the low light, but even still he couldn't help but think she was beautiful. The unforgiving pain radiating from his shoulder had him gritting his teeth and cradling his arm a moment later. Everyone fussed over him like a gaggle of hens, and at one point he brushed them aside only to be descended upon once again, this time by Murtagh, his godfather, his oldest friend, his confidante.

"Sit still, lad," Rupert said. "We've done this before." Somehow, that didn't make Jamie feel anymore prepared for what they had planned on doing, but he closed his eyes and braced himself.

"Wait!" The woman called out as she stepped forward and pushed Rupert and Angus out of the way. "You're gonna break his goddamn arm forcing it back in like that."

Zahra was momentarily captivated by the most startling pair of baby blues she had ever seen. They were even more intense than Jim's and that's saying a lot. Holy hell. She cleared her throat and at his silent nod, she took the young man's arm by the wrist, giving him a very clear glimpse of the ink that covered the backs of both of her wrists. She was an odd woman; dressed strangely with even stranger designs written across her skin. Tattoos were no strange sight to Jamie, but never had he seen any on a lady before, and never so many, and never done with such intricacy? His curiosity kept him staring even as he let her take his arm. He licked his lips, and his brow furrowed in pain as he watched her gently maneuver his arm a bit. Everyone else had taken a step back, at this point, obviously not overly concerned for Jamie’s safety at the hands of this odd woman.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But this is the bit that's gonna hurt." When she took a hold of his wrist, Jamie nodded. He may not know her from Adam, but she couldn't possibly have been as haphazard about this than his well-meaning companions. Zahra shifted his arm a bit, knowing it was hurting him, pausing only when she had it aligned right. "This is the worst part," she cautioned, then looked back at a couple of his companions. "Hold him still," she directed to the other burly men behind him. As they did, Zahra quickly twisted and set Jamie’s arm back into its socket with a grinding snap.

Having never experienced a dislocated shoulder before, Jamie was uncertain of what to expect. The overwhelming pain of having her twist his arm so abruptly was jarring, and it had him hissing inwardly in pain, before letting what sounded like a growl come from his chest. It had definitely hurt, and yet, as soon as she did that, all the pain subsided. He looked up at her in wonder and awe. "It
Zahra nodded. "It will, though. It's gonna be sore and tender for at least a week." Of course it was too good to be true, Jamie though. "In fact--" she said as she unbuckled her hiking pack from her back and crouched down as she unbuckled the lip and rifled around inside of it for a moment. Several of the men reached for their swords or pistols, afraid she was going for a weapon. When her hand came back out with a roll of cloth, however, they seemed to relax. "We should put your shirt back on first."

One of the men handed a clean shirt to him and Zahra helped the younger man slip back into it. Jamie let her help him put his shirt back on then she proceeded to use the thick brown cloth to wrap around his back and shoulder, like a brace, securing his arm close to his chest. He was watching intently, everything she did and every odd thing about her. Jamie didn't even understand what he saw well enough to begin to assume who she was or where she was from.

"There," she said once her task was done and she secured the wrapping tightly in place. When she was done tending the redhead, one of the other men took her pack from her forcefully. She glared daggers at him, but any attempts she made to take it back were met with the threat of a blade or a pistol. Son of a bitch. McGruff was there as soon as Zahra was done, gently grabbing Jamie’s uninjured shoulder. “Can ye ride?” he asked.


McGruff, aka Murtagh Zahra learned, caught the man's gaze, though, and looked from him to the woman. "Ye ride wi’ him," Murtagh told her. "Keep him on his horse."

"Ride?” Zahra interjected, surprised and alarmed. “What? Where? No. I--No, I can't." She had to get back to the circle of stones. "I can't leave."

The men started speaking to each other again in their own language and Zahra could feel her stomach plummet to her feet. Baldy, the leader, came over and grabbed her arm. Why did they insist on doing that? Oh, right. Women were just property during this time in Earth’s history. "Ye’re comin’ wi’ us, lass,” he ordered and she wanted to argue with him just on principle.

Zahra looked where Baldy was grabbing her and then around at the other men. She played through multiple scenarios in her mind and, no matter what she did, this situation for her did not end well. If she crossed them, she was severely outnumbered, outbladed, and outgunned. Even if she could take a couple of them with her, the outcome would still end up the same. She would still be dead. "My--people will come looking for me,” she tried to implore him again. “I need to stay here." The man’s grip on her arm tightened, causing her to grit her teeth.

"What people?” Baldy spat. "Ye're not Scotch. Ye dunnae sound like an English Sassenach either. So, until I know who or what ye are, ye're comin' wi’ us."

She grit her teeth harder and met his steely gaze with one of her own. "My people will come looking for me," she repeated. "You have to let me stay." She tried pulling her arm from his grasp, but his grip only tightened further to the point of bruising and made her grit her teeth harder, but she didn't make any sound.

"The only way ye'll be stayin' 'ere, lassie--is tied to that hitchin' post--" He inclined his chin at the door, meaning the post outside. “--with a slit in your throat."

Zahra exhaled hotly through her nose and dropped her gaze, the challenge she'd been holding Mr. Clean in dropped along with it. He shoved her gently towards the door so she started walking on her
own. She was directed toward the horse the redhead was leading, and Mr. Clean insisted on helping her up. All Zahra wanted to do was kick him in his stupid face. “I know how to get on a goddamn horse; I don’t need your fucking help,” she cursed, which earned her several startled glances. Zahra grabbed the reins and pulled herself to climb on with Jamie.

Jamie watched curiously as Dougal more or less dragged the strange woman out of the cabin and into the rain. Her resistance was met with Dougal’s own stoic determination. The dainty creature had no chance against the larger, stronger man, but it amused young Jamie that she tried. Like watching a wee kitten try to threaten an old hound. The curses falling from her tongue had Jamie and most of his companions stunned, though in an amused way. Jamie had never heard a woman curse before.

Jamie helped her climb on as much as he could, knowing how awkward it was. When she was settled in front of him on the horse, he tried very hard to tame his wild thoughts from thinking too much about the supple derriere in his lap. The drizzle from earlier had turned into a full downpour, that was increasing the chill of the autumn air. Zahra couldn't help herself from shivering, no matter how much she wrapped her arms about herself, her teeth were still chattering. She rolled the sleeves of her jacket all the way down, buttoned the front clear up to her neck, and buttoned the cuffs at her wrists, which helped fight the chill, but not much.

“Yer shiverin',” her riding companion mused as he made a futile attempt to pull his plaid around the both of them.

“I’m f-fine,” she lied.

“Lass,” he said from over her shoulder, a single ginger brow raised in disbelief. “Ye’re shakin' so hard it's makin’ my teeth rattle.” It was an exaggeration of course, but Jamie wasn't the sort of man to be okay with a woman suffering and not doing anything about it; even one as stubborn and spirited as she. "The plaid will keep us both warm, lass, but I cannae reach it--with just one arm."

Was that chivalry she detected? Among a group of brigands? Color her shocked. And blue, because she was definitely freezing. Zahra was stubborn as a mule, though, and even if part of her wanted to tell him where he could shove his ‘plaid’, her stubbornness paled in comparison to her chill. Zahra was a desert climate baby. She wasn’t meant for this Scottish fall. So, as much as she hated it, she needed his help, or he was the one who need her help? Whatever. She reached back and helped pull his plaid around them both. She found it to be surprisingly warm once they were wrapped inside, though she knew that was partially due to their now shared and combined body heat. The intimacy of their situation was not lost on her and it made her a little uncomfortable; though, not because she didn’t like it, more because of how much she found that she did. Shit. Even Jamie found comfort in the closeness as by sharing his warmth with her she was also keeping him warmer and, with the wind at his back, he was very thankful.

The entire travelling party was soon cantering off through the trees. It was only a few minutes into their rainy journey that Zahra spoke up. "Where are we going?" she asked, but her question was met with silent indifference, and maybe a shushing noise or two, but no real answer. Her frustration grew and she hung her head a little, jaw clenching as she exhaled deeply out her nose.

Jamie would have liked to have answered her question but it wasn't particularly his place to tell strangers anything about their activities. He caught the clenching of her jaw from over her shoulder which made him grip onto her and the reins a little bit tighter in response. "Where’re ye from, lass?" He asked, his voice barely above a whisper. He didn't want to catch anyone's attention but his curiosity was blazing. "Surely no' here. Ya don' look like any woman I've ever seen before."
She looked back at him over her shoulder but the closeness of their faces was equally uncomfortable as the almost intimate closeness of their bodies, so she looked back ahead as his horse cantered on after the others. She didn't answer him right away, lost in thought as she was. She didn't know what year it was but her knowledge of earth’s history, English at war with the Scottish; well, that could be multiple timelines, honestly, but if she had to guess, based on their garb, their rifles, pistols, and such, she could confidently place herself in the earlier half of the 1700s. It was crazy to think about. She was still wrapping her head around it but, honestly, stranger things had happened to her other than being shot back in time.

Zahra tried to think of how best to respond to his question. Where was she from? Her birth country, Australia, wasn't settled until the late 1700s, so that probably wouldn't be the best answer... America though? That existed, yes? "I'm from the west, America." She said after a moment. “I was-- vacationing at Inverness.” With no one. She had been alone. Utterly alone. Mrs. Bard, Pastor Donnelly… Would they come looking for her? Would they call her father when she didn’t return? Would he call Starfleet? Who knew?

Jamie didn't know much about America, but it still felt odd to him. He wasn't the most intuitive man in Scotland but he trusted his gut and his gut was telling him that she wasn’t telling the truth. Although, if there was a reason for her to lie, he wouldn't press her further. Her clothing, though, I mean bloody hell, he wasn't even wearing pants!

"I'm Jamie, by the way.” he said after another moment or two. “Surely ye have a name, lass?"

"Jamie...” She repeated, sniffing softly form the chill. Her nose was freezing. "I'm Zahra. Em, Leeloo Zahra, but I usually prefer Zahra."

In Jamie’s experience it was mostly soldiers who tended to call and be called by their surnames in such a way. Zahra was making him grow curiouser and curiouser. "Zahra," he tested the name out, finding it even more odd to say than to hear. His thick accent hacked it, but it was interesting enough to be likeable. “Ye’re far from home, then?”

She swallowed a little, and instinctively her head turned back the way they’d come, longing and worry etched into her features. She glanced at Jamie for a moment, eyes glistening softly before she turned to look back ahead. Fortunately, Zahra had over 15 years of training in deception and spy/assassin/cloak and dagger shit to fall back on. She was a little rusty, but it didn't take her long to formulate an explanation. "I was visiting Inverness, like I said.” She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “A small group of us were traveling to a harvest festival when we were set upon by bandits.”

She didn't really know how she was going to explain her tattoos and shit but she had pulled down the sleeves of her jacket, and she was deliberately not being oversharing with information, only answering what he asked. She knew, though, that he had to be curious about her appearance, and there was really only one way she could think of to answer that. "I ran when we were attacked and got lost.” She shook her head and looked down as if sad. “I was a woman, alone and terrified in a foreign country, so--” Yeah play to that age old sexism and sense of chivalry. She was just a damsel in distress. “When I managed to find my way back everyone was dead. So I hacked off my hair and stole the clothes off one of the men in an attempt to mask my sex, lot o’ good it did me..."

"It's yer face tha' gives ye away,” he said in regards to her comment about trying to disguise herself and failing. Jamie had known right away that she was a woman, no question about that. Her clothing may have been masculine in appearance, but her face was far too delicate and beautiful to be a man's. Jamie didn't know what to say to the rest of it though. He couldn't imagine how terrified she'd been and yet she seemed to hold her own fairly well. Her explanation of her outfit sort of worked, except
that he had never seen any men or thieves in this part of the country dressed like she was; the style; the fabric. Yet, Jamie wasn't going to question it all too much at this point. What good would that do anyone now? Maybe later when they were in a safe place. For now, he knew she was alone, probably scared, and although his comrades may not look like it, they were mostly good men. She was safe with him.

"We're going to Castle Leoch," Jamie finally answered her ignored question from earlier, adding, "Dougal will try ta help ye. His brother is Laird. Ye canna jus' go off on yer own, though. I's no' safe fer anyone, especially a lass."

"I can take care of myself," she argued stubbornly, which made Jamie smirk. If Murtaugh had found her, it meant she had been in trouble, and hadn't she moments ago admitted to running away from danger? The more she spoke, the more Jamie seemed to like her, contradictions and all. She was unlike any woman he'd ever met, no mistake. Before he could comment and undoubtedly put his foot in his mouth, though, he watched as her attention focused on the riders ahead of them. "Which one is Dougal?" she asked.

"He's tha man at the lead," he answered, pausing a moment to grip her a bit tighter. "Whate'er yer thinkin', lass, dinnae go and make a scene. He isnae a man ye wan to cross."

Her gaze moved up the line to the man in the front. "The bald one?" She asked.

Jamie smirked, chuckling softly and nodded his head. "Aye. That’s him."

Dougal, not Mr. Clean, had discouraged the others from trying to molest her, and then he'd threatened to slit her throat. As a leader, Zahra respected the fuck out of him, but would she ever be seen as more than a tiny little woman to him and his men? She doubted it. Women were still property in this time. No rights. No voice. It was a terrible nightmare for an incredibly independent warrior like Zahra.

She was about to say something else but as her gaze had lifted up the line of horses, they also lifted to see the cropping of mountains in the distance ahead of them. She could recall vividly what their tour guide had called them. "The mountain ahead--" she started to say. "--is it called Cocknammon rock?"

Her question had him looking up as well. "Aye, it is. Been through here bafore, have ye?"

She shook her head. "I heard--talk--in the village that the British have been using this mountain to stage ambushes for the Scottish."

That caught his attention and had Jamie suddenly more vigilant. He took a much closer look at their surroundings, and he couldn’t disagree with her assessment. "Right bonnie place fer an ambush, sure enough," he whispered as he urged his horse forward, passing the men they had been following until he reached the front of the line. "Dougal. Dougal." He kept his voice low.

The older man looked back as they came up next to him. Jamie spoke rapidly in Gaelic, mostly so if anyone was listening they wouldn't know that the Scots knew about the ambush. "She says the redcoats lay ambushes here."

Dougal’s focus zeroed in on Zahra and a stern, yet concerned expression crossed his features. "Now, ye'll be tellin' me how and why ye've come to know there's an ambush up ahead." The last part of his sentence was hushed, but said urgently nonetheless.

"I heard it from the villagers," she replied just as quiet but urgent. Again, it was not a lie. She
suddenly found herself wishing for a blade or something though, especially if fighting was to be had.

Dougal's eyes flicked to Jamie and the younger man nodded. "I don' think she's lyin'," Jamie answered the unasked question.

The War Chief didn't have a chance to make any sort of decision, however, before gunfire erupted and shouting commenced as everyone scrambled. Jamie unwrapped Zahra and forced her off the horse. "Hide yerself!" he cried.

Zahra landed into a saving roll, then turned back to look at Jamie as he told her to hide. She wanted to argue, that she could fight, but she hadn't even brought a knife to a gunfight. Plus, this was the best opportunity she'd been presented with ever since Murtagh had found her at the stream. Without another thought, Zahra took off running, fast, back the way they'd come. She scanned the ground for hoofprints as she ran, following them as best she could. When she came around a group of trees, and hopped over a fallen log, gunfire whizzed past her face, grazing her cheek. She flinched away and drew her hand up where her fingers came away with blood. She scanned for the direction the gunshot had come from when she saw one of the Redcoats reloading his pistol not fifteen feet from her.

Zahra glared, and like a madwoman possessed, she charged him with a fierce battle cry. The Redcoat's eyes went wide and he gave up reloading his pistol to try and draw his sword but he wasn't fast enough. Zahra tackled him before he'd unsheathed it completely. They tumbled to the ground and after the second roll Zahra planted both feet in his gut and kicked him away from her into a nearby tree with a crack. She rolled to her feet still in a crouch, teeth bared like a wildcat waiting to pounce.

When the man had shaken the dizziness from his brain and collected his breath, he stood and withdrew his sword… Zahra flinched when she heard another gunshot, and saw the man flinch and blood started pouring from a new hole in his head. Zahra turned in a defensive stance to face off whoever had found her.

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Sometime during the scuffle, Jamie had been knocked from his horse, but successfully downed his fair share of the redcoats. When he’d let Zahra go, he made sure to take notice of which way his woman, er, the woman had taken off. He figured she'd try to make a run for it and he didn't completely blame her. He found her eventually, but the scene he came upon when he did so had him stopping in his tracks. He watched, unable to tear his eyes away, as the woman wrestled with the Redcoat. Jamie had never seen a woman so savage and fierce before, it made him question everything he knew about the 'weaker sex'. Jamie gave her enough time to wrestle with the startled man, just to get herself clear. When the Redcoat regained his stance and went to draw his sword, Jamie fired without hesitation, sending him to the ground with a bullet to the head.

Zahra rounded on him then and Jamie thought she looked almost feral in her current state; covered in dirt, mud, and leaves; some even stuck in her hair; smudges all over her face. Her eyes though, they were wild and her pupils were blown so wide from the lust for a fight. Honestly, the entire situation including her appearance were a bit to swallow. Jamie had seen that look before, even on his own face, and definitely on those of his companions. It was the look a warrior got before a battle. Never had Jamie ever seen that look from a woman. The lust for blood and a fight was in her body and in her eyes. Jamie was suddenly feeling a huge confliction internally. Was he intimidated or aroused? Maybe both? God, who was this woman?

When it all came down to it, though, she had no weapons and therefore, wasn't going to make it far. Her combat skills may have surprised him, but it didn't negate the fact that she was a woman. An
unarmed woman. It was hard to unlearn a fact he’d had drilled into him his entire life; women were the weaker sex, needed protection, even when they didn't want it.

Jamie could only grin a bit smugly. He’d just saved her life after all. "Lost yer way?" He asked, taking a step forward.

"On the contrary," Zahra replied with a wicked smirk of her own. "I was just finding it again..." Every step he took forward she took a step back.

When she stepped back, Jamie’s grin quickly faded into a glare. "Dougal an’ tha others will be waitin’ fer us." Another step forward for him, another step back for her. "Yer comin' with me."

“Am I?” The problem here was that Zahra was now spoiling for a fight. Jamie had robbed her of her victim so now she had all this pent up adrenaline and energy to get rid of.

“Aye, ye are.” Blood-lust in a woman. Holy mother, Jamie still didn't understand his feelings all of sudden. It was like this weird mixture of curiosity, disbelief, and arousal. Part of him, a baser part he didn’t know existed, desperately wanted to engage with her. To see if she actually could put up the fight that was in her eyes.

"You think you can make me?" Zahra could see that desire to, that he wanted to fight her and part of her wanted him to. “How's your shoulder?” She asked, though it was more like a deliberate taunt than anything. He'd taken it out of the sling and she knew it must be hurting him.

At her taunt, he glanced down at his shoulder and shrugged, if a bit lopsided. “The shoulder's fine; nothin' I canna handle.” He took yet another step forward, only this time she stayed her ground, looking like she was indeed ready to brawl. As much as he might have entertained the thought, he would never hurt a woman, let alone one he actually was starting to like. “Look, Zahra, I dun wanna fight ye.” He had avoided using the word ‘hurt you’. Interesting. Did he maybe even subconsciously realize that this woman might could very well carry her own in a fight? “Just come with me and we won't attract any more attention.” He wasn't really asking, at this point. She was going to go with him whether she liked it or not. Jamie was merely giving her the option of going calmly and saving her pride, or being bound and gagged off.

Zahra's hands clenched and unclenched at her sides as they stared each other down. Her mind wheeled through all of her options as the blood pumped hot and fast through her veins. She could fight him, or she could run. Fight or flight... Fight or flight... That was all that was going through her mind... Until a third option suddenly cropped up that screwed everything up. Fight, or flight, or fuck... Fight, flight, or fuck. Those were her present options?

Zahra clenched her teeth some more and her face turned upward, closing her eyes to fight off the hot angry tears that threatened. With an angry shout, Zahra turned and punched the nearest tree which did nothing but bloody her knuckles. Jamie had tensed, thinking she was about to hit him, but instead he watched her punch a tree and saw all the spirit and fight drain out of her then, like water through a sieve. It was almost sad to watch.
Zahra placed her head against the trunk of the tree for a moment, feeling utterly defeated once again. There was a part of Jamie that hated to see her give up like that. Defeat did not look good on her and it was a punch to his gut to know he was causing it. It was like watching a wild, beautiful creature suddenly break. It was almost devastating. There wasn’t much he could do about it, though. Keeping her close was in the best interest of everyone, including her; either she was an innocent and needed help, or she was a spy that needed watching. Even still, it was hard to see her admit defeat.

He stepped closer, reaching out a hand to try and comfort her. Before Jamie could try to play the placating male card, though, and make her feel even more inferior and worse about herself, Zahra pushed away from the tree, then stomped angrily past him and back through the forest in the direction they’d come from. Jamie shook his head and followed after her.

"Are you bleeding?" She threw the question over her shoulder at him as they went. She had not even tried to keep the bite out of her words. She could be angry and still concerned about his well being at the same time.

Jamie was relieved that she was coming of her own accord. The other option would have only been embarrassing for them both, but especially for her. Her tone didn't get past him as he turned to follow. "It's not my blood," he responded and she looked at him in disbelief. "Not much at least."

She nodded and didn’t say anything else the rest of the way back to the horses and the others. The only ones she spared a look to when they returned were Dougal and Murtagh who were watching her and Jamie's approach with interest. She barely glanced at the others and she still didn't say anything as she found Jamie's horse and moved to climb up onto it. Once she was on, Jamie resumed his position behind her, grimacing a bit as he settled himself atop the horse. Jamie didn't say anything either, figuring she'd speak if she wanted to. Sometimes silence was a good thing.

The others were much the same as they set out on the road again; quiet, reserved; perhaps still in shock over the ambush and the woman's insight that had just saved their lives. At least the rain had let up, that was the only positive in this entire situation. The line of horses weeded its way over the rocky ground in relative silence as men nursed minor cuts and bruises. Someone eventually handed Jamie something to eat and he broke the biscuit in half then handed the bigger half to Zahra as he said, "It's not much, but it'll make ya forget yer hungry."

She took the crust, or whatever it was with a soft thank you and nibbled on it disinterestedly. She didn't have much of a stomach for anything at that time. Jamie's own portion was gone in a couple bites, but that was when his head went fuzzy. Jamie couldn't control it when his vision went blurry and his ability to hold on to the reins was gone. Zahra felt the reins go slack a moment later and she knew what was happening. She turned to look at Jamie over her shoulder and twisted to try to grip onto him but he was like a sack of potatoes and she didn't have any sort of leverage or grip. "Shit, help! He's going over!"

Zahra winced as the man hit the ground with a heavy thud. She was hopping down off the horse right after him and crouching over his chest to check him for injuries. She instinctively checked his shoulder thinking maybe the bone had popped out again, but what she saw there made her sigh and grit her teeth. "Stupid, fucking, goddamn, stubborn son of a bitch," she cursed him mostly under her breath but loud enough for the rest of the party to hear.

"I've never heard a woman use such language in my life," one of the men said.

"Yer husband should tan yer hide for tha," said another.

Zahra just rolled her eyes at their comments. She might have a mouth, but it was practically expected
in the company she normally kept. She had to keep reminding herself that these men weren't her friends. "He's been shot but--no major arteries were hit. It went clean, straight through the meat." The wound oozed, though. "Son of a bitch... I need to clean it and stop the bleeding… I need my fucking bag."

"Why?" Dougal asked, and he was the only person Zahra was giving her attention to.

“Because I have a medicine kit inside,” she confirmed with a stern gaze.

Dougal locked eyes with her a moment longer, assessing, but he eventually nodded and snapped his fingers. Murtagh handed over the pack and Zahra rifled through it a moment before she brought out a small red bag. Inside that bag were some alcohol pads she used to clean the wound. Any pain Jamie felt could only mean the alcohol was doing its job. She pressed and packed the wound with some gauze to stop the bleeding. She daren't try to stitch it out here; too much risk for bacteria and infection; nowhere to sterilize a needle.

Everyone stood around, staring and shocked at the way the woman talked and her take charge attitude over the situation. A few made comments to each other in Gaelic, but the others just watched the strange woman hover over their youngest companion. It was the alcohol seeping into his wound that brought Jamie back with a deep gasp and wide eyes. He tried to sit up, but found himself nose to nose with Zahra, who was now sitting back on his legs, and pressing a hand to his chest keeping him flat on his back.

"Take it easy, cowboy," she cautioned and at his insistence she helped him slowly sit up. “I don't know how much blood you've lost but you're gonna feel dizzy and lightheaded.” When one pad soaked through, she tossed it and applied another one and then secured that in place with two longer strips of cloth bandages. The bandage was then wrapped around his back and under his arm and she met Jamie's eyes as she tied the bandage in place. They both seemed to realize that she was practically straddling him at that point, but it had been the best vantage to dress and wrap his shoulder. "I'll need to clean and dress it again in a couple hours,” she said as she tied a final knot in the wrap.

When she was done, Zahra packed up her first aid kit, put it away, then handed her bag back to Murtagh. Murtagh gave her a confused look like he hadn’t been expecting her to surrender it back to them so willingly, and because her doctoring skills were also baffling him as well, but he was beyond grateful. He gave Dougal a look as he took the bag back and slung it over his shoulder.

Jamie had destroyed the sling Zahra had made him earlier. “You need a new sling,” she said, but she didn't have the supplies for that in her kit which left her only one other option she could think of. Jamie and the other watched as Zahra he unbuttoned her leather jacket, slipped it off her shoulders, then handed it to Jamie to hold for a minute. Jamie did so confusedly. He didn’t know what she was doing. His head tilted at her as he watched her pull her overshirt off over her head, leaving her in the black camisole underneath, and exposing her upper chest and all of her arms, which were covered in more tattoos.

Jamie’s eyes widened to saucers and he tried to get a better look but it was so dark, and she was snagging her jacket and pulling it back on over her shoulders, quickly, covering everything from his and the others' eyes. Too quickly in Jamie’s opinion. She had only been exposed for an instant, but in that instant she had showed off more of the intricate tattoo work that covered her arms and shoulders like sleeves. Jamie had been watching vigilantly, eyes never leaving her, she was still sitting on his legs after all, so he had indeed managed to take her in before she'd put the jacket back on, though not nearly as good a look as he wanted. Especially not here in the dark. Her skin had been marked vibrantly and he wanted to get a better look, a touch even, but she'd covered too fast.
Jamie watched as Zahra bunched the shirt in her hands by its collar and he ducked his head as she slipped it on over him and draped it around his neck like a scarf. She then helped pull his arm through the opposite sleeve and fitted the material over his elbow, and when she was done, the garment was effectively serving as an impromptu emergency sling. “There,” she said, inspecting her work. “That should do until I can set it properly.”

Jamie winced and hissed through his teeth he did when she worked to get his arm into her shirt. When it was done, though, he was amazed at how well the shirt was holding his arm in place. “Tha’s a right handy trick i’n’ it?”

The two of them shared a secret smirk before they were harshly interrupted by Dougal’s throat clearing and commanding voice. "We have fifteen miles to go. Five hours, if not seven." Dougal looked down at the pair. "Get him on his horse."

Zahra nodded at Dougal. She was a soldier after all and could recognize her commander's orders when given, and right now that's what he was to her. It was a role she could recognize. It was familiarity she could grasp onto. Follow orders. Be a good soldier.

She helped Jamie to his feet with surprising strength, though, maybe not so surprising if he had gotten a look at her with her jacket off. The woman was fit, make no mistake. Just another little fact that added to the mystery and intrigue that was Leeloo Zahra.

It might have taken a minute but they were settled on his horse once more and the group was once again on their way to Leoch. Several hours in, even with a photographic recall, Zahra was lost. Even if she could miraculously track their trail back to where they'd found her she was still just a meager woman in dangerous, unfamiliar lands where literally everything and everyone was pitted against her. She would get back to the stones, she would. But she had to be smart about it. She needed to have a plan. She couldn’t go off half-cocked or she wouldn’t survive. Fortunately, she had the rest of their journey to this Castle Leoch to think about it.
It was silence mostly that surrounded them as they traveled and Zahra scoped out the lands and terrain as they passed, an observant vigil for danger and any landmarks she could remember. Just as Dougal had predicted though, about six hours later they were entering the security of Castle Leoch. Zahra immediately recognized the castle as the one she'd visited with her small tour group days before, only this one wasn't in ruins. How long ago was that though? Really? Technically, she supposed, it hadn't even happened yet. God. She felt like she was going mad!

They were reining to a stop inside the main castle courtyard; the end of their journey where they were greeted by several people. One man seemed overly concerned after one horse in particular. Was he the stable master perhaps?

Zahra caught sight of a man staring down at them from a tower window. She looked away just as a portly old woman was there to greet them, ecstatic of their return. She predicted they'd all be starving and told them breakfast was waiting in the kitchen. There was a goofy exchange with her and Murtagh that made Zahra smirk, despite her predicament.

When the older woman's gaze fell on her though, it was instantly insightful, judgmental, curious, disgusted? All the above?... Zahra shifted a little in her heavy boots and wrung her hands at her side.

"Well, now... what've we here?" The woman looked at Jamie expectantly.

"I'm Zahra," she said. "Leeloo Zahra..." The older woman nodded in acknowledgment but still looked at Jamie for an explanation.

There was a little back and forth then. Jamie told the older woman that they'd found Zahra on the road and Dougal had insisted on bringing her with them. The woman introduced herself as Mrs. Fitzgibbons and had insisted on taking Zahra to find her something to wear, but that was when Zahra had to sort of put her foot down.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Fitzgibbons, but Jamie was shot and I wasn't able dress his wound properly. I need to clean and stitch it before it gets infected." The older woman just sort of stared at her like she'd sprouted a second head. Shit, what was another term for infected? "Umm--before it gets poisoned? Swollen and--infected." Must buy a thesaurus.

"Oh, aye, I ken whatacha mean. But are ye sayin' ye know what ta do about tha?" Zahra nodded
"Are ye a charmer, then? A Beaton?"

Zahra didn't know what either of those meant. "I'm a trained field medic."

After another pregnant moment, Mrs. Fitzgibbons was insistent as she led them both back into the castle and down a corridor to a small, private and tidy room with a fireplace.

Mrs. Fitzgibbons set a pot on the fire to boil while Zahra told her what supplies she would need. The woman left to fetch that which Zahra requested, and in the meantime, Zahra brought over a bench for Jamie to sit on by the fire. Once the older woman returned with the supplies and herbs Zahra asked for, the younger woman added the herbs to the boiling pot. "Thank you, Mrs. Fitzgibbons," she said with a smile.

"Everyone calls me Mrs. Fitz," the older woman said with a soft smile of her own. "You--may also."
The older woman gave both Zahra and Jamie a nod before she left.

Zahra dropped a couple clean cloths and strips of fabric into the herbal concoction, before she turned to look at Jamie. "You should take off your shirt," she directed.

Jamie had been watching curiously as Zahra and Mrs. Fitz gathered whatever she would need to clean his wound. Zahra was so different but the more he spoke to her and watched her, the more he felt comfortable in her company. At her request to remove his shirt though, Jamie hesitated. In the forest, on the road, in the dark she'd never gotten a clear glimpse of him. Now though, in the light, with the time and ability to see clearly, he wouldn't be able to hide his back. It would require an explanation; one he wasn't too keen on giving to a stranger, which had nothing to do with her being a woman. He wanted to decline, but her insistent gaze coaxed him to pull his shirt off over his head with a sigh. The wide expanse of his back and the gruesome scars that wrecked his flesh were now exposed to her.

He thought he caught a look of surprise from the woman and quickly turned to face her. "Redcoats," he started to explain. "Flogged me twice in the space of a week. They'd have done it twice in a day, I expec', were they no' afraid a killin' me. There's no joy in flogging a dead man, y' see?" He added dryly.

There hadn't really been a look of surprise, Jamie's own discomfort must have had him imagining it. When Zahra saw his back her only reaction had been sympathy, understanding, loss. To know someone who would be able to understand her own pain, maybe in that regard she had been surprised. Her hand came up and lightly touched the scarring on his back, brow furrowed slightly in the center as she could very clearly recall her own torture, the night Jargen had violently cut the Phoenix from her back. Zahra could more than empathize with his pain. "And the one who did this," Zahra asked. "He took joy in it? Your pain?"

Jamie almost winced at her touch, no matter how gentle it was. He had expected her to shy away in horror or disgust, not to be curious and gentle. In a way, it was relieving. He'd hidden his scars, and the why and how, from everyone for so long, especially the weaker sex. In the end, it was a source of shame, even if he prided himself on surviving the ordeal. "Well, if Randall wasn't particularly joyous, he was at least very pleased with himself," Jamie answered stoically.

Maybe as if sensing his discomfort, Zahra cleared her throat a moment later and lifted her hand away to focus on cleaning the wound on his shoulder. "Why did they do it?"

"Do the English need a reason to do anything?" He said rhetorically. "The first time was for trying to escape Fort William. The second was--theft." Punishment for escape? How many times had Zahra suffered a similar fate? How many brands had she earned that her well-placed tattoos now covered?
"Why were you--imprisoned in the first place?" Zahra asked cautiously. Jamie looked up at Zahra who paused what she was doing to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

He offered her a soft smile, and before he knew it he was going into the story. About Jenny and the farm. Randall and the Redcoats arrival. Jamie trying to defend her, being lashed because of it, only to watch her being carried off and most likely assaulted anyway. He had been knocked unconscious and only remembered waking up in the carriage with the chickens, bound for Fort William. He hadn't seen Jenny since.

"That's horrible," Zahra said, hand resting gently against his shoulders.

"Oh, aye. Chickens are very poor company." He smirked at his own comment. Apparently, Zahra wasn't the only one who used humor to deflect her pain.

"How long ago?" She asked.

"Near to four years now," Jamie answered.

"And you've--not seen your sister since?"

Jamie nodded. "There's a price on my head."

"Oh," she said and worried on her bottom lip. She could understand why he wouldn't want to go home then. If there was a price on his head, that would be the first place they'd think to look and he'd end up putting his sister and everyone in harm's way.

Zahra didn't probe further after that and they both seemed to fall silent, focused on their own thoughts. Zahra had thoroughly cleaned the wound during Jamie's story, then used one of the soaked cloths to rest over the wound for a spell where the herbal concoction would soon numb the area so she could stitch it closed. Like an anaesthetic. She then sterilized a needle and thread and went about stitching him back up. Jamie was surprised when he didn't feel anything when she started the stitches. In the past, stitching always required a wooden bit to bite through the pain. Huh. Fancy that.

Jamie watched her closely, eyes scanning the bits of flesh visible to him, mostly just her hands now. He remembered the show of more art on her skin when she'd removed her jacket in the woods, but it had been dark and he'd not been able to get any sort of decent look with how brief the show had been. That only seemed to pique his curiosity, though. He wanted to see her. All of her, if just to admire the art marked onto her flesh.

He had so many questions, he couldn't stop his mouth. "Your markings, ah, tattoos? Where'd ye get them? And why?" Tattoos weren't unknown to him, but then that was mostly among the older Scottish tribes, or the Orient. Pirates, brigands, and people of lesser morals acquired them, too, maybe even forcibly to prove their lack of innocence but he'd never seen so many, and definitely never so intricately done, leastways on a woman.

"Are we playing I'll show you mine if you show me yours, then?" Zahra asked with a teasing smirk on her lips and a chuckle in her throat.

Her tease coaxed a grin from him with ease. Zahra was intriguing and interesting and he wasn't much for subtlety. "Oh, aye, we can certainly do tha' if ye like?" Of course he was only teasing her in return. Jamie was nothing less than a gentleman--never mind the fact that he'd never even seen a woman fully naked, at least not up close… Not for lack of trying of course. Jamie couldn't seem to take his eyes off her and didn't much concern himself with the fact that he may have been staring. He
was suddenly overcome, nigh, obsessed with the idea of seeing Zahra naked. Wondering how far those tattoos went, how many did she have, what did they mean? Surely, she would murder him if she found out he was thinking such things, though, so he kept those thoughts to himself.

Not privy to Jamie's inner monologue, Zahra seemed focused on her task, but in truth she was trying to think of what she knew of Earth’s history at this time; to help make any story she gave more believable. Eventually, after she mulled it over for a spell, she answered him with the simple truth. "One of my best friends is a tattooist. Well, he’s more of an artist really, who also happens to be a skilled tattooist.” That wasn’t a lie. Most of her tattoos had been given to her by an Edosian by the name of Saren, her favorite artist and one of her best friends. Most of her pieces had been done by him. “For a real artist, most tattoos are just like any other form of creative expression or work of art. My body just happens to be a favored canvas.”

Her stitches were surprisingly neat, her hand steady yet gentle. “Most of my tattoos are--artistic in nature, renderings of some of my favorite legends, or myths. A few are tributes to--experiences I’ve had--people I love, and a select few are--well--” When she finished her stitches, she leaned back to meet his eyes. "Let's just say you're not the only one here with their fair share of scars and attempts to hide them.”

Not really were playing this game? Zahra huffed softly, amused. "Do you really wanna know? I mean I'd hate to put any strain on your gentlemanly sensibilities?" She was teasing him again, smirk on her lips. God, was she actually flirting with him? What was wrong with her?

Jamie gave her a mockingly shocked expression. "Me? Sensible?" He teased, but then shook his head. "I've never been much fer forcing a woman to do things she doesnae want." He shrugged then too.

"How noble of you,” she said only half jesting. That was actually a rather forward way of thinking for a man of this time.

Jamie realized she was dodging the question, so either she really did have her own scars, or she was making it up. The story behind his own scars was horrific and traumatizing enough for him, he was a man, a warrior, trained for battle. She was just a woman. No, not just a woman, at least, not like any woman he had ever met. For some reason, though, he didn’t think she was making it up.

Jamie had been too distracted to realize Zahra had finished and was cleaning up. "I should thank ye for your help,” he said after a few moments. “Gentle touch from a kind woman. Yer husband is a lucky man.” He had to remind himself that she was not just any other lass. Not by a long shot, and probably not available in any sense of the word.

Husband? "Oh, I'm--I'm not married." Maybe she should have let him believe she was though. Shit. "Oh." So she was unwed? Did that mean she was… available? "Promised or engaged, then? Surely, a lass like you must have a line of suitors a mile long."

Zahra was suddenly uncomfortable with this line of questioning. She'd never been good with relationships. She had no suitors to speak of. She shook her head in answer to his question and focused on wrapping his shoulder. "No fiancee. No suitors. Just my work." She suddenly let out a long sigh. For a while there, Zahra had almost forgotten. She had been so focused on Jamie, on taking care of his shoulder. Focused on this place, on surviving... It had been so easy to fall into a
role. She had been needed to fill that role... but what did she do now? How did she get back to the stones? Back to the 23rd century? Back to Enterprise and her family? Her face fell and she sort of sat back on her heels just looking into the fire kind of stunned, and sad. Maybe a little hopeless.

Jamie was surprised by her sudden change in demeanor. Her entire body gave away the emotions that crossed her face and he instinctively reached a hand out to touch her shoulder. "Are ye okay?" He caught the sadness. "What's wrong? Was it somethin’ I said?" He brushed his hand gently up her shoulder to cup her cheek, meaning to comfort. He couldn't stand to see her like this. Especially knowing he may have been the cause. Jamie was the sort of man who needed to fix what he had broken, but he couldn't very well fix an upset woman. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

The touch was far more familiar than was probably proper, but Zahra had to fight not to nuzzle her cheek into his hand, finding this surprising sense of calm from his touch. She met his eyes and gently lifted her face out of his hand to give her head a shake. "I'm fine. It’s fine. You’re fine. I just--" She sighed heavily and scrubbed her hands over her face, breaking eye contact with him before turning her gaze down. "--I wanna go home."

Jamie thanked his lucky stars that she didn't burst into tears. He'd have no clue what to do with a crying woman. He also seemed to find a sense of relief in the fact that she was unwed, but again his heart reached out to her. She wasn't the only one missing home. "I'm certain the Laird will wan’ to talk with ye soon abou' that." Jamie was sure Colum would be willing to help. At least he hoped... and yet, part of him didn't want her to leave. She was interesting and fierce, in a place where all the women were meek and silent and dull, she was anything but and he found it far more than intriguing. She was downright desirable.

What Jamie didn't realize was the irony of his own thoughts, because the only reason the women of this age were so meek and silent and dull was because of centuries of oppression from men like Dougal and the like. Jamie was definitely a rare breed in this time.

Zahra nodded at his comment. She wanted to wrap herself up in him in that moment, in the comfort he was offering, but she didn't. She couldn't. She hadn't always been someone who desired physical comfort, but these days, thanks to many years of therapy, she tended to crave it. As such, it took every ounce of her willpower not to wrap her arms around him and bury her face in his shoulder. Jamie had been the only one to show her kindness in this place, and for that he at least had her admiration, her gratitude, and her respect.

"You think he’ll really help me get home?" She asked with a sniffle.

She was vulnerable, that much he could tell, but he didn't see it as weakness. Even within the short span of time that they had known one another, Jamie knew completely that Zahra was a strong woman and more than capable of taking care of herself. It was the world around her that made that difficult. "I don’ see why he wouldn’. Do ye have any kin left alive? Colum may be kind enough to take ye to them."

She blinked a little, looking thoughtful. "My father. My crew. I’m supposed to meet back up with them in a week. If they hear about what happened they--they won’t know I’m still alive.” That was an actual fear Zahra had. Would they think she went AWOL? Or worse?

Her crew? Jamie idly entertained the idea that Zahra could be some sort of pirate. It might explain the weird garb and mannerisms, but--she didn’t come off even remotely as a scoundrel or villain to him. She had been unusual, yes, but so kind, modest, and caring. He highly doubted a piratess would be such things.

“I was staying in Inverness. I'd like to get back there if I can." She sighed heavily and scrubbed at
her face with both hands, tired and weary. "Dougal does not strike me as a trusting man, though, I doubt he'd just let me go freely."

Jamie wanted to comfort her, but she appeared to be doing pretty well for herself. Of course, it could all be a front, but he wasn't used to women pretending to be anything other than what they were. "Dougal is a good man. Hard, but good. He looks out for his brother, Colum. He may be easier to sway. Not that I would know personally." He sighed too.

Zahra nodded, nothing else to really say on the matter. She inspected her work one last time to make sure she hadn't missed anything. "You might need help washing if you decide to do so. You shouldn't get the bandages dirty or wet."

Jamie just nodded again, grateful beyond words. “Thank you, Zahra.”

She took in a deep breath and rubbed her face. "I should let you get some rest." She studied him for a moment and suddenly felt like she could sleep for days with just how dog tired and bone weary she felt. As the saying went, however, there was no rest for the wicked.

"You as well," he urged.

Zahra finished packing everything up. “I feel like I could sleep for a week, but I need to see what necessities I can gather and maybe grab something to eat before I pass out.”

Jamie smirked and nodded back. He knew the feeling. “Care fer some company?” he asked. “I might could help ya find whatcher lookin' for?”

He was so kind, which seemed to be in such stark contrast to Dougal and the others. She might have been a little reluctant to leave his side, primarily because he was the only one she felt she could actually trust in this place. An ally perhaps, but even then was he really? His loyalty, undoubtedly, was to his clan. It was a conflicting feeling. She wanted to trust him, but ten to one anything she told him would be taken to his 'laird' and her story was one she probably needed to tell in person. “Maybe we can grab something to eat together, sustenance would do us both some good, but you should really get some rest after. I can manage the other stuff on my own."

Jamie nodded in agreement and they made their way to the kitchens together. Their ragtag team of travelers were still sat around a sturdy table, eating warm porridge and biscuits but looking worse for wear. Jamie and Zahra collected their own plates and food and joined them. No one was really feeling chatty of any sort so they all ate mostly in companionable silence. Or if they did talk it was in their own language, and completely went over Zahra’s head. She didn’t even bother asking what they were saying, but she assumed some of the comments might be about her.

“Did you make the porridge, Mrs. Fitz?” Zahra asked of the woman who was making a round offering seconds.

“Aye, lass. I did.” Fitz was a little defensive, fully prepared to hear Zahra’s gripes about her porridge being lumpy, or bland. The other men usually had no qualms pointing it out to her.

Zahra smiled at her kindly. “It’s delicious, thank you.”

Mrs. Fitz blinked, surprised. “Er, ye’re welcome, lass.” Fitz harrumphed primly at the men, smiling smugly as she walked off to attend to something that needed tending.

When Zahra turned back to her food, she had half a dozen pairs of eyes just staring at her, dumbfounded. Zahra had another spoonful halfway to her mouth when she noticed. “What?” She asked, then brought her spoonful the rest of the way and ate it. Willingly.
“You just called--Fitz’s porridge--delicious?” Angus said, addressing her as if she were mad.

Zahra shrugged, and ate another bite, then another until her plate was empty, and she was licking her spoon almost sinfully. “You don’t like it?” Angus just blinked at her. “Can I have yours then? I’m fucking starving.” He offered it to her with a blank expression, and she took it without question and began to eat it while Angus just munched on his bannoch in bewilderment.

The man said something in Gaelic, and they all laughed. Jamie responded in a reprimanding tone and politely ate his own porridge. “No, but seriously,” the redhead leaned in next to Zahra’s ear whispering so only she could hear. “Most of us just choke it down cause it’s hot. How can ye actually be enjoyin’ it?”

Zahra smirked and turned to whisper back. “I have no sense of smell, so I can’t taste much of anything. Honestly, you could serve me a bowl of shit and call it pudding and I probably wouldn’t know the difference.” She leaned back with a shit-eating grin, and Jamie looked at her in shock and alarm, and maybe even a little disgust. That was an awful mental image.

“You just said something about a porridge that is delicious.” Angus pointed out.

“Seriously?” he asked loud enough for the rest to hear. Zahra just shrugged and nodded. “How does not bein’ able to smell affect ye’re taste, though?” The others were listening in now, suddenly interested in that answer as well, even without being privy to the former part of the conversation.

Zahra nodded and tapped the side of her nose. “It’s a medical condition called anosmia. I won’t bore you with the scientific explanation, but basically your taste buds are linked to the olfactory glands in your nose, and the olfactory glands are what produce your sense of smell and most of your sense of taste. Ya follow?” Jamie, and everyone else, nodded, except Angus who shook his head no, then nodded because everyone else did. “My olfactory glands don’t work, ergo my sense of taste is also broken. Make sense?” The group nodded again, well, everyone except Angus again, who just looked confused.

“So, wait.” It may have taken him a while, but Angus was suddenly catching on. “Tha’s why ye said Fitz’s porridge was good? Cause ye cannae even taste it?” This deduction was noted by Rupert, who clapped and pointed at his friend like ‘Ah, you just solved it!’

Zahra chuckled softly. “I can taste things, but only if they’re really, really spicy.” She grinned suddenly, and laughed at an inside joke no one else was privy to. “God, ok, so this reminds me of this one time, right?” And just like that, they were all drawn back in. “My best friend Kai and I were in a prank war.” She was laughing at her own story a little as she told it, but the others around her couldn’t help but be drawn in. Zahra was a rather engaging storyteller, so expressive, and she talked animatedly with her hands a lot. “I had put something into his drink that made him piss blue for a whole day. So, in retaliation he tried to slip some habanero sauce into my oatmeal. Which, habanero, by the way, is one of the spiciest peppers on Earth. I mean, like, it’ll melt your face off.”

At the silent gasps and looks of horror she received, Zahra just smirked and rolled her eyes. “Not literally.” A chorus of ‘Oh’s. “Your face will just turn an angry shade of red, and you’ll start crying like a baby. I mean just touching the pepper to your lips can make them feel like they’re on fire.”

They were all of them smiling at this point, some laughing, some shaking their heads in disbelief. “So he slipped some habanero sauce into my oatmeal one morning at breakfast, expecting me to gag or puke or something, in front of the entire crew, but hah, jokes on him. I ate the whole damn bowl. Best oatmeal I’d had in a long time.” She grinned brightly. “Granted my back end paid for it later, cause while I couldn’t taste the fire going in, I could definitely feel it coming out. If ya know what I mean.” That earned another chorus of laughs and guffaws, and some shocked glances. Zahra definitely did not talk like any woman they’d ever met. “So maybe he got his prank in after all,” she said with a playful shrug. “Not how he had intended, though, so it doesn’t count. I still won.”
“Eh, ye’re just havin’ us on, lass. That didn’ actually happen.” One of the guys she didn’t know his name yet, said.

Zahra shrugged. "It's true as I’m sitting here."

“Oh, aye? How did ye make him piss blue, then? That’s some bullshite right there.” This time the question and disbelief came from their very own Rupert.

“Well, I could tell you the exact chemical composition of methylene blue, Rupert, but I think it would make your head explode." That earned her some laughs, and Angus jeered his friend in the side. “Just know there’s this special blue medicinal powder that when taken in very small doses is not harmful to the body, but it can turn your urine and feces blue.”

“Ye’re shite, too?” Murtagh asked now, he’d been silent almost the entire time, but blue shit seemed to make him squeamish.

Zahra laughed and nodded. “Yeah. Kai thought he had gonorrhea or something.” Her grin had been so bright until that moment, then the thought of her friend had sort of stolen the winds from her sails. How was she gonna get back to them?

“Amusin’ story, lass.” Angus said as he stood, gathering his plate. “But I still think ye’re full o’ shite.”

Rupert followed suit. “Aye. Magic blue dust, and fire peppers, my arse.”

One by one, the others followed until it was just Jamie and Zahra left. Murtagh and Jamie had exchanged a few parting words, but Jamie hadn’t left with him because Zahra seemed to still be a little lost in thought. “Remind me to ne’er get on ye’re bad side, lass. If that’s what ye do to a friend…” he chuckled softly. “Everythin’ all right?”

Zahra blinked out of her thoughts then and looked at Jamie. She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m fine. Just tired I guess.”

The younger man noted just how tired and weary she indeed looked, her face was just that expressive. That’s probably what had drawn so many into her tale, and it was a fantastical tale indeed. Jamie hadn’t been so entertained in some time. In that moment, looking at her closely in the quiet of the Kitchen, though, with the bright light coming through the windows, Jamie realized that the cut on her cheek from the gunshot that grazed her, and the one on her neck from Randall’s sword had not been cleaned. She had been so busy taking care of him that she’d not tended to herself.

Jamie got up and went to the large pot of hot water near the fire and ladled some into a bowl, then grabbed a fresh cloth which went into the bowl as well. He returned to Zahra’s side and set the bowl on the table, and straddled the bench to face her. He wrung out the cloth with his good hand and raised it to clean her cheek. She flinched away at first, startled, but he showed her it was just a cloth. “Ye’ve got a few cuts need cleaning,” he clarified. She nodded and sat still to let him tend her for a change. Her quietness now was almost jarring compared to moments ago. “Penny for yer thoughts, lass?”

Zahra took in a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. “I’m afraid I’d end up sending you to the poorhouse,” she responded with another sigh.

Jamie smiled at her wit, and marveled at her skills of deflection that could rival his own. “Fair enough,” he said, not pressing. He finished cleaning her cheek. It had bled, but the cut itself was tiny and already scabbing over. It should heal without a scar. The one on her neck though; that one had
stung when he'd begun to clean it and she'd made a surprised hissing noise. “Sorry,” he apologized for hurting her.

“It’s ok.” She responded softly. “I can disinfect and bandage it properly when I get back to my room.”

Jamie nodded and continued cleaning the wound. “Murtagh told me ye had a run in with Captain Randall.” He was feeling surprisingly better after some solid food, and mending. Still exhausted, but he didn’t rightly feel like leaving Zahra yet. The more time he spent in her company, the more he wanted to spend in her company. Wanted to find ways to put the positively joyous smile back on her face like when she had been talking about her friend.

“I don’t--you mean the redcoat from the stream?” she asked. Where Murtagh had saved her. “That was Randall?” Jamie nodded. "As in, the same Randall that--"

Jamie nodded again, then dipped the cloth back into the bowl. "Aye. He’s the one what took the pleasure o’ puttin’ me to the lash.”

Zahra turned to look at him with sadness and a little anger in her eyes. “For some reason that doesn’t surprise me.” She now more fully understood the evil she had seen in the man’s eyes and she was a little scared of it.

“Aye, I didnae think it would.” Jamie had finished cleaning the wound on her neck and was just cleaning off her face in general now, from the muck of the road. “They dinnae call him Black Jack for nothin’.”

She stopped his hand and met his eyes. Jamie’s ‘Black Jack’ was akin to Zahra’s Jargen, only in Jamie’s case his tormenter was still very much alive. Still very much a sadistic bastard. “Then I suppose I owe Murtagh a great deal of gratitude for saving me from him.”

Zahra was still holding his wrist when Jamie brought his hand to touch her cheek, thumb brushing softly beneath the cut he’d just cleaned. “You an’ me both, a gràidh.” Did he mean Murtagh had saved him, or that he was grateful Murtagh had saved her? Maybe both?

She could feel his pulse beating in his wrist and it was just as steadily quickening as hers. Their gazes held, locked, and in that moment it was like someone had just jostled the embers of the fire that had been smouldering softly between them since they’d met; it was quickly becoming a bright, burning flame. Zahra’s breathing grew heavy, and her grip on his wrist tightened a little as she rubbed her face into his palm.

And then Mrs. Fitz suddenly came back bursting into the kitchen in one helluva mood. Zahra and Jamie broke apart as whatever little moment they’d been having was completely spoiled with Mrs. Fitz’s appearance. Fitz ushered them both unapologetically out of her kitchen as Fitz was eager to get Zahra set up in her room so the older woman could get back to preparing lunch and then dinner. She at least allowed them a moment to say their farewells rather briskly in the hall.

Jamie had watched on as Fitz escorted Zahra away, until they disappeared from sight. His thoughts were overwhelming and many as he made his way to his own bedchambers. If the young Highlander hadn’t been conflicted before, he sure as hell was now. Dougal didn’t trust Zahra, and maybe the man had his reasons not too, but Jamie couldn’t help but feel that the man’s distrust and misgivings were ill placed. Zahra simply could not be the villain that Dougal suspected her of being. Sure, Zahra had secrets, that was a given. Jamie was man enough to understand that he may never be privy to all of them, but he carried his own close to his chest. It was comforting to know someone else understood what that was like.
In his chambers, freshly bathed and weary from travel, sleep was still hard to come by as worry over the strange woman nagged at the edges of his mind. When he did finally succumb, though, Zahra plagued his dreams. So much so, that when he woke later in the day he was not surprised to see the erected state his body was in. It should have been expected after the dreams he'd had about his painted woman. Needless to say, he’d had more than enough material to bring himself a little afternoon relief.

"Up with ye!" Zahra startled awake to Mrs. Fitzgibbon's command as the older woman pulled back the tapestries around her bed. “C'mon, then. You've been sleeping long enough.” With appropriate clothing in hand, Fitz was intent on making Zahra look presentable, or at least like she belonged within the hold. "Ye've nearly slept the day away, it's already past five." Five? Zahra had just gone to sleep around 10 that morning. “There’s hot broth for ye by the fire. Wake yourself and we'll get ye dressed."

Zahra had been dreaming, nothing pleasant, so it was rather fortunate that Mrs. Fitz woke her when she did. She had managed to find a shift to sleep in that morning, instead of her soiled clothes, and she was actually grateful she had decided not to sleep naked. She would have had a difficult time explaining that to Fitz.

Zahra got up slowly, feeling a little achy all over but ignoring it for now. She sat and ate quietly by the fire but it wasn't long before Mrs. Fitz was taking the bowl of broth from her, uncaring that she wasn’t finished. The older woman guided Zahra to the bath, trying to help her strip of her shift, but Zahra tensed up and away from her.

"Mrs. Fitz, please. I know you’re trying to help, but I am perfectly capable of bathing myself.” Zahra stubbornly crossed her arms over her stomach and chest before Mrs. Fitz removed anything else. "So, if you don't mind..."

The older woman gave her a sceptical look, but eventually she nodded. "Just call if ya need help dressing."

Zahra nodded and watched the woman go. When she was sure Fitz was gone, only then did Zahra strip and get into the tub. She bathed quickly, and thoroughly, washed her hair, her body. The water was cloudy afterward. Gross. She eventually got out and dried herself, then debated putting her old clothes back on. They were soiled and torn. She had gathered some necessary supplies that morning, but hadn’t been able to actually mend or clean them yet.

Zahra looked at the clothes Mrs. Fitz had brought in and she scratched her head. Medieval garments were not her forte, though inspecting them closer, they reminded her very similarly to the garments she would wear at Jargen’s mansion on Rigel. She put her panties back on, at least, because she was not walking around naked underneath her shift, for hygienic purposes. She then pulled on the under dress/chemise thingy or whatever it was called. It was a long nearly see through, muslin gown, but the rest, she was at a loss as to how it went. The corset she recognized but did it go over or under the dress?

Mrs. Fitz poked her head in, because Zahra was taking too long, and without being asked, the woman came in the rest of the way and started helping Zahra dress. Zahra paid particularly close attention to what Fitz did, because she definitely did not want to need the woman's help again.

"Thank you," Zahra said softly as Mrs. Fitz pulled her corset closed. Another unexpected word of gratitude for something Fitz had long gotten used to being ignored for.
“Ye’re welcome lass,” she said as they put on the finishing touches. "There. Now ya look proper to see his Laird. Although—" The older woman’s gaze had drifted up and she was staring at Zahra's hair.

Zahra's eyes shot upward, realizing what was giving Fitz pause, and she sighed. "Do you have any hair pins?" Zahra asked, and the older woman nodded, then left to retrieve said pins.

While she was gone, Zahra sat down in front of the mirror and braided her short crop back in two French braids tight against her head. It was a style she wore often when fancy occasions called for it. When Fitz returned with the pins she secured her hair that way and stood. Mrs. Fitz smiled and nodded. "Aye, that’ll do. Now you’re ready to see his grace. Come."

Zahra was led through the castle up to the highest tower, where Mrs. Fitz left her. She entered the room and saw an older man standing by the window; he had malformed legs. Zahra didn't stare, or at least she tried not to.

Colum was a very perspective, observant Laird. Zahra had tried to be as honest as she could when answering his questions without sounding insane. She had kept with the same story she had started to tell on the road. She'd had time to work out all the finer details now, but she tried to stick as mostly to the truth as she could. She told the Laird that she was from America, and had only been vacationing in Inverness. When they got on the subject of how Murtagh had found her being attacked by Randall, however, Zahra’s patience had begun to grow thin. Especially when Colum had used the phrase, “Rape a woman for no good reason?” What good reason was there ever for rape?

“Well, I might have spit in his face, then told him to eat shit, and called him an asshole,” she said, unapologetically. "I suppose if there ever was such a thing as a good reason to rape someone…" Zahra didn’t bother finishing that sentence.

Colum’s brow shot to his hairline. That had not been the answer he was expecting. Dougal had been right. This lass was a strange one. She’d made him realize the ugliness and poor choice of his words then, which he apologized for and dropped the matter. Colum seemed sympathetic to her being stranded, but Zahra knew he was calculating. Trying to figure her out. She wasn't telling the truth, and he seemed to know it, but he wasn’t calling her out on it. Not yet at least.

The Laird eventually asked after Jamie's condition and when Zahra had told him how she'd helped him, he had seemed greatly intrigued by that. He asked about how she knew what to do and Zahra easily kept with the story that she was a widower merchant’s only daughter, who had no idea how to raise a lady. With no money to hire help, he had been forced to bring her on the sea with him. There, he had raised and trained her as a boy for most of her life, which was why she knew how to wield a sword; why her mannerisms were not entirely ladylike; and why she had knowledge and skills of a healer. She had studied herbs since she was a child and had been educated in some basic medicine and healing from her father. In the end, Colum seemed to take her story in good faith, nodded his head, thanked her for her time, then sent her on her way, but not before making sure she promised to be at dinner.

Zahra was left to explore the castle ramparts and grounds after that, where she had seen Dougal playing in the courtyard with some children. She found Rupert and Angus, whom she questioned about Jamie and where she could find him, but the only answer she ever got from anyone was a shrug. Zahra assumed she would see him at dinner, or so she desperately hoped. So she retired to her chambers, where she took the time to wash and mend her clothes, then left them to dry near the fire before she left at the sound of the dinner bell.

When she entered the dining hall, her eyes had immediately sought out the redheaded highlander, but she couldn't find him among the diners. Dougal found her instead and directed her to sit with him at
the head table as his guest. Zahra agreed, even though a few pairs of eyes followed her as she joined Dougal and Colum for supper. She noted that they placed her very strategically between the two of them and she feared this dinner was not going to be as pleasant as she’d hoped.

It only took a few minutes into dinner service for Zahra’s suspicions to be confirmed. It was like Colum and Dougal had their own unique version of good cop/bad cop. The brothers had tried to supply her with wine, get her drunk, and ‘question’ her in a seemingly innocent manner. They may have sounded like they were being social and polite to the unsuspecting observer, but they were actually still interrogating her. Unfortunately for them both, Zahra never got drunk in foreign company and had only taken the one glass that she barely sipped on through the course of the meal. She was also keenly aware of what they were trying to do. This wasn’t her first rodeo, as the saying goes.

The questions had started promptly, and perhaps innocently enough, but she knew they were trying to probe her, trap her, make her slip up on her story. Unfortunately for them, Zahra was very familiar with this tactic, and did not fluctuate from her story in the least. She knew it forwards and backwards at this point; she wasn’t an amateur. She was a merchant’s daughter. Vacationing in Inverness. Her father and his ship would be expecting her in a week.

Eventually, she had enough of their ‘polite’ interrogation, so she made to excuse herself. “My apologies, my lairds,” she began politely, in a soft tone that did not reach the entire hall as she did not wish to make a scene. “--but the past few days have been trying, to say the least, and I wish to retire. So, if either of you wish to interrogate me further, I only ask you have the decency and courtesy of imprisoning me first instead of masking your distrust and animosity over dinner pleasantries.” She stood then, and gave them each a polite smile that was anything but. Let her leave or take her prisoner, that was what she had just offered to them.

It was Colum who finally gave her leave, by way of nodding his head, then saying, “Rest well, then, Mistress Zahra.”

"Good night, my lairds. My lady." She bowed her head to Lady MacKenzie as well, then turned to leave the hall. Dougal, however, was not so willing to let her off so easily; especially not after calling him out in such a manner. The man found her in the halls shortly after her little speech, and called out to her, "I'm not tryin’ to interrogate ye, lassie."

"Really?" Zahra said, not stopping but speaking to him over her shoulder. “You give all your dinner guests the Third Degree then?” She’d said, still walking away.

Dougal didn’t know what the Third Degree meant, but he caught up to her and took her arm to make her stop and face him. "I might not be tryin’ to interrogate ya, but I know ye’re not being entirely truthful about who or what ye are. I know there's something ye're hidin'."

Zahra stared at where he was gripping her arm and when she spoke her voice was full of venom. "All women have their secrets, Dougal. Surely a man of your wisdom and experience must know that.” She met his gaze with a steely, dangerous one of her own. “What makes you think you should be privy to mine?” Look at her using period specific language.

"Because I don't trust ye,” he argued back.

"Good,” she said immediately, with great enthusiasm and sincerity. Then, with an impressive maneuver Dougal had never seen a woman use before, Zahra managed to twist her arm around his and break herself forcefully from his grasp, which surprised him greatly. “I don't trust you either,” she declared. “So I guess that makes us even."
He reached for her again but she dodged him easily, not letting him back her into a corner. Dougal huffed angrily out his nose, and crossed his arms. "Until, I know ye’re no’ a threat to us, I’m gonna be watchin’.

"Fine. Please do. You’re gonna be very disappointed and bored." With that Zahra backed away from him, refusing to put him at her back, which Dougal fully understood meant she didn’t trust him. Clever girl. She didn’t turn around until she was a safe enough distance and she stormed off back to her chambers.

Dougal was scary, but at least he wasn’t Jargen level scary. Dougal was just a chauvinistic asshole who was trying to protect his people from a threat he was making up all in his mind. She suspected that too many years of living with an enemy at your back had made the man bitter and jaded. He was a man with a heavy burden on his shoulders and just trying to do right by his people, though, so she could respect that. Still, didn't mean she trusted him for shit.

She’d gone to bed restless that night, concerned for herself and for Jamie, whom had never made an appearance at dinner. She hoped he was all right.

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The next morning, she’d actually woken up early, her body’s internal alarm clock was still running strong apparently. It was still the ass crack of dawn and the only people who were awake were servants. Rupert was stationed outside her door, which she had discovered only because when she had opened said door he had practically fallen into her room. Apparently he had dozed off leaning against it. Zahra had pushed him back outside before she closed and locked the door behind him. She took care of her morning business, before sitting and gazing out the window a moment in naught but her skivvies. It was still dark outside, but the rising sun was definitely turning black to blue. She wondered if she’d be able to get in a run before the grounds were busy with action. It was beautiful outside, crisp and chilly, but still beautiful and the morning air was definitely something she craved.

She had washed and mended her clothes the day before, so when she got up to check them she found that they were dry. She pulled on her black jeggings first, followed by her black camisole with built in sports bra, then one of the men’s tunics she’d managed to snag from the laundry to replace the one she’d turned into a sling for Jamie. Her leather jacket went on over that, then some thick stockings and her boots. She exited her chambers fully dressed, which promptly awoke the dozing Rupert posted outside. “Wake up, sleepyhead.” She clapped him on the cheek. “Care to go for a morning run with me?”

“A morning what?” He started to say with a yawn and a stretch. “What’re ye goin’ on about, lass?”

Zahra smirked and gave him another light, playful pat on the cheek. “C’mon, tubby.” She slapped his gut playfully, then started jogging down the hall, stopping about thirty feet out and jogging in place as she waited.

“Damn ye, lass. It’s ungodly to be so chipper at this hour!” He called after her.

“Better keep up, pony boy,” Zahra called over her shoulder tauntingly. “What would Dougal say if he found out you lost your charge, huh?” And then she was off again, sprinting down the hall towards the stairs.

“Shite!” Rupert whispered to himself before jogging to catch up. He had a feeling this woman was going to be the death of him.
It was halfway across the grounds that Rupert decided Zahra must be some kind of woodland nymph, or a sprite, or something just as troublesome. She was a quick little devil, full of energy and spirit, and the worst part was she seemed to be enjoying this. To Rupert, this was as good as torture. His heart felt like it was going to explode out his chest, and his lungs and thighs were burning something fierce.

Zahra had lapped the grounds a few times, before she exited the courtyard and eventually made her way to the top of a hill that overlooked the MacKenzie grounds with the sun still rising in the east, casting a beautiful ethereal glow on the morning dew. It was there where Zahra had mercifully stopped to take it in.

Rupert eventually flounced up to her, panting and breathing hard and gripping at his knees and chest to catch his breath. “Damnit… woman… please… can we… go back… shite…” The man collapsed to his ass, then to his back, trying desperately to catch his breath.

“Why would you want to go back, when you get to wake up every morning to this?” Zahra asked, stretching her hand out towards the horizon. She was slightly winded herself but nowhere near Rupert's level.

The man glared up at her before he sat up a little, still panting hard. He took in the view that he normally took for granted because he saw it every day. To someone like Zahra, who was a stranger to their lands, however, he supposed he could understand her wonderment. “Aye.” He said after a moment. “Tis a bonnie view, I expec’.”

Zahra smiled down at him before moving to sit down herself. She had her knees bent, elbows resting on said knees, and her hands idly plucked at the grass as she watched the sun rise.

"What’re ye wearin’ woman?” Rupert poked at the patch sewn onto her jacket shoulder. “Weren’t ye given a proper wardrobe yesterday from Fitz?”

Zahra smirked and shrugged. “Can’t exactly run while wearing fifteen layers of skirts, now can I, Rupee?”

Rupert shook his head. “Nae, I expec’ not. Though why anyone in their right mind would willfully want to run, especially at this godawful hour, is beyond me. This normal for ye?”

Zahra nodded. “Pretty much.”

"Remind to switch with Angus for morning duties from now on then.”

Zahra smirked. "Ah, come on, laddie.” She teased. "It wasn't that bad. You did good for your first time. I took it easy on you. Normally, I do about ten miles, but then I don’t normally have a severely out of shape shadow following me.” She teased and slapped the back of her hand against his gut once more.

Rupert flinched slightly and rubbed at his belly. “Hey, now. I’m no’ out o’ shape.” Zahra gave him an ‘Are you serious?’ sort of expression and Rupert smirked. “I’ve got a perfectly well rounded shape… Wait, didya say ten miles? Aye, ya daft lass. There’s no way ye run ten miles every mom!” He looked at her like she was crazy. It was like the story at breakfast all over again. Zahra's tall tales he was gonna start calling them.

Zahra shrugged. “I don’t mean like ten miles distance. I mean, I do laps. Example," she went on to clarify. "A full lap around the castle is probably what, quarter mile? Give or take? So if I did forty
laps around the castle that would be about the equivalent of ten miles, yeah? It’s simple math really."

Quarter mile, forty laps, ten miles? The woman wasn’t just sassy, and spirited, but she was educated as well? Dangerous combination for a woman. Especially around these parts. Zahra was strange, and it went far beyond the short hair and tattoos. "Aye, but, runnin’ fer fun, though? Still think ye’re daft."

"Maybe." She shrugged. "But a little aerobic exercise once in a while is good for the soul. And the body." She poked at his belly again and made a sound like the Pillsbury doughboy, laughing as he swatted her hand away. She chuckled and dusted off her hands. "C’mon, bub. It’s just a quick jog back to the castle." She stood fluidly.

Rupert groaned and plopped back on his back. "Ye’re killin’ me lass."

"Nah. You’d know if I was killing you." She said to him with a wink, then offered him her hand to help him up. "C’mon!"

Rupert glared skeptically at her hand before taking it. He was more than a little surprised when she was actually able to help pull him up without much assistance from him. Maybe there was something about this running for leisure thing?

Rupert trailed behind her back to the castle and when they were safe in the courtyard, Zahra stopped and waited for him to catch up. He was breathing hard, and leaning against a fence. "Not bad, not bad. You only trailed behind me about 45 seconds or so this time. We’ll have you in tip top shape in no time." She patted him playfully on the shoulder, and he just glared at her, then flipped her off with two fingers.

Zahra laughed and went to the well to pull up a bucket of water. Her loyal shadow weakly trailed after her then slumped against the wall of the well and waited. Once the bucket was up, Zahra set it on the side of the fountain then used the ladle resting there to take a few swallows of the cool liquid. Ned was trying not to stare when some of the water trailed out the corner of her mouth and down her throat. She was unusual, no mistake, but definitely beautiful. According to Dougal, however, this woman could very well be an enemy. Rupert was supposed to be watching her, reporting her unscrupulous activities back to Dougal. He wasn’t supposed to be making friends… He hadn’t counted on her actually being so nice, and playful, however, in a way no woman usually was around men like him. It was as if she wasn’t afraid or intimidated by him in any way. It was refreshing.

Speaking of refreshing, Zahra handed a fresh cup of water to him and he took it before promptly started to gulp it down. "Easy, buddy," she said. "Drink too much, too fast, too soon after a workout like that and it’ll make you sick, or cramp up, or both."

Rupert actually took her advice seriously and started taking small sips. When he was done Zahra took the ladle back and scooped another half a cup for herself. She obviously hadn’t been unaffected by their run. She had sweat around her hairline, and moisture coloring the material of her shirt around her neck and pits just like anybody. That was comforting at least.

When she was finished, she offered him another as well which he took. He sipped on it slowly as he watched Zahra move a few feet away, then proceed to stretch her arms and legs. "What ye doin’ now?"

"It’s good to stretch before and after a run." She said as she brought her knee up to her chest and held it there for a few seconds, then released it, but only to do the same with the other. "Prevents your muscles from cramping."
Rupert harrumphed. “Tha’s a load o’ codswallop, I ever heard tell.” Though, he couldn’t stop staring at her while she did them.

When she was finished with her stretches she turned to him and announced, “C’mon, I’m hungry.” She didn’t wait for him before heading back towards the castle.

Rupert dropped the ladle back in the well bucket and followed after her. Halfway up the stairs back to her chambers, his left calf cramped and seized up making him hiss harshly in pain. “Ah, shite!” He cursed as he hobbled up the stairs grabbing at his calf.

“I warned you,” Zahra said with a soft, albeit sympathetic smirk. “You gonna be ok?” It looked like it hurt like the dickens, like someone was stabbing his calf. “Try resting your foot flat on the floor and putting your weight on it,” she instructed.

“It bloody hurts!” He grit out angrily after he tried and searing pain ripped through his leg.

“I know. But that’s the only way to stretch it out.” She crouched down and took his leg by the ankle and behind his knee. “C’mon. Try. Put your weight flat on your foot.” She tried to help him, and he groaned in pain but he did as she asked, only to seize back up. “Again!” She said without giving him room for argument. Rupert did it again, and while he did feel pain, it was lesser now. “Again.” She repeated, and he did it again, and again, until the pain was gone and the muscle relaxed.

The man breathed a sigh of relief then looked at Zahra with a bewildered expression as she stood. “Still believe it’s codswallop?” She said with a wink.

Rupert huffed amusedly. He may no longer believe it was codswallop, but he wasn’t about to give her that satisfaction. "Aye. Ye’re absolutely full of it," he said with a grin. “I just wanted an excuse for ye to touch me.”

Zahra gave his shoulder a friendly punch before turning and taking the short distance to her chambers. “Thanks for the run, Rupert. I’ll see you at breakfast?”

The man nodded. “Aye, lass. I’ll be here.” Zahra nodded and closed the door, which Rupert took up guard next to once again.

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After a quick sponge bath, Zahra had managed to dress herself on her own since she had watched Mrs. Fitz do the day before. She folded and hid her 'men's' clothing in the chiffarobe in case Fitz got any ideas.

Once dressed properly like a lady, Zahra made her way down to the kitchens, which were busy working to get breakfast out for the castle. Zahra had intended to ask Mrs. Fitz about Jamie’s whereabouts but upon seeing how busy the kitchen was, she offered to help instead. Mrs. Fitz was reluctant at first, thinking the woman might be a hindrance more than a help, but Fitz was pleasantly surprised when Zahra turned out to be quite useful in the kitchen, almost as if she had previous experience in scullery work and the such. They were normally so short staffed in the kitchens that Fitz ended up running double or triple duty, but with Zahra’s help it went much smoother.

Rupert had taken his breakfast in the kitchen to keep an eye on Zahra, and he was once more bowled over by this woman. She was good in the kitchen too? Was there anything she wasn’t good at? Her bannochs were superb, and, unlike Fitz's normal inedible slop, Zahra's porridge actually had a nice texture and flavor. Maybe she could teach Fitz her secret?

After breakfast prep was finished, Mrs. Fitz had handed Zahra a large wicker basket full of food
enough for two. “Take this to Jamie out in the stables, will ya, dear?” She said without Zahra even needing to ask the question. “Poor lad’s prob’ly starving with how much Auld Alec works him so. Make sure he eats enough, aye?”

Zahra beamed with gratitude. “Thank you, Mrs. Fitz.” She gave the woman a brief hug, and a kiss on the cheek as she accepted the basket. “I’ll make sure he gets a break.” Zahra gathered some more herbs and the medical supplies she’d brought to change Jamie’s dressing, then left to go find him. Rupert followed her as she went searching for Jamie, and he even helped direct her toward the stables.

When she came upon Jamie he was training with a horse. His arm was in a sling but he was using his good one to lead the horse in a wide circle around the pen. Zahra stood back a moment to just--admire him and what he was doing. It was almost majestic, the way Jamie seemed so peaceful and at ease with the beasts, even with his shoulder restrained as it was.

To Jamie, tending the horses was relaxing. They didn’t judge or gossip and if one didn’t like you, you knew it long before they started talking behind your back. The particular horse he was working with had been a thorn in everyone’s side, but Jamie had a knack with the feisty ones. So he was tasked with that very job at the moment. It was going well so far, assuming the mare didn’t get too headstrong, yet, he was learning he liked that about her. Reminded him of Zahra--as if he hadn’t already been thinking about her. Honestly, the woman seemed to be all he could think about since they’d met.

Jamie was a magnificent creature in his own right Zahra couldn’t help but think in that moment, watching him there, free and relaxed in his task. The mare was lovely too, but that was not what held her attention. There was a beautiful rawness about Jamie, about everything in this place really, but in particular she felt pulled to him, to this place in a very surreal, almost spiritual, and provocative way. Sometimes she wondered if she were but dreaming...

The horse Jamie was training reared suddenly when Zahra accidentally knocked a lantern from a post. The mare kicked out at Jamie until the man loosened his grip on the tether and let her trot off freely, though he cursed in Gaelic after her. When the horse whinnied, and bucked, Zahra gasped a little, concerned for Jamie, but he apparently knew what he was doing.

When he turned, wiping his dirty brow, Jamie realized what had startled the beast. When he saw the very woman of his thoughts, a wide grin spread across his face, boyish perhaps, but genuine and so charming. When Jamie turned to look at Zahra with that grin, it did something to her insides, and a deep blush colored her cheeks. "Sorry,” she said a bit sheepishly, smiling. "Did I cause that?"

Jamie closed the distance between them and shrugged. "Nae, she's just--a girl with spirit is all. That’s always a good thing.” He smirked at her and let his gaze take her in. She was in a new dress and all, and his grin turned a bit sly. "Ye look bonnie in that dress.” Jamie noticed how her arms, and pretty much every bit of her was covered. "Fitz didnae want everyone ta see your skin, I take it?” Jamie rather liked the interesting designs that spread across Zahra’s flesh and he’d never be able to deny that he had thought good and hard about getting a good, up close view to every inch.

His compliment had the heat rising up Zahra’s neck and face, giving her skin a soft rosy blush, and she bit down on her bottom lip slightly. She hated the dress. Zahra was a woman who normally hid her assets. She liked to be admired for her skills and accomplishments, not the swell of her chest. She hated the way it showed off her cleavage, and in general she just didn’t like dresses. She would have much preferred some pants but, she knew that would be stretching it a bit. She’d already pushed it that morning on her run.

She smiled, though, laughing softly at the comment about Fitz and gave him a kind of nod and a
shrug combined. "I'm sure if she had her way I'd probably be wearing a bag over my head." One thing he might notice was that she had removed almost all of her piercings so her ears and brow were bare, but some of the holes were visible.

"That'd be a pity indeed. I rather like seein' yer face 'round here." Jamie almost winked, but figured she was uncomfortable enough as it was. "Fitz is set in her ways. Don't let 'er get to ye. She only means well."

Zahra shrugged then got to her real question. "You weren't at dinner last night..." Ok it was more of an observation.

Hopping the fence, Jamie adjusted his tartan, tossing the loose end over his shoulder haphazardly and even making an attempt to tame his wild hair. "Aye, had work to do. Must earn my keep 'round here," He smiled again. Her blush indeed caught Jamie's attention, though he did his best not to make his notice of the physical change known - an attempt at being a true gentleman - but his grin couldn't have been mistaken for anything but smugness. After all, he was a healthy man and she was a very attractive woman who had actively sought his attention. "What d'we have here?" He motioned to her basket, curious.

"I need to check your shoulder," she began to say. “but I thought we could share some brunch first?"

"Brunch?" Jamie asked with a confused smirk and a furrowed brow.

"Uh, it's when you're too late for breakfast, too early for lunch, but just in time for a little bit of both. Brunch."

"Clever." Jamie's smirk widened into a genuine smile, and he nodded. "I'd enjoy that greatly." He replied, "We can sit up on tha' hill? The horses will be grazing; it's a bonnie view."

Zahra turned to look where he had indicated and then back to look at him, smiling. "I think I'd like that very much." She gripped the basket handle in both of her hands and turned to walk up the hill with him close at her side, enough that their shoulders rubbed together occasionally as they walked.

At the top of the hill, Zahra set down the basket and with Jamie's help they spread out the tartan blanket Zahra had brought with her. Every time she caught his eye, Zahra couldn't help the way her smile perked up a little and that feeling like butterflies in her stomach swelled. Once the blanket was down she picked up the basket again and gingerly knelt down on the blanket to open it and unpack their meal. "Food or first aid, which would you rather first?"

Jamie quickly settled himself on the blanket after helping her to lay it out flat on the grass. All the while, he watched her curiously. He wasn't sure he'd have been able to keep his eyes off her if someone was forcing him too, and not for the reasons others might have stared at her. Attraction was hard to quell, after all. He didn't know what she meant by first aid, but he knew what he wanted first. "Food first." He stated happily. "I never turn down a meal. Never know when it may be yer last."

"Amen to that." She nodded and set everything out. Mrs. Fitz had packed her some fresh fruits like figs, a couple apples, and some cheeses. There was a bit of porridge in a small pot and a few bannochs with honey and jam. Jamie wasted no time digging into the fare she had brought for them, and the company made his usual mealtime much more enjoyable. Jamie also took notice that the porridge was actually palatable with a nice flavor, to which Zahra just shrugged, not admitting she'd had a hand in cooking it.

"I suppose I can't blame you for doing your duties, but I did miss you at dinner last night," she admitted softly.
Jamie couldn't deny that a part of him liked the fact that she'd missed him. It meant that maybe she must be thinking about him as much as he'd been thinking about her. "Ai, it couldnae been that bad?"

Zahra huffed softly, part amused, part annoyed. "Lairds Dougal and Colum tried to get me drunk and probed me with questions," Zahra said as she cut a slice from an apple. "Most likely with the hopes I'd spill all my secrets and declare myself a spy."

Her comment about the Mackenzies definitely got his attention. "Aye. I promise they mean well. Colum more perhaps than Dougal." Jamie popped a fig into his mouth, not bothering to chew the thing completely before talking some more. "The English would have quite a find if they searched 'round here… but I don' believe yer an informer, if that means much o' anything. They're just cautious."

"It does," she said as she took a bite from her piece of apple, then cut off another piece to offer it to Jamie, which he took with a slightly crooked smirk. Unlike him, Zahra did wait until she had mostly chewed and swallowed her food before speaking again. "I've--lived a very difficult life. I do have a lot of secrets, Jamie, but--I'm not a spy. For anyone. I would never try to bring harm to anyone here. I just--" she took a deep breath and took a sip of juice she had poured from the skein Fitz had given her. "--I just wanna go home."

His heart ached for her. They were more alike than not it seemed, as Jamie desperately pined for his own home. He reached over and laid a gentle hand on her arm, a shoddy attempt at comforting. "Wha' did Colum say? Will ye be goin' home?" Jamie was almost sad at the prospect of her leaving. Not like he had any say, but his liking of her seemed to multiply every time he saw her, or every time she offered him even the smallest smile. She was a tough but beautiful woman, he saw that and he really liked it.

She shrugged. "He said something about a merchant tinkerer coming into town, and possibly traveling out with him when he leaves, but it didn't--" She huffed softly as she mulled over her words. "I know when I'm being pandered to, and it did not sound like the sincerest of offers. More something to try and get me to lower my guard." She sighed softly and munched on another piece of her apple. "He seemed--really interested when I told him how I mended your shoulder, though." She sounded thoughtful.

"Aye, that makes sense," Jamie said in response.

Zahra had definitely noticed the man's legs and wondered about what sort of hospital or infirmary they could possibly have here if he wasn't being treated for it. She didn't specifically know what caused the deformity but she knew he had to be in pain and some primo amounts of it. "Does Leoch not have a doctor?" Apparently, Zahra was fairly skilled in deductive reasoning among other things.

Jamie shook his head in the negative. "Haven't had fer some time."

Her brow furrowed in the center a little, thoughtful. "Do you think--maybe if I offered to help, that I might could barter my services for travel?"

Jamie was a little surprised at that. She had a cunning, intelligent way of thinking to come up with that plan. Beautiful, brave, and smart. She was a dangerous one and no mistake. "I couldnae say for sure, but--it couldnae hurt ta ask, now, could it?"

She nodded, face and shoulders now set in determination. "OK. Awesome! Would you--would you come with me to ask him?"
Awesome? Jamie watched her for a moment, curious and amused, and eventually nodded. "Aye. I'll come wi' ye."

She nodded again, smiling. "Thank you."

"I'm just happy ta be of some help, tha's all."

Zahra sighed softly. "I know. I also know that I'm a stranger here, and you've no reason to trust me or treat me any differently than Dougal or the others, but--you've shown me a great kindness these past few days. A kindness that I didn't expect to find here nor did I realize I'd need. So--thank you."

It was his turn to blush softly, not used to being given gratitude for something so simple and mundane as being kind. "No need to thank me for that, Zahra."

"Maybe not, but I will anyway." She smirked a little crookedly as she popped a fig into her mouth. God, he wanted to kiss her so badly in that moment. "You're a rare woman, Leeloo Zahra."

Zahra blushed a little and shook her head. She spoke with her mouth half full, but covered said mouth with her hand as she spoke. "I'm a huge pain in the ass, I assure you, maybe even more so with my dumb mouth. But I put my corset on one tit at a time, just like everyone else." That made Jamie laugh. It was one of those full, uninhibited belly laughs that they could hear all across the grounds.

Zahra was grinning brightly and mesmerized by the man before her, laughing so jovially despite the dire straits they had been in just a day or two before. "I'm serious," she insisted with a grin, his mirth infectious.

Jamie swiped at a joyous tear that had leaked out of the corner of his eye. "Oh--I don't doubt that at all I just--I've never heard a woman talk that way before. Ye're very funny, Leeloo."

Normally, she hated when people used her first name, but when Jamie said it she couldn't fight the blush that colored her cheeks or the way she bit her bottom lip. "Funny looking maybe," she corrected self-deprecatingly as she took a sip from her cup. Look, she was awful at taking compliments ok? They always made her feel awkward and squirmy.

"Oh, nae. Funny is definitely no' a word I'd use ta describe the way ya look, lass," he bantered back with a smirk.

"Oh, really? Pray tell, what word would you use, then?" She scoffed softly and rolled her eyes to look away from him, slightly embarrassed. With her short hair, muscled figure, and pointed features, she very much doubted she looked as appealing to him as the buxom, voluptuous women from his own time.

He reached out a hand gently to touch her cheek, resting her chin in the cradle between his thumb and pointer finger which he used to gently turn her face to look at him. "Stunning," he said softly, meeting her eyes for a moment with an intensity and sincerity that made Zahra's heart flutter in her chest and forced her to swallow hard past the lump in her throat.

Being around Jamie she couldn't deny her obvious attraction to him, the way he could somehow get the butterflies in her stomach going wild with just a smile or a well placed glance. Don't get her started on the way her heart had been beating on the horse ride the day before yesterday. The thing about Zahra was that, after spending as long as she had as a slave, forced to be other people's play thing, she didn't look at the world, at people, at sex the same as others. She didn't form everyday 'crushes' on people. She didn't usually think with that part of herself. Therefore, it wasn't often that
Zahra found herself truly attracted so quickly to another person like she was to Jamie. That meant Jamie was dangerous, and she needed to be careful.

Jamie’s eyes seemed to roam over her features, then, as if to take them all in. She was indeed stunning. He’d never seen a woman as striking and naturally beautiful as her. “Breathtaking,” he continued on to describe her looks. Since she had not pulled away, he even felt emboldened enough to let his hand cup her jaw as he moved a little closer.

This time, when he held her face, Zahra was a little overwhelmed from what she was feeling in the moment and she did end up nuzzling her cheek into his palm. She remembered the day before at breakfast when they’d had another moment like this. When her eyes opened, they locked onto his. Her pupils were blown wide and her breathing grew heavier, slightly laboured. Fuck, she wanted him so badly in that moment; to just crawl into his lap and have her way with him, and her thoughts startled even herself. Her hand, almost of its own accord, had reached out and was now fisting the material of his shirt in her palm.

The attraction between them burned like molten fire and Jamie wanted nothing more at that moment than to kiss her senseless. The grip she suddenly had on his shirt made him think that maybe she wanted the same thing. Before anything else could transpire between them, however, there came a loud, bellowing neigh from the field below which seemed sufficient enough to break them both from the spell they’d just been under.

Jamie cleared his throat, and dropped his hand from her face just as Zahra removed her grip on his shirt and sat up straight, also clearing her throat. “I should umm--” she cleared her throat again and pressed her palms to her cheeks, which were flushed red and hot. “--your shoulder.” She reached for the basket with the medical supplies she’d packed. “I need to change the dressing.”

Jamie himself was trying to will away the boiling in his blood that had started to travel south in the moment. Hopefully, Zahra wouldn’t notice or if she did, would not take offense by it. She sure didn’t seem like some blushing virgin, so hopefully, she would understand and wouldn’t fault him for his body’s natural reaction to--whatever that had just been. Bollocks, Jamie had never been so attracted to a woman before in his life. It was like it wasn’t just his body that wanted her. It was strange, foreign, unknown, but exciting nonetheless.

“Of course.” Jamie obediently removed his shirt and watched as Zahra knelt beside him then unwrapped the bandage from yesterday. Her body language and features had changed almost dramatically into something much more clinical as she touched him now. There was a stiffness there, and she was deliberately avoiding looking into his eyes.

“You must be careful not to move your arm much or you’ll bust the stitching,” she spoke without looking at him still and Jamie’s brow furrowed in concern. He had obviously done something wrong. Again. Had he taken advantage of her? Had he imagined the attraction between them? Did she in actuality maybe hate him for being part of the reason she was stuck here? He wouldn’t blame her if she did.

“You must keep the bandages clean and dry,” she continued relaying instructions, wrapping her new dressing with more long bandages.

“Zahra,” he spoke softly, concerned.

God, how could just saying her name carry so much weight? She still refused to meet his gaze, though, and instead focused on what she was doing. “If you start to feel feverish or like you’re gonna vomit, come and get me right away--”
“Zahra?”

“There is still a serious risk of infection that we--”

“Leeloo, please,” he touched his hand to her cheek again which cut off whatever she had been trying to say, forcing her to close her eyes and breath heavily out her nose. “Please look at me?” She took in a deep breath and her eyes opened and finally met his as he continued. “I’m sorry. I know ya must feel lost an’ sick for home and the last thing ya need is--” He sighed softly, shaking his head. He dropped his hand from her cheek only to reach down to hold her hand instead. “I would n’er want tae take advantage of you or yer kindness and I’m sorry if I--”

“Shut up!” Jamie was surprised when Zahra not only cut him off so abruptly, but when he looked up at her, she was suddenly kissing him. It was like a bolt of lightning had just struck his body. He’d stiffened at first, but after the initial shock wore off, his body relaxed, his eyes closed, and a moment later he was taking control of the kiss. Holy god, was he taking control of the kiss.

Jamie heard Zahra moan softly, which had his member stirring back to life beneath his kilt, and he desperately wanted to pull her into his lap. As he reached for her, though, to act on his fantasies, he was suddenly reaching for air and his mouth was chasing after lips that were so suddenly gone it was almost cruel.

In a dizzying blur, Zahra had broken away from him and their kiss before Jamie could even register what had just happened. When his brain caught up to reality and he looked up, Zahra was already halfway down the hill with her basket in one hand, and straightening her skirts with the other. Jamie was in shock and awe as he watched her retreating form head back to the castle, though he did note that Rupert was following close behind. Had the man seen? Probably. Would he tell Dougal? Probably, too. Did Jamie care? Not really, no.

His fingers reached up to touch his lips that still tingled from the force and abruptness of Zahra’s kiss. He licked the flavor of her from his lips and found he could still taste the juice she’d drank moments prior, along with the honey from her bannoch, and the unique something that was distinctly her. God, he wanted so very badly to taste her again.

After a moment, a very smug, crooked smirk appeared on his lips and he chuckled softly to himself, shaking his head at the situation.

"Auch, lad." Alec shouted up at him. "Ye still stuffin' yer face while the beasts run wild?"

Jamie reached for his shirt to put it back on. "Away, old man," he called back. "I'll be right there." After he pulled his shirt back on, he grabbed up the blanket from the grass which smelled like dew and Zahra. He wondered if it was the blanket she slept in and the thoughts that stirred in his mind were going to get him in a predicament again. He would have to make sure he returned the blanket too her.

With one last look at Zahra’s far away form, Jamie turned to make his way back down to the stables. His thoughts remained occupied about the woman who’d just given him the most memorable kiss of his life, and he came to a few conclusions throughout the afternoon following: 1) Zahra was unpredictable, and impulsive, 2) She was strong, both willfully and physically so, 3) She was the most beautiful, but untamed creature he had ever met, 4) She was an amazing and confident kisser. No virginal softness or misgivings. And that brought him to the most important part, 5) She would be his. At least, that was if he had anything to say about it. He very much doubted a woman like her would be easy to catch, and then only if she wanted to be caught. Jamie was definitely going to have to stay on his toes.
Jamie gets a crash course in Leeloo Zahra 101. Hopefully, he doesn't crash and burn.

I tried to break this chapter up into two but couldn't find any appropriate place to do so, so here. I also realize that I might have taken some liberties with the canon story line but seeing as how I am not really following the canon story, I figured what the hell.

It's really long. And I feel like I am spoiling y'all by posting these chapters so close together. In truth these were mostly written before I started posting. From here on out it's all new chapters I haven't started yet so... I guess I mean to say don't get used to it!

Hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Zahra and Jamie didn’t see much of each other after that morning by the stables. Not for lack of trying on Jamie's part; he had a blanket to return after all. Mostly, it was Zahra. She wanted to believe she wasn’t avoiding him, but it was most likely she was doing that very thing.

As much as every natural instinct and nerve-ending in her body was screaming at her to go for what she obviously wanted, Zahra was not normally a woman who was driven by carnal desires of the flesh. She was a soldier, committed to duty, and Starfleet. If, er, when they found her, what would they say if they learned she had been fraternizing with the local population? What would they say when they found out she had violated one of the first rules of the Prime Directive? And that she was fucking with Earth’s history, no less? She was already screwing up god knows what by even her simplest actions, here. Who knew what she had fucked up already by helping them avoid that ambush on Cocknammon rock two days ago?

No. She needed to focus on surviving, on getting back to the stones, and however she could do that with the least amount of interference as possible. So she’d stayed away from temptation, which meant she was staying away from Jamie, because obviously her attraction to the redhead was something that went deeper than simple lust for her to act so brashly as she’d done.

In her avoidance, that meant she had ended up meeting with Colum on her own, without Jamie, though her loyal shadow, Rupert, was never far behind. She and Laird MacKenzie had talked bluntly, and Zahra had made him a deal. She would offer her services as a medic and a healer, such as they were, if, in return, Colum would grant her the means to return to her port of origin. Colum further stipulated that a month of services would be more than enough to grant her supplies, a carriage, and an armed escort back to Inverness. He had initially demanded three months but Zahra had negotiated down to one by agreeing to swear her services under contract; a contract that she had read through with a fine toothed comb. Thusly, she became not just acting medic, but she was now under the protection of Clan MacKenzie as long as she stayed within their boundaries.
That was all it took, that simple assurance that she would definitely be going home, to help calm her mind and ease her worries. A month was not long to wait at all. It was longer than she’d anticipated, but doable. She had been shown to their former healer’s ‘surgery’ which was now hers. She’d gotten herself acquainted with it, and afterward she settled into a bit of a routine.

When she was behind closed doors, she trained alone to keep up her physical and combat skills; pushups, yoga, that sort of thing. She and Rupert had even started going on daily morning runs together. Sure, he griped and complained about forgetting to switch duties with Angus, but she knew he was starting to enjoy it.

Over the span of the past couple days the two had built a sort of camaraderie around their morning runs. They bantered more easily now, and Rupert had gotten used to her manners and quirks. He wasn’t sure if he’d be comfortable enough to call her friend, because Dougal still insisted she could be dangerous, but from what he had learned of her so far, she was a decent woman. Kind. Funny. Intelligent. Witty. Strong. Any man would be proud to call her his, but Rupert doubted very much he would ever be able to do so. He might not be the smartest man, but he had seen the way Zahra looked at Jamie from across the hall, or across the yard. Even if he hadn’t witnessed their first kiss personally, he could clearly see the obvious chemistry and attraction between them. Zahra might be fighting it for whatever reasons that were her own, but Rupert could see it. He saw more than people gave him credit for. If Zahra wasn’t going to pursue it, however, Rupert wasn’t going to make her. Though, he may just eventually have to give Jamie a swift kick in the pants. A woman like Zahra did not just drop into their laps every day. She very well might have to be chased, and Jamie was gonna have to do the chasing.

When Zahra wasn’t helping tend the sick or afflicted, she occupied her time helping Mrs. Fitz in the kitchens and around the castle, where she continued to surprise the older woman with her kindness, her willingness to help, and her knowledge of the ‘harder’ part of castle life. When Zahra wasn’t in the clinic, or helping Mrs. Fitz, she could mostly be found in the gardens foraging for supplies, not only for Mrs. Fitz in the kitchen, but for her own herbs and things she could use for medicinals as well. It was calming to her, relaxing even, reconnecting with nature, reacquainting herself with a hobby and skill that went as far back for her as her early childhood.

“That one’s poison,” a voice startled her from behind, making Zahra thunk her head on a low lying branch. Zahra turned, then, to see a beautiful red haired maiden smiling and giggling at her plight. “Sorry, I don’t mean ta laugh.”

Zahra smirked and rubbed the back of her head. “Don’t be. I’m sure it was hilarious from your point of view.” Zahra held up the mushroom before dropping it in her basket. “Thanks for the warning, but I’m well aware these are poisonous.”

“And who are ye plannin’ ta do away with? Is it yer husban’ perhaps? Would ye tell me if it works so maybe I can try it on mine?” The woman smirked impishly and lowered the hood of her shawl. Zahra had to admit the woman was quite beautiful. First Jamie, now this one? Zahra never realized she had a thing for Scottish gingers. What would Monty say?

Zahra smiled and approached the other woman slowly. “Actually, the caps on these shrooms might be poisonous, but if you dry them out they can be ground into a fine powder, which can actually help stop bleeding when applied topically.”

“Fancy that,” the redhead answered casually. “My name is Geillis. Geillis Duncan.”

“I’m sorry. Where are my manners. I’m--”

“I know who ye are, Zahra. The village has been positively humming with talk of ye since ye came
Zahra’s smile faltered some and she looked away embarrassed. “Can’t imagine what they’re saying.”

“That ye’re some kind of Sassenach assassin or spy,” she said before she stood and moved closer to where Zahra was crouched in the verge. “Ye know--those’ll start bleeding,” Geillis said as she nodded at the purple bunch of flower stalks growing not too far from them. “To get rid of a child ye don’t want. Brings on yer flux, but only if ye use it early. Too late and it may kill you and yer unborn child.”

Zahra knew these times were barbaric compared to where she had come from. A woman's body should definitely be her own to do with as she pleased, but using things like abortion or these “flux” inducing purple flowers as a form of birth control, never sat well with her. Sure, these times were awful, and she wasn't talking about incidences of rape or incest, don't go jumping down her throat, please. As a free woman, though, one of Zahra's strongest desires had once been to bear her own children, but she was simply unable to. The thought of purposefully killing an unborn child, it almost made her sick.

“The girls in the village come to me every now and again for such things,” Geillis continued in a sing song like manner. Or maybe that was just her normal manner of speech. “They say I’m a witch.”

Zahra snorted. “A witch? Seriously?”

“Hardly,” Geillis responded playfully. “However, I am aware of how wood betony can transform toads into pigeons.” Zahra’s grin widened. For a second, she had thought Geillis was being serious but it was obvious the woman did not think herself a witch anymore than Zahra did. “You should come visit me sometime in the village. I’ve a whole cabinet full of medicinals and potions that might strike yer fancy.”

Zahra smiled and nodded. “I’d like that.”

“But before then I hope to see you in the hall tonight.”

“The hall?” Zahra asked.

“Aye. For hearings.” Geillis answered with a smile and handed Zahra a flower. “Ye’ll see.”

That night, in the hall where Colum was to attend court, Geillis had sought out Zahra and the two had been attached at the hip all night. Zahra had stolen glances to young Jamie through the crowd, of which Geillis had not missed a single look. Only what Zahra did not see was how often young Jamie’s gaze sought her out as well. There was a longing there, from both parties; a powerful yearning. Geillis had an almost sixth sense about these things and she could practically feel the line tethered between them. How interesting.

When the piper rang in the start of court, Geillis linked elbows with Zahra and they stood in reverence as his laird approached the dais. The piper was silenced and as things began Geillis supplied Zahra with all the necessary translations to keep her privy to the goings on before them. A dispute over a cow here. An argument over land there. It reminded Zahra of being back with the Syndicate, with Jargen at his estate. The Orion had been a lord of sorts over his own lands and governing of people. He used to take court in a similar fashion. Maybe not so pomp and circumstance and a little more blood and fists, but he used to settle disputes in a very similar fashion. He had thought himself royalty that way, the sadistic prick.
Zahra couldn’t understand what they were saying, so she thought it was rather boring really; Geillis’s play by play being the only thing keeping her entertained. It wasn’t until an older man brought forth a younger maid that Zahra’s interest piqued. Her stance straightened with tension, and her brow furrowed in concern as the man gripped the younger woman’s arm and spoke in a harsh, berating tone. “Uh oh…” Geillis mumbled and Zahra leaned in for explanation. “Her father accuses her of loose behavior,” Geillis answered Zahra’s unspoken question.

“With what proof?” Zahra asked quietly.

Geillis shrugged. “Her father wishes the MacKenzie to have her punished for disobedience,” the redhead responded in a whisper.


Further in the crowd, Geillis saw Jamie and Murtagh arguing among themselves, but Zahra didn’t see it. She only had eyes for the younger woman in front of her. She was just a girl. She didn’t deserve to be flogged for disobeying a father’s rule, especially not without proof.

This wasn’t her world, she tried to remind herself, but she couldn’t stop herself from remembering.

A little girl, no more than eight, being strung between two posts. "Please, master. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. Please!"

Apparently Colum was granting the punishment, and as the girl’s struggling intensified so did Zahra’s memories… but she shouldn’t intervene.

"I’ll be obedient, master! I promise!" The crack of leather in the air. "Please! No! No!!!"

“Stop!” Zahra suddenly called, making Geillis look at her, startled and surprised. Geillis wasn’t the only one, though. Jamie was staring at Zahra intently, too. What was she doing?

The crowd all parted as each one turned to look at her. Zahra gave Geillis a look and squeezed her hand before she stepped forward through the crowd, head held high. Who knew all those mandatory diplomacy classes from command school would actually come in handy someday? When she got to the center, she bowed in front of Laird MacKenzie.

"Who d’ye think y’are, lass?” Colum said, quiet but definitely angry.

Zahra remained bowed, head down. “I do not ask for pardon, my laird, only that if it is punishment you wish to give, that I may take it in the girl’s place.”

There was a raucous murmuring in the crowd and Colum spoke loudly in Gaelic then raised his hand to quiet them down. "This is nae yer business, Sassenach."

“And is it the business of my lord, to traumatize young maidens, and irreparably score their flesh simply on the word of one angry father?” She was pushing it, she was very well aware, but there was no way she could stand idly by and watch such a young, innocent, beautiful girl be tortured.

Zahra remained bowed as Colum and said father hashed it out in their native Gaelic. Zahra did not see when Dougal whispered something to Colum, and Colum ended up having the final word. The Laird raised his hand and an audible but hushed gasp came over the crowd. Jamie struggled to step forward but Murtagh was holding him back. What the hell was Zahra thinking?
“So be it,” Colum finally said in English and Zahra stood slowly, watching as the young girl was released, running to Mrs. Fitz and then weeping openly in her arms.

Angus and Rupert approached Zahra, intending to restrain her but Zahra shook her head. “I can stand on my own.” They looked up at Dougal who just nodded his head, so they stepped back, but remained close. Geillis was suddenly behind her, loosening her corset. “What are ye doin’?” the redhead whispered harshly.

“Don’t worry,” Zahra said with a wink.

“I don’t think ye understand what ye’re--” the words died on Geillis’ lips when she got a view of the scars on Zahra’s back, barely hidden beneath the muslin of her shift. They weren’t scars of a lash, they looked more like burn scars, only they covered the entire expanse of her back. They looked angry, and evil, but long healed. Geillis gently touched the scars on Zahra’s back, wondering how old they were? What had been done to her?

Zahra smirked at the redhead over her shoulder, far too casual for the gravity of the situation. “Like I said, don’t worry.” Zahra held the front of her dress and corset to her chest as Geillis stepped away, exposing her back to the dais; for Colum and Dougal’s benefit mostly as no one else gathered would get a clear view from the angle. Dougal and Colum exchanged glances with one another and while no words were said, that one look spoke volumes.

Rupert was eventually given the ugly task of lash master, and he stepped up behind the woman just as Angus and another man moved to try and restrain Zahra again. “I don’t need your help,” she argued with a glare.

“Listen, lass,” Rupert leaned in to whisper. “I admit ye may be stronger than other lassies, but--”

“I can stand on my own, Rupert” She gave him a stern look. “I’ll be fine.”

The man sighed regretfully but nodded. Dougal may have his own plans and mistrust of the woman, but Rupert had been her watch for the past several days, and he might have grown a little attached. Even fond. If she didn’t want the support though… He supposed they’d see how long til she broke. Rupert sighed heavily and released the lash to graze the marble beneath them…

Jamie couldn’t bear it any longer. While he might have been willing to take punishment for the other lassie simply on merit, this was bloody Zahra they were talking about. It wasn’t just merits at stake. He actually cared for this bloody woman and no way could he let this happen. “Stadadh a-nis!” He called out before Rupert could strike the first lash. Dougal all but rolled his eyes.

“No.” Zahra said, shaking her head. She stared Jamie down as he pushed past Murtagh and approached the dais. “No!” She called again as he spoke over her in rapid Gaelic. She assumed he was arguing against her punishment, or maybe even offering up himself instead. How idiotic. (Pot, kettle, hello.)

“My lords, please, don’t listen to him. He’s got some fool’s sense of misplaced honor.” They were talking over each other now, Zahra in English while Jamie argued rapidly in Gaelic. “You’re still injured, Jamie, you can’t…” Once more Jamie ignored her entirely and continued talking directly to Colum and Dougal like she wasn’t even there; like she was just some silly girl who didn’t know what she was doing. Frankly, it was really pissing her the fuck off.

Suddenly, Zahra’s closed fist struck him dead in the jaw, which sent Jamie to the ground. It was a sucker punch and she knew it but, dammit, he was being an ass. “This is my choice, goddammit!” She said firmly down to him. "My choice! You don’t get to take it away from me.”
“Enough!” Dougal and Colum shouted at the same time. Zahra turned and bowed her head.

Jamie stared up at Zahra equal parts shocked and awed while he flexed his jaw around and raised a hand to touch it. Murtagh offered him a hand, and still slightly stunned, Jamie took it letting the man help him stand. They were all staring at Zahra with a different perspective now.

“Anything else, Mr. MacTavish?” Colum asked.

Zahra and Jamie stared each other down, their own exchange happening without saying any words. His jaw muscles clenched and unclenched as he mulled over his thoughts. She’d hit him. She’d hit him and it had hurt. She’d knocked him on his ass with one bloody punch. Jamie had never been struck by a woman before but, damn! He had never expected any lass to hit so hard. She hit harder than most men Jamie had come to blows with. He had half a mind to grab her to try to shake some sense into her. What did she think she was doing? What was she trying to prove?

With a simple look, Zahra dared him to try to deny her again, and somehow Jamie realized in that moment that if he did take this from her he may irreparably damage whatever trust and rapport they had been building together. That was a devastating thought, but so was the thought of watching her be lashed. Finally, after a moment that seemed to stretch for eternity, he broke the tense silence.

“Nae. Nothin’ else. If this is her choice, let it be.”

Jamie stepped to the side, but stayed close. It was then, seemingly for the first time, he noticed the scars on her back and his heart plummeted to his feet. She’d said she’d had scars of her own but he’d never realized… He looked intently at Dougal whose expression was as stoic and closed off as ever, giving absolutely nothing away. How could his Uncles really go through with this?

With a heavy, weighted sigh, Rupert got into position again. He drew back the whip and Jamie flinched as the first lash struck. Zahra, for her part, managed to stay upright, and didn’t even make a sound. Again the lash struck flesh, the sound echoing through the chamber. Jamie flinched again, probably more than Zahra. How was she still standing? Jamie could see the fresh red welts raising on her back, slicing through the thin muslin of her shift. He knew intimately how much it hurt, but she hadn’t made a sound; she was still standing of her own volition.

Unbeknownst to Jamie or any of the others, Zahra had decades worth of survival training which included withstanding torture. She’d been flogged, beaten, electrocuted, and branded more times than she could count. She had learned long ago that pain was a state of mind just as much as physical, and if she could enter a meditative like state she found she could mostly block out the pain. Mostly. Currently, she was breathing deeply and steadily, and reciting herbal and chemical compositions in her head. Her fists were clenched in front of her, still holding up her corset to preserve what little modesty she could. Her body may have moved, may have reacted with each lash; her nostrils may have flared and her teeth clenched, but other than that she showed no outward reactions.

Jamie was dying a little more inside as each lash struck, and so it seemed was Rupert, who had sweat beading on his brow, and his face had paled dramatically, making him look like he was going to cry, or be sick, or maybe both. He pleaded with Dougal with his eyes; to let him stop, but Dougal insisted they continue until first blood, as was the rule of the punishment. No amount of silent pleading on Rupert's part seemed to be enough to convince Dougal to let him stop.

After the 20th lash, Zahra’s impressive willpower finally began to falter when the first truly audible sign of her pain erupted from her throat before she fell forward to her knees. That still wasn’t the end though, no blood had been drawn and Dougal insisted they continue. Angus approached to try to help her up but Zahra pushed him away, denying any help or support. She managed to stand back up on her feet and waited. Her mantra had been broken, though, so she felt every lash fully after that. It was painful, but if ever she collapsed from the pain, she simply took a breath or two and stood back
Rupert began whipping her harder, hoping to God to break flesh, to allow him to stop this. He didn't know if it was because of the scarring on her back causing a sort of callous in her skin, or what, but it wasn't until the 30th lash or so that the skin finally broke.

Rupert collapsed to his knees and twisted to stare desperately at Dougal with pleading in his eyes. Dougal nodded his assent; finally, he could stop. Rupert dashed away hurriedly to discreetly find a bin to puke in and Angus followed on his best friend's heels.

Zahra had collapsed to her knees and Geillis ran to her, holding her close and whispering nonsensical nothings as she helped the woman to stand. The redhead stared Dougal down as she helped carry Zahra out of the hall. Jamie gave his uncle a similar staredown before taking his own leave as well.

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Mrs. Fitz had found Zahra in her chambers shortly after court ended. Apparently the young girl Zahra had saved from punishment was the woman's granddaughter. “Ye did no' have ta do that lass, but--I thank ye. Whate'er ye need, no matter what it be, ye let me know?” Fitz nodded at Geillis before she left, running into young Jamie in the hall. “That woman, Jamie… I was wrong abou' her. So wrong. I don' know where ye found her, but--I'm grateful ye did.”

Again. Such praise coming from Fitz, when the woman had not been too keen on Zahra when they first met, was high praise and Jamie couldn't agree more. He gave Fitz a nod as she turned to walk away. He entered Zahra's chambers shortly after that, just as Geillis was leaving to grab some more supplies. “How is she?” he asked from the doorway.

“Better 'an ye'd expec’,” the woman said. Jamie nodded and debated turning around and leaving. “She’s sent me to fetch a salve from her clinic. Will ye sit with her? I don' think she should be alone.”

Jamie worried his bottom lip for a moment, then reached his hand up to rub his still sore jaw that might actually be sporting a bruise tomorrow. “I don’t think--”

“She was askin’ for you,” Geillis said simply. Zahra hadn't really asked for him, not out loud at least. They were, both of them, stubborn asses, though, and Geillis had no shame in intervening. Jamie looked at her in question and the female redhead nodded, then indicated her head towards the door. “Go on. I'll be back shortly.”

Jamie nodded and watched Geillis go for a moment before he turned and pushed the door open. Zahra’s chamber was lit by fire and lantern light, and the woman herself was laying on top of the bed covers, bare from the waist up. Jamie had half a mind to look away, but she was on her stomach, not like her nudity was on display, just her bare back… but what a back.

He approached slowly, eyes roaming over her injured back, assessing the damage both old and new, unable to help when his gaze inspected the artwork displayed across her shoulders, neck, and arms.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” Zahra said a bit muffled.

How had she known it was him? “Eh. I deserved it, I’m sure,” he tried to sound much more casual than he felt.

Zahra made a slightly pained noise as she turned her head to face him. “You definitely deserved it, but I mean--I'm sorry I hit you in front of everyone. I can’t imagine what gossip that's gonna spread.”
Jamie smirked softly and knelt down on the floor at the side of the bed, trying not to jostle her too much. “I am no stranger to gossip, lass, nor am I a stranger at being the butt of said gossip.”

“One could say you put the butt in scuttlebutt?” Zahra asked with a snort.

Yes another weird phrase from the woman. What did a ship’s water storage have to do with anything? And did she just snort? Jamie laughed, more at the absurdity of it than understanding any joke she intended. Zahra laughed in return, the action of which just made her brow furrow and she groaned softly in pain. Jamie’s smile fell dramatically into a deep frown as he looked at her back again, and he yearned to reach out and touch her.

Zahra noticed the drop in his smile. “Please, don’t be sad,” she said as she reached her hand out to touch his face. “I’ve had worse, I promise. I’ll be fine.”

Jamie held her hand to his face, nuzzling his cheek into it, then slowly removing it to hold her hand in both of his larger ones. “Why did ye do that, lass? She’s no’ yer kin? Nae yer clan, either? No’ even an acquaintance…”

“I know,” Zahra said with a sigh.

“Then, why?” Jamie had little room to talk because he had just been about to offer himself up as tribute before Zahra had beat him to the punch. He was aware of how hypocritical he was being right then. At least in his circumstance, however, he knew the lass was Fitz’s granddaughter, part of their clan, and that made her important to his family. Zahra had no ties to this clan or their people.

Zahra’s nostrils flared as she inhaled and exhaled deeply, trying to compose her thoughts. In truth, it had been too hard, had hit too close to home to think of another young girl being terrified and traumatized into obedience. “I couldn’t just--stand there and watch some innocent young girl be tortured for no reason.”

“Yet, ye made me stan’ there and do that very thing?” Jamie said, a bit of anger and hurt seeping into his words.

“Jamie, I--”

“No. No! I don’t care if it was your choice,” he said angrily. “What gives you the right to put yourself in harms way like that?”

“What gives you?” she argued back.

“I’m a man!” He declared. “I’ve been trained for battle. For war.”

“Yeah, well, so have I!” She blurted out unintentionally, her emotions getting the better of her.

“Such things are expec--” Jamie cut himself off and his brow furrowed when he caught onto what she'd just said. “Wait--what was that?”

Zahra’s nostrils flared again and she closed her eyes then turned her face away from him. “Nothing. Please leave me alone.”

“Nae.” He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, resting his good arm on the opposite side of her hip, kind of leaning over her. "Did ye just say ye’ve been trained for battle?"

“No,” she denied.
“Oh, aye, ya did.” She still refused to look at him and it was frustrating. "When I said I’ve been trained for battle, you said ‘So’ve I.’”

“No I didn’t.”

Gods Bollocks she was stubborn. “I know what I heard, Leeloo.”

“Clearly not, James, because I said no such thing.”

She may be denying it now, but suddenly, it was like everything started clicking into place in Jamie’s brain, all the pieces falling together to form the bigger picture. “In the meadow, with the Redcoat, that wasnae just a fluke. You actually know how to fight?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she insisted but Jamie didn’t relent. Seems she wasn’t the only stubborn one here.

“And just now in the hall, you plum knocked me clear on my arse with one bloody punch!” He actually sounded more impressed than angry.

“Now that--that I will gladly admit to,” she said smugly.

“Cheeky little, shite,” he said with a smirk. He wanted to still be mad at her but she was making it difficult.

"Though, I will admit it was a sucker punch and, in a fair fight, you wouldn't have gone down so easily.” Zahra chuckled softly, then slowly turned her head back to look up at him, a sullen expression on her face. “Are you gonna tell Dougal and Colum?”

He hadn't moved, was still perched on the edge of the bed leaning over her. “Tell ‘em wha’ exactly? That a feisty little chestnut knocked me on my arse? I’m pretty sure they saw the whole damn thing, so nae.”

Zahra jabbed him in the arm weakly, and he feigned like it hurt. “You know what I mean.”

Jamie smirked. “So are ye admitting that ye’ve got some sort o’ training?”

“That depends… Are you going to go tell Colum and Dougal if I do?”

“Well, that depends… Are you some sort o’ secret agent or assassin of the enemy sent here to kill or betray us all?”

“Oh no. How did you find out?” She deadpanned in a monotone voice. “I guess this means I have to kill you now? And I was just starting to like you, too.” Jamie’s brow furrowed, concerned, and Zahra just rolled her eyes. “That was sarcasm, Jamie. No! Of course I’m not some super spy trying to learn all your secrets. I seriously, honestly, just want to fulfill my contract with Colum and go home.”

Jamie believed her, but then he’d never actually believed she was a spy either. That was all Dougal. She had every right to yearn for home, but Jamie had to admit a part of him wished he could somehow convince her to stay. “Just starting to like me, eh?” He lifted his hand from the mattress to touch her cheek. "So, then that kiss the other day, that was you not liking me?”

Zahra blushed and buried her face in her pillow. “I was hoping you’d forget about that,” she said, voice muffled into the down.

“Leeloo… I could live a thousand years and I don’t think I’d ever forget that kiss.” Zahra groaned
into the pillow, knowing full well she was acting like an idiot. “Truth be told,” Jamie continued. “I've been tryin' to return yer shawl and ask ya on a walk with me through the meadows down by the loch, hoping we could share another, but ye’re a surprisingly hard woman ta track down under the circumstances. It’s like ye’ve been avoiding me or somethin’.”

Zahra sheepishly turned her face to look at him. “Or something.”

“So, you have been avoiding me.” He looked down at his hands in his lap. He looked so downtrodden in that moment it made Zahra want to snuggle him and make all his insecurities go away. “Shoulda figured tha’ after ye ran away from me t’ other day like a bat out o’ hell. Was I tha’ bad?”

Zahra ignored the pain as she pushed herself up to sit, holding her pillow to her chest. She extended her hand to touch his. “No. No, Jamie, no, it--honestly that was hands down the best kiss I’ve ever had in my life.” Jamie looked up at her with that smirk, and Zahra quirked her left brow at him, realizing she just got caught in his trap. She rolled her eyes and took her hand back to hold the pillow more firmly against her chest.

Jamie’s smirk did not falter as he maintained an air of well-deserved arrogance about him. He really was a remarkable kisser so she couldn't fault him all that much. “Well, if ye enjoyed it so much, would ye not like ta do it again?”

God he was way too adorable and sexy and arrogant, God! She really would love to make out with him for an extended period of time, like forever, but she was leaving, and the last thing she wanted to do here was get emotionally involved with the locals. Jamie was making that an impossibly hard rule to follow, though.

Admittedly, she was already having feelings not just lust for the man and it was already going to be insanely difficult to say goodbye as is. “I’m not--good with relationships, Jamie. Why else do you think I’ve never been married?” She said after a while. “I’m too--strong willed and independent for my own good. I scare men away in droves. You don’t want me Jamie, I promise. I’m stubborn, and impulsive, I have a horrible temper, I’m really weird, and just unusual in general. I’m loud, obnoxious at times. Did I mention stubborn and hot-tempered?”

Jamie’s smile only widened, and turned a little crooked. He was giving her a look like he thought she was the most precious thing in the world. Oh no. “Aye, ye may be all those things, a gràidh. Which are not necessarily bad, by the way... But I also happen to know that ye’re very considerate, kind, caring, passionate. And I hear ye’re a beautiful singer, and a bang up cook.”

Zahra fish mouthed a little blushing. “How did you--I’ve never--”

“Fitz told me ye’ve been helpin’ in the kitchens, and that the ladies love your voice. Comin’ from Fitz that’s--high praise. Heard her talkin’ ‘bout teachin’ ye a song for Colum.”

Zahra groaned and dropped her head to bury her face in the pillow against her chest. Jamie chuckled softly and gently glided his hand from her shoulder and down her bare arm until he took her hand in his. He gently stroked her palm and her wrist with his thumbs. “Ye’re also completely selfless, compassionate, strong, and one of the most graceful, beautiful creatures I’ve ever met. If I knew nothing else about you, that would be enough... but y’also sacrifice yerself for innocent maidens.” He held her hand so her palm was flat to his, their thumbs interlocked, and he placed a kiss on the intricate Mandala tattoo on the back of her wrist. "I coundnae care less where ye’re from or what others would say. I’d like to court ya proper if ye’d let me.”

Zahra had lifted her head to watch him and her eyes welled with tears. How was she supposed to
survive the next month without interfering if Jamie was gonna keep saying things like that? If fate kept thrusting them into situations like this? It wasn’t fair. She was only human. A single tear fell onto the pillow she was still holding, but her eyes were still glassy with them. She took in a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. “Why do you have to be so wonderful?”

Jamie smiled, soft and fond, then brought his free hand up to touch her cheek, to brush the tear away. “I could ask ye the very same thing, lass.” He brought her hand to his lips again and placed a gentle kiss on her knuckles. God, he was so fucking charming, and kind, it was so unfair.

“I don’t--” she started to say, still trying to push him away. "There’s so much you don’t know about me, Jamie. My past. I’ve not had the most pleasant of lives. Neither have you, I know. I mean, there’s so much we don’t know about each other.”

Jamie knew that. “That’s what courtin’ is for, is it no’?”

“But--I’m leaving in less than a month.”

“Then, I suppose I know exactly how long I have to convince ye’ to stay, or to otherwise convince ye ta let me come with ye.”

Now that was something she hadn’t considered. Him coming with her. No. She would be court-martialed for sure. “What would Dougal or Colum say?”

“I don’t rightly care what Dougal or Colum would have to say, but who says it’s any o’ their business in the first place? What I do on my time and with whom is my business, no’ theirs. Same with you. You’re oathed as a medic under the MacKenzie’s service, tha’s all. You owe them nothin’ else.”

That was it. She was out of arguments. Except! “I’m not a virgin,” she all but blurted out, perhaps a little too brashly. She then covered her mouth quickly, embarrassed, and blushed a deep red, ashamed of her little outburst.

Jamie laughed, and that same boyish smirk was back on his face. “That doesnae bother me none… So long as it doesnae bother you that--I am.”

“Really?” She asked, looking and sounding stunned. “But you’re so--I mean are girls blind in this--town?” She had almost fucked up and said ‘this century’. Time Traveling 101, do not tell people you are a time traveler. Never ends well. “I mean--not even like--a 'lady of loose morals' type situation even? Nothing?”

It was Jamie’s turn to blush and he rubbed the back of his head nervously. “Nae. Well, I mean I’ve kissed a lassie or two in my day, but…”

She was embarrassing him. “I’m sorry. I’m not--you being a virgin doesn’t bother me at all. I’m just surprised because you’re so--handsome, and kind, and brave, and I just--I would have thought some lass would have tried to lock you down ages ago.” And then suddenly Zahra was questioning everything she knew about the situation. Her brow furrowed and she tilted her head at him. “How old are you?” Because in this day and age she suddenly realized it was not uncommon to have child brides and shit. Ew.

“I’m Twenty-three,” Jamie answered. PHEW!!! MORAL CRISIS AVERTED PEOPLE! Zahra let out a literal exhale of relieved air. She wasn’t robbing the cradle here, folks. Huzzah! “How old are you?” Jamie asked in kind, realizing he didn’t exactly know.

“Right, I’m, um, thirty-four,” she answered honestly.
Now it was Jamie’s turn to be stunned. “Really?”

Zahra shrugged and nodded her head. “I’ll be 35 in September.” Well, technically she wasn’t even born yet but let’s not dive into that migraine, now, shall we?

“Huh. I never woulda pegged ye a day over twenty-four.” He said, gazing at her hand where he was rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, tracing the intricate pattern with his eyes. It looked like Indian lace, if Jamie knew his world studies.

“What that--does my age bother you?” Was he an ageist? Was this her way out of any potential future heartbreak? Now why did that thought make her sad all of a sudden?

Jamie shook his head and kissed her knuckles again. “Not in the slightest. I actually like the fact that ye’re older ’an me.” He brought her hand to his lips again, only this time he laid her with an incredibly sexy, smouldering gaze as his lips once more kissed and lingered at her knuckles. The look in his eyes was unmistakably sensual and his tone seductive. “With age comes wisdom... as they say.” Holy hell, dirty mouth and mind, Mr. MacTavish. How was this man a virgin? Ee gods!

Heat suddenly pooled between Zahra’s legs and her breathing heavied as she watched Jamie practically make out with her hand. “Kiss me?” she said on a low whisper, perhaps not intending to have said it out loud, but, oops, too late.

Jamie looked into her face, her eyes, and the longing he saw there very much matched his own. He did not need to be told twice. He reached a hand to hold her face and leaned in to seal his lips to hers in a very languid, sensual kiss. His tongue gently glided across her lips, seeking entrance, which she promptly gave, moaning and mewling gently into the kiss.

Zahra lost herself in Jamie’s kiss. She had not been exaggerating when she’d said it was the best kiss she’d ever had. It was. Jamie Fraser may be a virgin in the biblical sense of the word, but his mouth was positively pornographic. Ignoring the sting in her back, because let’s face it Zahra usually enjoyed a little pain with her pleasure, she discarded her pillow in order to wrap her arms around Jamie’s neck. Then, in almost the same movement, she used her new leverage to climb into Jamie’s lap, straddling his waist.

Jamie instinctively moved his arms to wrap them around her back to hold her against him, which was when Zahra let out a pained cry as her mouth tore away from his. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he spoke quickly, breathlessly, and his arms dropped away from her as if he had been burned.

“It’s ok,” Zahra said, just as breathless, holding his face in her hands and resting her forehead against his. “Sshh, it’s ok.” She kissed him lightly. “I’m fine. It’s ok.”

“We should stop,” he spoke, equally breathless. “I dinnae want tae hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me, Jamie. Just reminded me of it.” They were both breathless and panting at this point, the desire and arousal clinging to the warmth around them as they shared each other’s air. It was then that Jamie seemed to realize that Zahra was on top of him… and she wasn’t wearing a blouse, and the pillow had gone to the wayside.

He glanced down at her bare chest, though her actual bosom was pressed to his, hiding her breasts from view. “Ye’re naked,” he stated the obvious.

“Not completely,” Zahra answered, feeling a flush creep up her neck, shoulders, and face.

“Aye, but... ye’re still topless,” he ran his hands up her bare sides, thumbs gently grazing the sides of her breasts. God, he was so hard all of a sudden.
Zahra smirked a little and worried on her bottom lip. “I’m sorry. I guess—I have impulse control issues. I haven’t—it’s been a very long time since I’ve let anyone touch me like this. I might have gotten a little carried away.”

The thought of anyone else touching her suddenly made his blood hot with jealousy. Even if it was in the past. “How long?”

Zahra bit her bottom lip, looking away embarrassed as she tried to think of the last time she’d slept with someone. It was a pretty epic fly by night adventure with a space cowboy back in San Francisco, after Altamid. “Two years,” she said, her brows pinching together. “Give or take.”

“Two years?” His eyes widened, but the green monster of jealousy at least started to give way. Two years celibate practically made her a virgin again, at least according to Roman Catholicism. “You mean just, two years without—lyin’ with a man, or d’ye mean—”

“I mean—” Zahra shook her head, blushing again, and she took a deep breath. “I don’t—Normally, I don’t like to be touched in any way, but especially—intimately.” She tried to be as obvious about her meaning without being crude. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh?” Jamie said brow furrowing a little. “Oh!” His eyes widened when he caught onto the implications behind her admission, and his hands lowered to her waist. “Oh.” and the surprise gave way to sadness and maybe a little anger at the idea of someone hurting her that way. “But—am I—I’m not—is this—”

Zahra kissed him to silence his uncertainty. “I very much enjoy it when you touch me, Jamie.” It was everyone else she wished would cease with the manhandling already. Her elbow was gonna start getting hand grooves.

“Oh!” Now a pleased smirk lit his features. Who knew so many different emotions and expressions could be applied to just one word?

“Such a diverse vocabulary, Mr. MacTavish. I think you missed your calling. You should’ve been a poet.” Zahra said teasingly, more of that sarcastic wit Jamie was growing to love.

He smirked and held her close with his hands around her waist and lower back; where the lash hadn’t hit as much so he assumed it would be safer to touch. Seeing as she did not protest or fuss, he must have assumed correctly. “Ye want poetry, lass? I can give ye poetry,” he said with a smile that was positively sinful. He brushed her hair off her forehead with one hand then held her cheek in that same palm. His eyes roamed over her features as he spoke quietly in that insanely sexy brogue of his, speaking words Zahra could not for the life of her understand, but she didn’t want him to stop. Where was a universal translator when she needed one, huh?

He whispered one phrase, then laid a soft sensual kiss on her cheek just below her eye. Another phrase was spoken before he kissed her nose, and another as he kissed her forehead, followed by her other cheek, her chin, and then her throat. He then sort of burrowed his face against the side of her head and whispered directly into her ear. Zahra elongated her neck for him as his breathy words brushed against her skin, causing goosebumps to erupt all over her body, which in turn pulled a heady moan from her throat.

With her arms wrapped tightly about his shoulders, Zahra began to move her hips against him, wanting, no needing friction to help relieve the ache Jamie was causing between her legs. “Jamie.”

“Aye, a gràidh?” He had his hands on her waist, and his grip tightened as he helped her rock against him. He’d never done this with a woman before. It wasn’t sex. He may not know much but he knew
that he at least needed to be inside of her for it to count as sex. So it wasn’t sex, but it still felt really
good. The way her tits were mashed against his chest reminded him, yet again, that she was
completely naked from the waist up. That realization made him moan against her neck. He was
kissing a trail back to her mouth in the next instant, then he sealed their lips together in another kiss; a
kiss that, because of the fire suddenly blazing between them, was far hungrier and more heated this
go around than the last.

“Aheh-hermm,” a dainty, feminine sounding voice, deliberately cleared her throat from somewhere
behind them.

They broke the kiss abruptly and turned with twin, wide-eyed, stunned expressions toward their
intruder. It was Geillis. “I’m glad to see somebody’s feelin’ better.” The redheaded woman just
smiled widely like the cat with the canary, then walked further into the room to set the basket of
salve, herbs, and bandages on the table. “Though, I had hoped I’d given ye enough time to finish
‘efore I got back.” Zahra and Jamie’s eyes locked and they both started giggling awkwardly. They
were about to break apart, but Geillis just stepped behind Zahra and started massaging the salve onto
her back. “Pay me no heed,” Mistress Duncan said as she casually went about her task. Jamie didn’t
know where the leather gloves she now wore had come from or why they were necessary.

The pain relief was almost instantaneous and Zahra deflated against Jamie, sighing heavily as she
rested her head on his shoulder while Geillis tended her back. Jamie was grateful for Geillis’s care,
but this was definitely awkward. How was Zahra not feeling as squirmy and anxious as he was? The
woman in his arms suddenly hissed in pain when Geillis got to a particularly painful spot, and
Jamie’s awkwardness faded away in the face of Zahra’s strife. “Ye all right?” he asked, concerned.

“Yeah. Yeah. It’s a good hurt.” Zahra spoke, sleepily. A good hurt? Was there even such a thing?

Jamie looked at Geillis with a questioning gaze and Geillis just smirked and continued what she was
doing. “Not all pain is painful, young Jamie,” she said with a shrug. The highlander could both feel
and hear when Zahra started giggling, and he couldn’t help but think that both women knew
something he didn’t, or they were having him on. He would have to do some digging into that. How
could pain not be painful? Wasn’t that why they called it pain?

The more Geillis rubbed, the heavier Zahra seemed to be getting, until she was just a lifeless weight
on top of him. Granted it was a slight weight. Jamie wasn’t complaining. And… was he hearing
things or was she snoring ever so softly, too?

“All done,” Geillis declared. “Think ye can put her to bed without jostling her about too much?”
Geillis closed the jar of salve and wiped her gloves on a clean cloth before removing them.

“Aye. I think I can.” Zahra practically had her legs wrapped around him already, a fact he was
desperately trying to ignore now that Geillis was in the room. Jamie stood off the bed with Zahra
wrapped around him, trying desperately to control the heat in his blood. Geillis then pulled back the
covers and laid a fresh, clean linen on top of Zahra’s mattress to protect it against the mess of the
salve on her back. She then stepped back out of the way to give Jamie room. “She should be all right
to lay on her back now. The poultice will numb the pain.” If it was the same concoction Zahra had
put on his shoulder before she’d stitched him the other day, then, yes, she wouldn’t feel a thing.

Jamie put up one knee on the bed and placed her as gently on the linen on the bed as he could. She
stirred a little, but for the most part simply laid back on the bed once she was down. As Jamie stood,
he got a brief, but full view of her bare chest before averting his gaze quickly. Sure, he’d wanted to
peak when they were engaged in a passionate embrace, but she was asleep now and vulnerable, and
it wasn’t his place to look without her permission, but even the brief glimpse he got, holy hell…
He’d spotted more tattoos and had that been a jewel in her navel? Damn, he wanted to look again.
Geillis stepped in, helped undress Zahra the rest of the way, then draped a thin cotton blanket over her. “It’s safe to look, now.”

Jamie sighed in relief then turned to give Geillis a grateful smile. “Thank ye, kindly, Mistress Duncan. For your care… and your discretion?”

Geillis patted him on the shoulder. “Worry not, young Jamie. I care far more about Zahra’s personal reputation than your own, to ever sling any slanderous gossip around about her.”

“What do ye mean?”

“I mean,” she laid Jamie with a stern gaze. “—that a man like you might be able to withstand the social fallout from a dirty rumour, but for a woman like Zahra, a stranger in these parts, it would mark her. Maybe even worse than the brands on her skin. Ye ken?”

Brands on her skin? What was Geillis talking about? Zahra’s tattoos? Her scars? Why did Geillis always have to speak in riddles? Jamie was aware what society thought about women who engaged in salacious activities outside of wedlock, which was exactly what Jamie wanted to avoid.

Geillis picked up the basket and handed it to Jamie. “She’ll need another washing and a fresh application in the morn. G’night, m’lord.” She said with a curtsy before turning to leave.

“Wait, what?” He stared at the basket. “Are ye coming—” He looked up but the woman was already gone, door closed behind her. “—back?” Jamie sighed and glanced at the sleeping Zahra. “Bollocks,” he muttered to himself before setting the basket on the bedside table. He would just have to return in the morning to do as Mrs. Duncan had instructed.

He leaned in, brushing Zahra’s short hair off her forehead and placed a kiss atop her head. “Goodnight, a gràidh.”

In her half-asleep-half-awake state, Jamie felt Zahra fist her hand in the material of his frockcoat. “Stay?” she said.

He didn’t think she was still awake. “Leeloo, I dinnae think—”

“Please?” She asked softly, her eyes opening enough to look into his. “Bad memories make for bad dreams… I don’t—wanna be alone.”

Jamie knew all about that, didn’t he? In fact, he had more questions about her now than ever before, but perhaps they could wait until she was well. “All right, lass,” he agreed with a soft smile, brushing his thumb across her forehead. “I’ll stay.”

Zahra released her grip and relaxed back into the pillow with a sigh. Jamie moved around to sit on the chest at the end of the bed where he first removed his boots and socks, then his sporran, waistcoat, sword belt, and vest were removed and draped on the oversized chair in the corner. He kept his shirt and kilt on for obvious reasons; one of them naked was more than enough. He soon climbed into the bed from the other side, laying on top of the covers not under them, trying to give Zahra as much modesty and propriety as he could. He lifted his arm, bent at the elbow to rest beneath his head as he gazed at the canopy above them.

Eventually, Zahra had turned in his direction, subconsciously seeking his warmth, and it didn’t take long for Jamie’s thoughts and curiosity to draw him to turn and look at the beautiful, peacefully sleeping creature next to him. The room was bathed in naught but moonlight from the window, and the soft glow from the fire, but in that moment, his breath was stolen away by her. If he could wake up to that sight every morning and go to bed with it every night, he would die a very happy man.
She had one arm beneath her pillow, and the other was securely holding the blanket against her chest, under her chin, which left her entire right arm and shoulder bare to his sight... and his touch. Jamie reached out to gently graze his fingers over her face, then traced his fingertips over the beautiful designs and patterns on her shoulder. She sighed in her sleep and moved to snuggle closer to him, seeking out the physical connection and warmth he was creating. Jamie laid a gentle, comforting kiss on her forehead before leaning back to continue his visual exploration of her skin. His fingers grazed lightly down her bicep, which was when he paused as his fingertips moved over raised flesh. Other than the tattoos, and the obvious scarring on her back, Zahra’s flesh had been unbelievably smooth and soft, like silk, but here... her skin was raised with more scars... Scars that were too oddly detailed and shaped to be normal wounds. Someone had either carved a design into her skin, or she had been branded with one, and more than once from the feel of it.

The only branded humans Jamie knew of were slaves or pirates who’d been captured by law. In the case of pirates, however, the brand was usually a prominent and obvious P typically located someplace visible like the wrist, or the face. Zahra had no marks on her face, and when he’d been holding her hands, he’d felt no markings there but--maybe he would sneak a peak later. Assuming she had no pirate brand, though, where had her brands come from and what did they mean? Had Zahra once been a slave? Was she still a slave? Had she escaped her captors? Was that how she had ended up in Inverness? Would her master come looking for her?.... Even if any or all of those wild hypotheticals proved to be true, however, there was no way Jamie would let anyone take her, least of all to return her to life as a slave. He would die first.

Murtagh would call him a damn fool, throwing in with her so soon, but Jamie couldn’t deny his heart. Ever since this woman had come into his life, their lives, he’d been unable to think of anything else. Sometimes he even forgot that he had a bounty on his head. Sometimes, he imagined he could be happy, that he could make her happy.

Reaching for her hand next, to hold it, something unusual and unbelievable caught his eye. The incredibly intricate lace work type design on the back of her right hand, was it... glowing? Jamie’s brow furrowed deeply as he gently took her hand in his to inspect the markings. What kind of magic was this? A glowing tattoo? Was his mind playing tricks on him? In the light from the fire and candlelight, the design was plain, simple black ink. In the darkness of night, however, the spaces between glowed an ethereal yellowish green. Jamie had never seen anything so miraculous and amazing in his life. How was that even possible?

Zahra had awakened from all the attention, and pushing and pulling he was doing with her hand. She feigned still being asleep at first, though, watching him marvel over the bioluminescent tattoo that was glowing on her hand. In her time, bioluminescent ink had long since been developed for body art and other arts in general. Zahra’s Phoenix used to glow a bright fiery red, orange, and yellow when the lights went down. It wasn’t like UV ink that needed a black light to glow. It was bioluminescent, which meant it glowed, naturally, in the dark. She had a few other pieces with the special ink but she had no idea how she was going to explain them to Jamie. Would he think she was a witch or something? Didn’t they still burn people at the stake in this day and age for things like that?

Zahra’s heartbeat was suddenly pulsing in her veins thinking of how she could explain. "It's bioluminescent ink," she said, deciding to just go with the truth after watching Jamie turn her wrist about this way and that.

He’d thought she was asleep so he startled slightly when she spoke, afraid he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been. "I'm sorry. I dinnae mean to wake you, I just--I've never seen anything like this before. How is it--I cannae understand how it's possible."
"It's a special ink my friend Saren makes from a selection of organisms like fungi and such that glow naturally in the wild." She was amazed at herself for how easily she had come up with this explanation. "I honestly don't know how he makes it, but it's neat, yeah?" Jamie looked at her in confusion, maybe a little wonder, and disbelief. "Have you ever heard of Foxfire?" She asked and Jamie shook his head. "It's a fungus that grows from decaying wood. It glows a greenish blue in the dark." She'd spotted some growing near the tree where she'd been picking mushrooms that afternoon when she'd met Geillis, and she was now insanely grateful she had. "I can show you?"

Jamie cocked his head at her. "Really?"

Zahra nodded, smiling. "There's some growing on one of the trees in the gardens." She pushed herself up on her elbow, holding the blanket to her chest. "Come on." She gave him a brief peck on the lips before she turned and slipped off the bed, holding the cloth sheet about her in a sort of toga. She went to her dresser and dug out her black jeggings, and the male style peasant shirt she'd snagged from laundry. The same clothes she wore every morning on her run with Rupert.

Jamie watched her from his side on the bed. "Ye mean to go right now?"

Zahra turned back to look at him with a smirk. "Why not?"

"Ye need to rest and heal for one, and two, it's very late." Gods, he couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"Honestly, Jamie." She said with a playful gleam in her eyes. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

Well, when she put it that way, it almost felt like a challenge. "Now turn around, or close your eyes." Jamie smirked, then raised a hand to cover his eyes.

Zahra turned her back to him and dropped her sheet. Jamie would adamantly deny this later if asked, but he definitely took a little peak between his fingers. She was wearing an unusual undergarment that covered mostly just her bottom and privates. She indeed seemed to have tattoos everywhere. Her hips, her thighs, the back of her calf had some masked figure he didn't recognize. She was pulling on a pair of leggings too soon, though, and covering herself from his eyes. He closed the gap of his fingers and allowed her privacy then. He wasn’t a pervert.

"You may look now," she said as she tucked the oversized men's shirt into her pants. She grabbed her jacket and slipped it about her shoulders. The salve and painkiller she'd taken before Jamie arrived was still working so it didn't hurt as bad as it should. The effect would only last so long, though. "Come on." She pulled on her socks, followed by her boots, then grabbed a lantern and a blanket and waited for Jamie to get his boots and coat on.

When he joined her, Zahra held her finger up against her lips as she pointed at the door. She handed him the lamp then pulled open the door slowly. Rupert was there, asleep in a chair leaned against the wall next to her door. She pulled the door open just enough to slip out between it, then reached for the lantern so Jamie could do the same. They managed to sneak past Rupert without making a sound or waking him, then slipped down the hall, all the while shushing and hushing each other like a couple of rebellious teenagers sneaking out of the house.

"It's colder than a witch's teet out here," Jamie said once they left the castle walls. "Where're we going?"

"The gardens. Like I said," she responded as she took his hand and led him on through the grounds, and up the hill.

Jamie decided he much preferred Zahra's kind of adventure to any other. Doing something impulsive and unexpected with someone special. This was the fun and exciting kind of adventurous. It wasn't
the death and danger lurking around every bend kind of adventurous.

Zahra shined the light ahead of her as they tread lightly through the gardens. "Watch your step," she cautioned before she crouched to the ground to inspect a stalk of the purple flowers Geillis had been going on about. She knew the tree wasn't far. "It's this way," she said and tugged on his hand as she turned in the direction she thought she remembered the tree to be. The fog was so thick, though, it was difficult to see much ahead of them.

"There," she eventually declared, smiling as she pointed at the tree. She walked up to it and leaned over the split hollow in the middle. "Here. See?" She left space for Jamie to crouch and look with her.

The lamp was shining its light on a dead hollow within the tree where Jamie could see a weird, white fungus was definitely growing, but hardly glowing. "Aye, I can see," he said with a nod.

Zahra was smiling impishly, and Jamie decided he rather liked her like this. Carefree and playful. "Now, watch," she said before she turned the key to douse the flame on the lamp nearly off, then set it aside.

Jamie obediently watched and soon the ordinary, white fungus began to glow. At first, it was just a faint greenish glimmer, but within moments the entire hollow of the tree was alight with an eerie greenish glow. He never would have ever seen it if he hadn't known where to look. He swore softly in Gaelic, and a look of awe and wonder came over his features. "I never woulda believed it," he said before looking at her with a bright smile.

"I know," she said, returning his smile. "Gotta see it with your own eyes, sometimes."

"This is what your friend Saren uses to make his ink?" He asked for clarification.

Zahra kind of shrugged and nodded at the same time. "Like I said, I don't know how he makes it exactly. He keeps the recipe close to his chest. Trade secrets and all. But I assume, he uses something like this."

"And it’s safe?"

Zahra smirked and shrugged. "Had 'em for years and haven’t killed me yet."

Jamie didn’t think that was particularly funny, but he realized she wasn’t being serious. With a soft huff, Jamie stood straight and reached for the woman’s hand, the one with the glowing ink. "Just when I start to think ye couldn't possibly surprise me anymore, a gràidh..."

Zahra smirked and took the opportunity to step into him, pressing her body to his and sharing his warmth. "I like to keep you on your toes."

"Aye," he agreed and reached for her face with his free hand, his other still holding onto her hand between them. Zahra's eyes fluttered closed just as Jamie was leaning in for a kiss, but a wailing infant's cries suddenly tore through the night.

The cry startled Zahra, making her grip at her chest. "What--is that?" Her brow furrowed deeply. There were no homes or cottages out here; the closest thing to one was the castle, but there were no infants there that Zahra was aware of.

"Some things are best left unanswered, a gràidh," Jamie said, knowing full well some of the farcical faery tales some of the lesser educated villagers still believed in. A sick child, for instance, must obviously have been cursed by faeries and thus left for them to take.
Another piercing cry made Zahra's brow furrow even more deeply and she suddenly felt sick. "What is it, Jamie?"

Zahra was growing panicked and anxious and Jamie didn't know why. "Nothing ye need to mind. Some silly superstition, leftover from the Druid and Pagan days. We should go back." He tried to urge her to come back to the castle with him.

The cries were heartbreaking for someone like Zahra to hear, though. Someone who'd long wanted a child of her own but had never been able to. Had someone really just abandoned their babe in the cold for no reason? How could someone do such a thing? Instead of going with Jamie, Zahra turned and began to follow where she thought the cry was coming from.

"Zahra… Please. Ye dinnae ken what ye're doin'," Jamie tried to caution her but she wasn't coming with him. He wasn't going to force her, but he wasn't going to let her wander these lands alone at night, in the fog.

Jamie wasn't the first one to tell her that she was acting without all the facts. Probably wouldn't be the last. Maybe she was being a bit too impulsive for her own good? First, there had been her little dancing session at the stones that had brought her here. Then her insults to Randall at the stream that had made Murtagh intervene to save her. Her blabbing about an ambush she didn't really know was going to happen. Her arguments with both Colum and Dougal. Kissing Jamie by the stables. Volunteering herself for another girl's punishment. She had been rash and impulsive since the moment she got here, it seemed, and she was still doing it now. What was wrong with her?

She stopped suddenly, gazing desperately through the mist. In her internal distress, the cries suddenly sounded like they were coming from all around her. "Where are you?" She called out to the night, and the wailing cries seemed to be getting louder and louder, threatening to make her go deaf. She covered her ears, then took off in one direction, only to stop when the cries sounded like they were coming from the opposite way. "Where are you?" She called again, almost desperate, voice tight and hoarse with emotion. She listened for the cries again but they had suddenly gone silent. "Where are you?" She begged quietly and fell to her knees.

Jamie felt helpless as he followed Leeloo as she tried to hunt down the crying child. "Leeloo!" He called out to her, trying to help calm her down, but it was obvious in that moment she was trapped in her own head. When the cries ceased and she fell to her knees, Jamie went to her, pulling her into his arms. "It's all right, lass."

She shook her head. "No. No, it's not all right." She gripped onto his coat, weeping into his shoulder. "How could they?" She asked him, tears falling down her face. "It was just a baby. How--Why?"

She gripped tighter onto his coat, and fish mouthed a little, at a total loss for words to voice how she was feeling. Meanwhile, the tears just continued spilling down her face, staining Jamie's coat.

"Oh, my darling, Leeloo." He held her head against his shoulder, and laid a kiss on the crown of her head. He couldn't begin to fathom where this pain she was obviously feeling was coming from, nor would he insult her by pretending to understand. So he could do little but just let her cry it out. "There is an awful ignorance in this world that at times can border on evil." He had experienced some of said ignorance first hand on more than one occasion. "Ye're just one person, Leeloo. Ye cannae save everyone."

Obviously not. She was still having a hard time wrapping her head around it and she felt like she was going mad. Had someone really just left a baby to die in the cold because of some stupid barbaric ritual or something? The thought made her feel sick. She knew she was probably ugly crying at this point which was unfair to put Jamie through when he had no idea why she reacted the way she did. Honestly, she was still a little surprised at herself for losing it. She blamed all the stress. Did she
mention she suffered from ungodly levels of PTSD? This vacation was supposed to help *relieve* her stress, not add to it.

Goddamn Murphy.

She sniffled and pulled him close. "I want to go home," she said sorrowfully.

Jamie's heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vice at her words, though, if it was more because he missed his own home, or because the thought of Zahra leaving broke his heart he couldn't say exactly. Maybe it was both? "Me too, a gràidh. Me too." He rubbed her arms and laid another kiss atop her head. "Let's get ye back to bed, aye?"

Zahra nodded weakly. "Ok." She sniffled and slowly pulled out of his embrace, though Jamie kept his good arm wrapped around her shoulders, holding her tucked close to his side as they slowly ambled back to the castle with just the moonlight and obvious landmarks to guide their way.

They didn't get far before Zahra had started humming to herself, an old Orion lullaby that she had always found comfort in, ever since she was a child, and especially in times of duress. "That's beautiful," Jamie said after listening for a spell. "What's it called?"

Zahra apparently hadn't realized she had started humming it out loud, but it didn't surprise her that she did, apparently it was an almost subconscious thing she did when she was stressed. This wasn't the first time she'd been caught doing it. "Um. Well, I think in English it just means Lullaby."

"Does it have any words?" he asked.

Zahra nodded. "Umm, it does not translate well to English, so I only know the native--Persian." It was actually entirely in Orion, but Persian was the closest sounding Earth language she could think of that was similar to Orion.

"You speak Persian?" Jamie asked, genuinely impressed.

Zahra shook her head. "No, not really. Well, maybe a few words… and this song."

Jamie nuzzled his cheek against the top of her head. They were in no rush to get back to Leoch. "Will you sing some for me?" Maybe he was trying to distract her from her thoughts, and maybe he wanted to hear for himself what Fitz and the maids from the kitchen had been going on about. Both? Both. Both is good.

Zahra turned her face to place a kiss on his jaw. "Ok," she agreed. Jamie took the opportunity to pinch her chin gently to hold her face in place as he pressed a soft kiss to her lips in return. He seemed to really enjoy doing that and she wasn't complaining.

She closed her eyes briefly and sighed. Jamie had a calming, comforting effect on her that was very much welcome and needed in that moment. She rested her head against his shoulder, her arm wrapped around his lower back and they held each other as they walked through the moonlight. A moment or two passed before Zahra started to sing. It was a very flowy, enchanting sort of melody that wove a story through the air. Fitz had not been exaggerating when she said Zahra had a pretty voice. Jamie didn't understand the words, but the melody was beautiful.

Zahra's song came to a gentle climax just as they entered the castle courtyard. Jamie sighed almost wistfully and pulled her in for a warm hug, then pressed another kiss to her hair. "Thank you, Leeloo. That was lovely."

Zahra sighed herself, feeling better, but still a little numb. She wrapped her arms tighter around his
waist, though, she ended up squirming a little under the pressure of his arms on her back and eventually made an unbidden noise of discomfort. Jamie released his grip a bit and held her shoulders. "The medicine's wearin' off isn' it?"

Zahra nodded then reached her hand up to cover a yawn. "C'mon," Jamie said, taking her hand. "Let's get ye back upstairs to sleep." Zahra nodded again and followed him through the halls and up the stairs to her room. Rupert was still sawing logs in his chair and they did their best to not disturb or rouse him as they sneaked back inside Zahra's bedroom.

Once inside, she suddenly felt so tired and numb that she sort of just stood there staring at the bed. Jamie's concern for her grew; whatever had triggered her tonight had taken a heavy toll. "You don't want me, Jamie." She suddenly said from seemingly out of nowhere. "I'm broken."

Jamie turned her to face him, holding her head in his hands. "How can ye say that?"

"Because it's true. I can't--" she swallowed hard, throat thick with emotion. "Your line would die with you. I can't--have children."

That was a helluva burden she had been holding onto. Jamie suddenly understood a lot of her misgivings. How many men had rejected her because of that? "Lots of women think they're barren when it's just they've not met the right man who could give them a child, but even if--"

She cut him off before he could finish as she reached for his hand, then shoved it partially down the waistband of her pants, then downward across her pubic bone. He didn't know what she was doing at first, and he had tensed up, but then suddenly he felt it; understood what she was trying to show him. There was smooth, creamy skin beneath his touch, and then suddenly there it was; a scar; clean; smooth; precise; surgical; just above her mound, her hairless mound, which he was trying to not think too much about at the moment.

"I can't--have children," she repeated, looking into his face. "He saw to it when I came of age."

Jamie suddenly lifted his gaze to meet hers. "Leeloo? Do ye mean that--someone did this to you?--on purpose?"

Tears welled in her eyes and she turned her face away, ashamed. "It was my fourteenth birthday present."

Jamie's eyes widened in horror. "Surely, no' ye're own father--"

She shook her head adamantly, not realizing he might think that. "No. No. No. Not my father. I was--my father didn't even know I was alive until a year ago. No. This man was--evil incarnate." In her emotional state, she didn't realize she had just slipped the truth about her dad, which contradicted what she had told Colum.

There was so much to unwrap in that sentence, but Jamie could only focus on one thing at a time, and the biggest thing he was curious about, was, "Is he the one responsible for--your back?"

Zahra sniffled and nodded. She supposed she owed him her own explanation since he'd so openly told her his. "His name was Jargen, and when I escaped him the first time--I thought I was free. I got a tattoo on my back not only to cover my own lashing scars, but also to kind of symbolize my freedom from him. It was a Phoenix. Meant to represent rebirth, ya know, burnt to ashes and then born again from them? It was--beautiful." She sat down on the bed and he joined her, holding her hands in his. "But Jargen found me eventually. He captured and tortured me for days, then dressed me up like a doll and brought me to a feast where he and his--family, watched while his butcher cut
the Phoenix from my back." She was trembling slightly, so Jamie pulled her in close, holding her tight.

That sounded positively horrific. Jaime had been whipped twice and it had been awful, but from the sound of it, Zahra had her entire back flayed off? Yes. Definitely Horrific. Jamie prayed silently to the heavens. This woman… the strength of her was something to marvel at. "How did you survive?" he asked after a while.

Zahra swallowed hard, gripping onto him like her life depended on it. "I didn't. I died on that table, twice, but both times he had his butcher revive me with medicinals and spirits and such, before continuing his work."

She was here though, not wherever that hell had been. "How did you escape?"

She took in a deep breath then sighed. "I had help... My best friend Kai had been taken when I was, and we escaped together."

Jamie would have to thank this Kai personally if they ever met. "And where is this evil bastard now?" He tried to keep the anger out of his tone but was pretty sure he failed.

"Dead," she said quietly, still feeling numb.

Jamie rested his chin atop her head and rubbed her shoulders gently, careful of her back. He was conflicted again because while he was grateful the man who'd tormented her was dead, he regretted the fact that he could not murder the bastard himself. "And ye're certain he's dead, no' just someone's word sayin' he is?"

Zahra inhaled deeply and exhaled out her nose. "I killed him myself... Watched as the life left him... So yes. I'm certain."

"Good," Jamie said, then leaned back enough to take her face in his hands. "Ye're not broken, Leeloo. Ye're one o' the strongest people I've ever met. Ye're a survivor. A fighter." He placed a kiss on her forehead and pulled her close. "As for children... if ye'd have let me finish, I was tryin' to say that when the time comes we both feel we're ready for them, there's no shortage o' orphans in these parts, mostly thanks to the English. We'll take them all in if that be ye're wish. Ye'll have more bairns than ye'll know what ta do with."

Zahra's eyes were leaking again. "Why--do you have to be so wonderful?" That same question again. As if it was a bad thing. "How am I not supposed to fall in love with you? It's not fair."

He didn't mean to laugh, but she had just admitted she was falling in love with him and then started pouting and whining about it like it was a bad thing? He wasn't sure if he should be elated or concerned.

Jamie was still holding her face, not letting her turn from him like she wanted. "I suppose life is a cruel, mistress," he said in response. "Aye, you an' I should know tha' better 'an most." He brushed the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs, then kissed them away gently. "Do ye really believe loving me--being loved by me, is such a terrible fate?"

No. No she didn't, but this wasn't her time. Sooner or later she would have to go back. Wouldn't she? She shook her head in answer to his question though, and gripped both hands in the fabric of his coat. "Only if you don't kiss me right now, James MacTavish."


Zahra couldn't help it when she huffed in amusement, and her lips turn up in a crooked smirk. "You know, that's almost as bad as Dumbledore?" Her smirk turned into a playful grin.

"Who?" Jamie asked with a furrowed brow.

Zahra shook her head. "Never mind, not important." She gripped the lapels of his coat and pulled him in for a hungry kiss, which Jamie eagerly returned.

It had been an emotionally charged night, so it didn't take much for passion to seize them both by the reigns. Zahra wasted no time at all as she climbed onto Jamie's lap, straddling him once more between strong thighs. Jamie groaned and his hands moved down to curve over her hips, then her bottom which was much easier to grasp and massage through her leggings. He pulled their pelvises tightly together with a sigh from each of them. Zahra exhaled heavily as she pushed at Jamie's coat until he got the hint and removed it the rest of the way himself. He winced slightly at the pull in his shoulder, but his coat was tossed carelessly aside a moment later. The same was done to Zahra's leather coat, with a similar reaction when her movements pulled at the fresh welts and cuts on her back.

"If this--is hurting you--" Jamie spoke between breathless kisses. "--we can--stop."

Zahra shook her head and her own words were staccatoed between needy kisses. "No... No, don't stop... don't stop, please? Need you... need to feel... Oh!"

"Feel what?" Jamie gasped out from where his face was pressed against her sternum, between her breasts, pressing kisses there and tasting her skin.

"Just feel... anything... just need to feel... Please!" It was cruel to ask of him without additional guidance when she knew he was a virgin, but she couldn't think straight enough to voice what she was feeling at the moment, only that she needed him.

His face was so close to her breasts, and she was practically offering her chest to him. Jamie seemed spurred on by basic instinct when he pulled at the fabric over her open collar tearing it slightly to reveal one beautiful, pert breast. He groaned deep in his chest at the sight, then cupped her left breast in his palm, brushing his thumb across the nipple. The sounds Zahra made seemed to encourage him on, filled him with a bit of confidence, and a moment later, he had his mouth wrapped around her nipple, which earned him a very heady moan from the beautiful goddess on top of him.

Zahra's hands fist ed in his hair and her head fell back in ecstasy. "Yes!" She cried but stopped herself from following that up with another moan. She was trying to be quiet, because, in the back of her mind, she knew that Rupert was right outside the door and they hadn't locked it. Zahra was panting hard and her skin was flushed from her chest clear up to her hairline. She dropped her gaze to meet his, yes Jamie was watching her as he suckled her breast. "Oh, fuck." She breathed out hotly and rocked her hips harder against him. "Touch me, please, Jamie." He reached for her other breast and she shook her head as she gently grabbed his wrist and slowly guided it towards the waistband of her leggings. She molded her palm over the back of his hand and guided it inside her pants and under her panties. She helped him find her clit with his middle finger and she whimpered and moaned softly when he touched the distended nub. "Oh," she moaned again and her entire body trembled from the sensation. She hadn't been touched in so long. "That's--my clit--" she informed him breathlessly. "Keep--rubbing it--gent--Ah!--gently, God!"

Jamie groaned around her nipple and broke contact just to press his forehead to her sternum again,
trying to catch his breath. "Jesus Christ, Leeloo." He had no idea a woman could take her own pleasure this way, or even what a clit really was until now. She was so responsive to everything he did that he just wanted to keep doing it to see what else he could make her do.

His cock was so hard, though, it felt like it was gonna break off. The incessant grinding of her hips was not helping, well maybe it was in a small way. It felt good, the friction, but just—not enough. She was killing him slowly here. "Ah, shite." He rocked his hips up against her, cursing the layers between them. He pulled at her shirt again to expose the other breast and his mouth latched onto that one as well, which got him another boisterous, uncontained moan from her. Her grip in his hair tightened and she pulled, which had Jamie moaning as well, because while it had hurt, for some reason it also felt really good. Made the hairs rise all over his body. Suddenly, Geillis Duncan's words came back to mind. 'Not all pain is painful, young Jamie.' Holy Mary, was this what she meant? Zahra had called it a good hurt?

To test the theory, Jamie watched Zahra closely as he let his teeth work her nipple gently. Zahra's head fell back in pleasure once more and another long, heady moan fell from her lips. He hoped that meant she liked it, or at the very least she would have told him otherwise if she didn't. He rubbed her clit a little more confidently, applying a little more pressure, which again seemed to be something she enjoyed. "Good, good," she breathed out, gripping his shoulders as she rocked against his hand.

He popped his mouth off her nipple and pressed a trail of wet, hot kisses up her sternum, and her throat. "Tell me, Leeloo. Tell me what you need?" Because, in this moment, against everything he had ever been told about sex from his comrades, he only seemed to want to make her feel good. "Now move it in… and out." She was so flushed and could barely breathe. She licked her lips they were so dry from all the panting she was doing. She always thought educating a virgin would be boring or tedious but she couldn't have been further from the truth. This was one of the sexiest things she'd ever experienced in her life.

At her instruction, Jamie began to pump his finger inside of her. "Like this?" He asked as he laid a kiss to her throat.

"Now move it in… and out." She was so flushed and could barely breathe. She licked her lips they were so dry from all the panting she was doing. She always thought educating a virgin would be boring or tedious but she couldn't have been further from the truth. This was one of the sexiest things she'd ever experienced in her life.

"Oh, God… Jamie… oh God. I'm gonna… I'm gon--" her hips rolled forward and held tight against...
his body, practically pinning his hand between them as her body bowed against him. Her head whipped back in ecstasy and she took a very sharp inhale of breath that seemed to get stuck in her chest. Jamie thought for the briefest moments he might have hurt her, but then it was like a wave crashed over her and her body trembled in time with the strong pulsations of her walls around his fingers. They gripped and squeezed so tight Jamie feared his fingers may actually break.

He cursed in Gaelic and pressed his face to her chest as she came apart with a loud, chesty moan. Her body eventually released all that tension and she slumped forward against him, feeling completely boneless. The grip of her walls eventually lessened and Jamie slowly worked his hand free. "I didnae know—that women could—as well," he spoke as he flexed and stretched his fingers that were soaked in her climax. It didnae smell bad like Dougal and a few of the others had told him it would. Zahra had an almost sweet smell, like honey or nectar, and out of curiosity Jamie licked her wetness from his fingers, finding he rather liked her taste. It was bitter, but sweet. Zahra had taken that moment to raise her head to look at him when she caught him licking her orgasm from his fingers. Her face reddened, mouth dropping open slightly as her skin flushed with renewed arousal.

"And here I thought someone was bein' murdered," Rupert's familiar brogue spoke from behind them, as he leaned casually in the doorframe.

They'd both been so preoccupied they hadn't even heard him barge in. Zahra and Jamie both gazed at him with saucers for eyes, and the instinct was to scramble for clothing, but they'd never even gotten undressed. "How long've ye been standin' there?" Jamie asked angrily as he helped Zahra cover her chest before she climbed off his lap.

"Not long enough, apparently." Rupert said. "Did that squeal come from her or you?"

"Out, wi' ye!" Jamie ordered angrily as he shoved the man's shoulder.

"Auch, ye could at least tell me how she tastes?"

"Out!" Jamie demanded with a final angry shove, and a kick in the pants before he slammed the door closed, then bolted it.

"That was—my fault." Zahra spoke from the bed. "I was trying not to be so loud, but—"

Jamie reached her in two long strides, took her by the shoulders and silenced her words with a fiercely passionate kiss. When they parted, Zahra was completely breathless, and her lips were swollen and red. Jamie smirked and pinched her chin again. "Dinnae ever apologize fer how I make you feel, ye ken?"

Zahra blushed and bit her bottom lip before she nodded, grinning. "I ken." Jamie felt a tug on his kilt and when he looked down, Zahra was trying to pull it free.

"What're ye doin, lass?" He asked, a little uncertain. Rupert's unexpected interruption had definitely soured the mood, but Jamie admitted that his body was still rigid and hard, yearning for release.

"Trying to make you feel as good as you just made me," she said with a sultry smirk that was positively devilish on her kiss swollen lips.

"You dinnae have to—"

"But I want, to," she interrupted his selfless protest. "Please?"

"Rupert is right outside," Jamie whispered, feeling a little awkward about that.
"So? You locked the door right? What's the worst he can do, tell Dougal or the others?" She was playfully taunting him now. "I thought you said you didn't care what they think."

"I don't care what they think about me," he said softly and moved to sit next to her on the bed, taking her hands in his. "I do care what they think about you, and if Rupert goes spreading gossip about--"

"He won't," Zahra said rather confidently.

"How d'ye know? He and Angus are like a pair of old bitties with how much they gossip."

"I know, because he and Angus have been following me around like puppies since that first night at dinner, and he was there the first time we kissed. If Rupert planned to out us he would have told Dougal about our many intrigues together by now, wouldn't he? You would have already gotten your head chewed off, and I would have probably been burned at the stake as a succubus for seducing young Master Fraser." She tentatively reached for the large buckle securing his belt, keeping his kilt closed. "But none of those things have happened, have they?"

She made several fair points. "Still, I should probably have a talk with him."

Zahra kissed him firmly. "In the morning," she said with a sultry gleam in her eyes.

"In the morning," Jamie agreed and went in for his own kiss.

Zahra was spreading his knees apart and kneeling on the floor between them a moment later. She curved her fingers and glided blunted nails up the tops of his thighs, under his kilt, reaching all the way to the bend joint of his hips before scratching back down. Jamie groaned softly and rested his weight back on his arms, though the strain on his still injured shoulder only permitted him to do that for a few moments before he rested further back on his elbows. "Just relax," Zahra said in a slightly husky tone. "Let me take care of you."

She unbuckled his belt, then the kilt pin and pulled open his tartan like she were unwrapping a present. She found the tent he was sporting beneath his tunic and her eyes dilated wide at the site before her. She teasingly rubbed him through the fabric for a moment, then gasped softly when she pushed the material of his tunic away and his cock was finally free.

Admittedly, Zahra had seen many forms of male genitalia in her day, but she would never call any of them sexy or attractive. A penis was a penis was a penis. In that moment, however, Zahra couldn't help but think that Jamie's cock was beautiful for lack of a better word. Perfectly rigid, slightly curved (he was left handed apparently), a beautiful shade of tan and pink, darker than his skin, with several prominent veins running through it. He was uncut, which was not surprising for this age. Honestly, Zahra preferred it that way. It may take a little more maintenance and time to clean, but made things so much easier to handle, so much more sensitive to touch.

Jamie watched Zahra closely as she devoured him with her eyes if nothing else. He'd never seen a woman look at him that way, as if she were starving and he was the meal, so it stroked his pride and definitely had the blood boiling in his veins. He groaned softly and felt his member twitch against his stomach. Zahra delighted in that reaction she pulled from him, and she rewarded him by running her nails up his thighs once more, over the joint of his hips and up his stomach. Her hands trailed back down his abdomen following that and she gently skirted the base of his sex, teasing, but not touching. Jamie cursed in Gaelic and raised his hips subtly off the mattress. "Dammit, woman." He exhaled harshly on a grunt.

Zahra giggled softly, then gave him a bit of relief when she gently circled her palm around his base. She couldn't touch her fingers to her thumb, he was that thick. She lifted his erection off his stomach
and raised up on her knees to firmly brush her tongue along the main vein that ran underneath. Jamie gripped at the mattress, and stifled another moan by biting his bottom lip. Zahra was lifting her other hand to his tip and pushing back his foreskin a moment later with a downward stroke, exposing his weeping, swollen head. Zahra gasped again and let out a soft little moan at the sight. Her tongue lapped at the hole at the tip before circling around the shroomed head.

Jamie's hips raised against her mouth again and he collapsed fully to his back on the mattress, unable to hold himself up any longer. Zahra watched him for his reaction as she took his head slowly between her lips and sucked on the tip while both hands stroked his base. "Aye, Christ!" Jamie called out gripping fistfuls of Zahra's hair to push it out of the way so he could see.

Zahra groaned at the hair pulling, apparently she liked it too, and she grinned around his cock, then giggled softly, the vibrations of which only stimulated him further. "Auch!" He swore something in Gaelic again.

Zahra began moving her mouth on him then, slowly, taking him as far down her throat as she could before lifting back off. She could only take him about halfway without gagging herself, but considering how out of practice she was… she'd just have to use her hands to finish. She tested how far she could go a few times before she found a depth and a rhythm that Jamie seemed to respond to best. She started at a slow but steady pace, working him up expertly with her hands and mouth. One hand stroked him in tandem with the rhythm of her mouth, and her other hand busied itself with massaging his sack, occasionally teasing her fingers against his perineum behind, which seemed to pull one helluvan enthusiastic reaction from her lover. He liked that, even if he maybe didn't understand why.

Jamie was sweating and muttering incoherent things in Gaelic, English, and even some Latin. He had one strong grip in her hair while the other was white knuckled in the mattress, veins bulging up and down the length of both arms. When Zahra could sense he was close by how tense his body was getting, she quickened her pace, focused on sucking his tip while her hand stroked his length. She eventually slipped her other hand under his shirt to play with one of his nipples, which seemed to be what finally pushed him over. With a strangled shout, Jamie thrust up into her mouth, which Zahra had been fully prepared for, then, with a staccatoed sound that was a cross between a growl and a moan, Jamie was coming.

More Gaelic curses and words of praise left his mouth as wave after wave of pleasure pulsed through him. Zahra continued to milk him through it, swallowing down every drop. She didn't stop until he had begun to soften in her mouth and his moans turned more into whimpers of more pain than pleasure. Oversensitivity was definitely a thing.

Zahra was as high on pleasure in that moment as a cat on catnip. She slowly kissed her way up his body as wave after wave of pleasure pulsed through the mattress, veins bulging up and down the length of both arms. When Zahra could sense he was close by how tense his body was getting, she quickened her pace, focused on sucking his tip while her hand stroked his length. She eventually slipped her other hand under his shirt to play with one of his nipples, which seemed to be what finally pushed him over. With a strangled shout, Jamie thrust up into her mouth, which Zahra had been fully prepared for, then, with a staccatoed sound that was a cross between a growl and a moan, Jamie was coming.

"What did you say?" She asked in a quiet tone. "Right before…"}

Jamie grinned. "I said I felt like my chest was going to burst," he responded just as quietly. Zahra smiled brightly and pressed a kiss to his stubbled jaw. Jamie captured her chin again to hold her still while he stole a lazy, but sensual kiss. Yeah, that was definitely his thing, and Zahra liked it. They were still, surprisingly, wearing most of their clothes, and their boots. Jamie was the most naked, being sans kilt now. "We still never got properly undressed," he said with a lazy grin, nuzzling his
cheek against her head.

Zahra had her eyes closed as she idly scratched her fingernails through the short hair peeking out through his shirt collar. "No we didn't. We should probably remedy that." But neither made any effort to move, just enjoying the lazy afterglow.

"Aye. We'll both be miserable come mornin' if we fall asleep like this." Jamie muttered as he carded his fingers through her hair and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Mhmhm," Zahra agreed sleepily.

Neither made any move to remedy their predicament, save Jamie who managed to toe off his boots before he was fast asleep along with the sleeping beauty on his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Since it's not technically sex, does that mean Jamie is still technically a virgin? Love your kudos and comments folks! Thanks for indulging in my selfish fluff.
The Future

Chapter Summary

The future, they say, is unwritten but can be shaped by the past. But what happens when the written past is now the future?

Chapter Notes

This was another one I tried to break up into two chapters but couldn't find the right place to do it so, here you go. Another long one. Unbeta'd still.

Zahra found herself lying in a field of heather, bathing in the sun with her eyes closed. It was such a warm, peaceful, lazy day. Suddenly, something small was blocking the sun from her face.

“Foun’ ju!” A little voice called from above her.

Zahra didn’t move, feigning sleep. Something soft that smelled like the flowers she was lying in suddenly tickled her nose. “Wake up, I foun’ ju!” Still Zahra moved not a muscle, even when she had about twenty pounds of toddler pushing on her chest. “Wake up! Wake up! I foun’ ju!”

“AAHHH!” Zahra suddenly animated, making the small child squeal and laugh hysterically. The laughing and squealing only got worse when Zahra grabbed him up in her arms and began tickling him mercilessly. He feigned trying to get away, but his peals of laughter could be heard over the entire plantation.

“Auch, you two are gon’ ta spook the beasts, carryin’ on like ‘at,” a very familiar brogue called out to them from several paces away.

Zahra relented her tickling to glance up at Jamie with a bright, adoring smile. The man looked a little harder around the edges, and his hair now reached a little past his shoulders, but he still took her breath away. “Save me, dada!” The boy declared with a fake whine in his tone, trying to crawl out of Zahra’s lap.

“But you’re my prisoner!” Zahra declared in a growly voice, then renewed her tickle torture and the boy squealed with giggles all over again.

“Hel’ me!” The boy called between fits of laughter. “Hel’ me, dada.”

Jamie withdrew his sword. “Unhand the boy, and face me, fiend!” He challenged as he took up a fighting stance.

“Oh, really?” Zahra said as she stood up slowly, and held the boy at her hip. “But, he’s my prisoner?” The little boy in question was grinning, then squirmed out of her arms, to drop to his feet and ran to his father, to hide behind his leg.

“I foun’ her, dada,” he declared triumphantly.
“Great job, boyo. Now, leave--the rest--ta me,” he said menacingly as his eyes narrowed at the woman and he taunted her with a circle of his sword.

“The boy is mine!” Zahra declared as she moved her long honey-brown locks to one shoulder, then reached behind her neck and pulled a short sword from the scabbard she always had hidden along her spine, under her blouse. Just because she had gotten used to wearing dresses now, didn’t mean she had to always be unarmed. She had another dagger in the inside holster on her thigh, and another two up each sleeve, and another in her bosom. Look. This was a difficult time to be a 23rd century woman, ok?

“Try and take ‘im… If ye can,” Jamie taunted and the little boy was trying to be serious but he couldn’t help but grin and giggle quietly to himself. This was his absolute favorite game.

Zahra was the first to lunge, but Jamie blocked it with a parry, and a lunge of his own, and just like that the two were engaged in an epic duel. Instead of peals of laughter, the clang of steel on steel echoed through the fields. The poor blades of heather and lavender bore the hard evidence of their battle and would never stand the same. The two equals had been sparring for years now, but it was always intense. They never intended to hurt the other but neither did either of them hold back. The fight was for dominance more than anything, the victor choosing the punishment, and the loser having to submit without argument. It just so happened to also be their favorite game as well.

Zahra was the first to lose her sword when Jamie managed to knock it from her hand to be lost amongst the heather, but she was not out for the count yet. She dodged his strikes expertly, and even managed to catch his blade flat between her palms and push him away with a push of her foot in his gut. It bought her enough time to extract the daggers from her sleeves, which she used to fend off a few more of his strikes. Two small blades against his one long sword was still equally matched.

Eventually, however, she went low and kicked his feet out from under him. Jamie went down with an 'Ooph!', releasing his sword in the process, which Zahra swiftly kicked away. Jamie then took that opportunity to grab her ankle, using her own momentum against her as he pulled her off her feet as well. The fight was now taken to the ground; it was actually Zahra’s weakness as Jamie’s superior brute strength outmatched her own. While she had speed and dexterity over him, he had strength and size. A ground fight was almost always a win in Jamie’s favor.

Zahra was down to one of her two daggers, but, after some heavy wrestling and impressive maneuvering, somehow she ended up pinning him with her remaining knife at his throat. "Submit!" Zahra demanded from her perch on top of his chest.

"Never," Jamie whispered before he bucked and flipped her off of him to her back. He was quick when he climbed right on top of her, reached under her skirt for the dagger at her thigh, then pinned her with it. "Submit!" He declared with a smirk of his own. That should have been the end of it, however, Zahra was grinning like the cat who ate the canary, which made Jamie's brow furrow until he felt a tapping against his groin. When he looked down, Zahra had another dagger idly tapping against his crotch.

A stalemate.

He looked back up at her with dark intent in his eyes as his smirk turned lascivious. "I love you," he said in a deep, sultry brogue.

"I know," Zahra replied and a moment later they were engaged in a heated embrace, knives discarded as arms wrapped around each other, and mouths sealed firmly together in a passionate kiss.

"Dada!" The little boy started pushing on Jamie's shoulder. "Don’ hurt, mama!"
They broke apart with a sigh and the adults shared a knowing grin, before Jamie rolled off of his wife to the side and wrapped the boy in his arms. "If that be ye're wish, my prince, so shall it be my command."

Zahra sat up and combed her fingers through the boys dark red curls that were just as unruly as his father's. "Your father has shown me the error of my ways and I shall now only use my powers for good." The toddler waddled over and practically launched himself into her arms. She hugged him tightly, then whispered something in his ear. The little boy turned, giggling, to look at Jamie. "Ready?" Zahra whispered and the boy giggled some more and nodded. "Get him!" Zahra cried and they both tackled Jamie to the ground and began to tickle him. Zahra was aware Jamie had few tickle spots, but he played along anyway.

"Auch, I've been betrayed!" Jamie declared dramatically. "And by my own son, no less!"

"Su'mit, dada!" The little boy said, which made Zahra bust out in hysterical laughter.

"Get her!" Jamie said, stealing the opportunity. Suddenly they both turned on Zahra, who was very ticklish, and they exploited every spot until she was practically rolling on the ground, dying with laughter.

There was suddenly a ground shaking, booming noise that frightened every bird in the area to the sky. "What was that?" Zahra asked as all three suddenly stopped and sat up.

"Sounded like canon fire," Jamie said as he stood with the boy in his arms. Zahra stood with him as well, all three gazing off in the distance, and her hand unconsciously found Jamie's to twine their fingers together.

Another loud booming sound rattled Zahra to her very core, and had her gripping at her chest with her other hand. "Run!" Jamie cried as he hurled the toddler into his arms, over his shoulder and all three took off at a run, just as the dirt exploded to their right, which they barely managed to dodge.

Their field of play had suddenly become a warzone.

The boy was crying and screaming as another loud boom sounded, followed by a whistling noise. Zahra turned in time to see a cannonball hurling right towards them and everything was suddenly in slow motion. She shouted something unintelligible and ran to push Jamie and their son out of the way just before...

Zahra startled and jolted awake to a loud, heavy pounding on the door. Her ears were ringing something fierce and she had a migraine threatening to split her skull. She was then forced to take a moment to get back in touch with reality. The ringing slowly faded, but the headache persisted, and she blinked several times as she took in her surroundings. Jamie groaned beneath her but remained asleep. They were still in her room at Leoch? Right! Jamie and her had spent their first night together last night. Jamie was still a virgin in the technical sense, but last night had probably been one of the best nights of her life. She was definitely falling, if she hadn't already fallen, in love with the man beneath her. Even so, she was still, as far as she remembered, completely unable to have children. So whatever that had been, it had definitely been just a dream. A dream. That's all. But holy shit it had felt so real! So real in fact that she suddenly felt a deep ache inside of herself and tears welled in her eyes as she cuddled closer into the man beneath her.

Jamie stirred beneath her and his hand trailed up her back, which made her hiss softly in pain. "Sorry," he said unconsciously, and moved his hand to her hair instead. Zahra lifted her head to look at him and she saw the tears in her eyes. He lifted his hand to her face and sat up slightly, concern creasing his brow. "Ye a'right, lass?"
Zahra nodded and leaned up to give him a kiss. "Weird dream is all," she answered his obvious concern. "I'm fine."

Jamie wanted to ask more, but the pounding on the door sounded again, and Zahra sighed before she gingerly crawled off of him to sit on the edge of the bed. She looked toward the window, and it was still dark, the sun was barely risen. It couldn't be past 6’ o clock. "Who could that be at this hour?" Jamie asked as he tried to rearrange his tunic and kilt properly.

Zahra shrugged and got up to answer the door. She pulled back the lock and opened it a crack just as Rupert was about to pound again. "Finally!" He declared angrily.

"What is it? I'm not particularly feeling up to a run this morning."

"Auch, that's no’ it, ya dafty." Rupert pushed the door open enough for Jamie to come into view, and Zahra stood back a little. "Dougal's lookin' fer ye."

Jamie finished buckling his belt and stood to grab his boots. "Aye? What the devil for?"

Rupert shrugged. "Dunno. But if'n he finds ya here…" Rupert let that sentence trail off as he glanced at Zahra, then back at Jamie.

They were all aware of how 'possessive' aka obsessive Dougal had been towards their lady companion. If Dougal found out Jamie and Zahra had been otherwise engaged, on multiple occasions, and that Rupert hadn't told him about it, it would be Rupert's hide. All their hides really, but probably Rupert’s especially.

Jamie nodded in understanding and quickly pulled on his boots, then grabbed his vest and jacket. "Aye, thanks, numpty. I'll take care of it."

Rupert nodded back, then didn’t even bother looking at Zahra before turning away. No smile or banter for her? That wasn’t normal. She frowned softly.

Jamie approached Zahra and held her shoulders gently. "Meet me at noon in by the stables?"

Zahra smiled and nodded. "It's a date!"

Jamie nodded and leaned in to give her a kiss that, while intending to be quick, ended up lingering for some time, until they heard Rupert clear his throat. They both sighed as they broke apart. Jamie pinched her chin and gazed into her eyes a moment before he reluctantly turned and left. Zahra sighed and lingered in the doorway watching him go. When he was out of sight, she turned to look at Rupert, who was avoiding her gaze.

"Thank you, Rupert," she said softly, to which he just nodded awkwardly. "About--last night--" she began to say intending to talk to him about Jamie but the man suddenly cut her off when he collapsed to his knees in front of her, hands folded as if in penitence.

"I'm so sorry, lass." He had actual tears in his eyes. "I didnae mean ta' hurt you. I wanted to stop. I tried. I just--Dougal he--I tried to ask him to lemme stop--I--"

"Hey! Hey! Sshh!" She crouched down and took his face in her hands. "Rupert, listen to me. That had nothing to do with you, do you understand?" He shook his head, near tears, obviously consumed with guilt. How could she get him to see? She exhaled heavily out her nose. "Listen to me, Rupert! I'm serious… When Jesus died on the cross, did he blame the soldiers?" If there was one thing Rupert knew it was his Bible. He shook his head. This was an analogy he could understand. "No. No, he didn't. What did he say?"
"Forgive them?" Rupert said with a sniffle.

"Right. Forgive them for they don't know what they're doing."

"It's actually, ‘for they know not what they do’."

Of course he would argue semantics. Zahra sighed and rolled her eyes. "My point is… If it had been your choice, if Dougal hadn’t ordered you to, would you have gone through with it?" He shook his head adamantly. "Exactly. You were following the orders given to you by your chief, your laird. That's what good soldiers do. I'm actually proud of how strong you were for going through with it, and I hold no ill will towards you, do you understand?" Rupert nodded slowly, and Zahra touched his cheek. "So… Who's my favorite shadow?" She said playfully, like talking to a puppy. Rupert rolled his eyes, but couldn't fight his smile. "C'mon, who's my favorite shadow?"

He huffed in half amusement, half annoyance and pointed at himself. "Me."

Zahra pinched his cheek, then clapped him on it a couple times. "Good boy!"

He swatted her hand away and got up off his knees to stand, offering her a hand to help her up as well, which she took, making a slight face at the pain. "Did ye just liken yerself ta Christ?" He asked as he pulled her to her feet. Zahra chuckled softly and answered with a mere shrug. "That's blasphemy, ya know?" Rupert said teasingly.

"I guess that makes me a blasphemer, then." She paused for a moment, worrying her bottom lip. "And about… the other thing…"

"What other thing is tha'?" He asked. "How ye were recoverin’ in yer bed chamber, alone… all night?"

Zahra smirked and touched her finger to the side of her nose. "Exactly." She then pointed at him with a smile and patted his shoulder. "Thank you. No, seriously. I know the risk you’re taking and it means a lot to me... And hey, as a reward, guess what, no run today!" She clapped him on the shoulder again. She was actually beyond exhausted and the way her shirt was sticking so painfully to her back she knew she was in for a rough morning.

"Thank God!" Rupert declared dramatically. "Does that mean we can just go straight to breakfast?"

Zahra nodded. "Yeah, just… Let me get dressed."

"What the bloody hell were ye doin’ in yer runnin' clothes in the first place?" Rupert asked from his new stance leaning in the doorframe where he could see the blood that had soaked through Zahra's shirt and the guilt threatened to take him again.

"That--would be none of your business," Zahra said with a wink and a finger gun salute directed at him.

"Ah, come on. I think deserve a little bit o' detail?"

"Get the fuck out," Zahra said goodnaturedly with a laugh.

He then pinched his fingers together leaving a tiny gap. "Not even jus’ a wee bit o’ detail?"

"Out wi’ ye!" She mimicked Jamie's accent and his ire from the night before as she moved to close the door to Rupert laughing. Before it closed all the way though she poked her head out really quick. "Wait, umm… do you--" Zahra worried her bottom lip again tapping her fingers on the door.
nervously. "--you think you could--fetch Mrs. Duncan or Mrs. Fitz for me?"

Rupert nodded. "Aye. What fer?"

Zahra sighed. "I just--I need one of their help… with a bath." Zahra hated having to ask for help, especially for something so mundane, but she wasn't going to be able to fix her back without it. Rupert nodded and Zahra gave him her thanks before she closed the door.

Zahra had poured all the water from her wash basin pitcher into the empty tub. It was tepid bordering on cold, but she was sitting in it anyway, naked save for her shirt. She had her knees hugged to her chest and was resting her head on top of them when Fitz came in with a fresh cauldron of hot bathwater. "Aye, deary." The older woman approached and set the cauldron aside, then brought a chair over and placed it next to the small wooden tub.

"I'm sorry," Zahra said softly. "I know you're busy."

"Auch, hush, child. I told ye whate'er ya need an' I meant it." She poured some of the water from the cauldron into the tub to mix with the cold to warm it up. Zahra sighed softly in relief. "Why're ye wearin' this then?" She meant the shirt.

Zahra sighed and turned her head to face Fitz. "It's stuck--to my back."

Glenna tested it by trying to lift the fabric free, but it was indeed stuck to the welts that had bled and dried overnight, which made Zahra hiss softly in pain. "Oh, aye... Well, let's see what we can do abou’ tha'." The older woman soaked a sponge and pressed it to the top of Zahra's back to ring it out, intending to soak the shirt; hoping the moisture would loosen the blood and help the shirt come free. It worked.

Eventually, Fitz was able to pull the fabric free with little to no pain on Zahra’s end, and helped the younger woman out of it much to her relief. Glenna looked at the bruising welts and cuts on Zahra's back and she sighed as tears stung her eyes.

Zahra reached over and touched her arm, then offered her a soft, comforting smile. "It's ok. Really. I'm sure it looks worse than it feels, I promise."

"Oh, lassie," she said as she covered Zahra's hand with hers and gave it a few gentle pats, trying not to cry. Zahra squeezed, trying to comfort her and wasn't that quaint? Zahra trying to comfort the older woman, when it should be the other way around. Glenna eventually sniffled and shook her head. "Enough o' that, now. Let's get ye washed and dressed. There's still breakfast to be made."

Zahra smiled and for once let someone else help her. Fitz washed her back as gently as she could, then her hair and the rest of her body as well. This was her first up close view of Zahra’s tattoos, and while she may have examined them closely as she helped her wash, she didn’t say anything about them.

Once she was cleaned, Zahra got out of the tub and Glenna helped her to dry, and bandage the few open cuts so the shirt incident didn’t happen again. “Ye’ve such beautiful skin,” she said as she helped towel Zahra’s shoulders. “Even with all the tattoos, and such.” There it was. Zahra almost laughed. “Not many women survive past their youths with such smooth skin.”

Zahra was hairless, almost everywhere except her head. Another one of Jargen’s doings. Another part of her ‘coming of age’. Orions were notorious haters of body hair of any kind. Many males even preferred to be bald. As part of her ‘value’ to him he’d paid to have skin and laser treatments to have it all removed. She’d seen the way Fitz had looked at her when she'd seen Zahra’s full nudity. Zahra
was aware how strange she must look on multiple levels. It made her super self-conscious and she was insanely grateful when Fitz finally helped her into her chemise.

“Ye’re next husban’ll be a lucky man,” Fitz said in a sing-song manner as she approached Zahra at the vanity.

Her next husband? Zahra idly thought back to her dream, and she couldn’t fight the bittersweet smile that lifted her lips, and the tears that welled in her eyes. Glenna saw the reaction in the mirror and she gently ran her fingers through Zahra’s hair. “Wha’s wrong, a graidh?”

Zahra huffed softly in amusement and shook her head, meeting Glenna’s eyes in the mirror. “Mrs. Fitz, can I tell you something?”

Glenna smiled softly and nodded. “Aye, darlin’.”

Zahra worried her bottom lip and reached for her brush. She wanted to tell Fitz about Jamie but she wasn’t sure that was a good idea. They were still so new, and she didn't know how many people knew his truth. She sighed, then handed the brush over her shoulder. “I can’t brush my hair. Will you help me?”

Fitz sighed, but smiled. That was a deflection if she ever heard one and no mistake. Still, she took the brush and started running it through Zahra’s short, but still damp locks. “Well, who knows what the future’ll bring, eh? Maybe there’ll even be a MacKenzie in ye’re future, huh?” Glenna prodded with a grin. Zahra grinned, but once again her thoughts strayed to Jamie. He was a MacKenzie, wasn't he? Fitz, however, was just excited that Zahra seemed to be open to the idea. Personally, Glenna would love to have the lass stick around. She was so much nicer than any of the other ladies of the castle, and she wasn’t absolutely worthless in the kitchen or other chores and tasks. “Oh, aye. Well, there’ll be hundreds o’ MacKenzie’s showin’ up in the next few days for the Gathering.”

Zahra tilted her head at Glenna in the mirror. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Fitz. What’s a Gathering?”

“Tis where all the MacKenzie men throughout the Highlands come and plight their oath to the clan and Himself.” By Himself, Zahra had come to learn Mrs. Fitz was talking about Colum. She listened intently as Glenna continued brushing her hair, and explaining. “Last one was decades ago when Colum was made Laird. I’m fair glad ye’re here to handle the Physicking,” Zahra assumed Glenna meant healing. The job Zahra had oathed herself to do. “I’ve enough to manage wi’out dealin’ with folks’ ailments.”

Zahra smiled up into the reflection once again. For some reason, she had a sneaking suspicion that she was going to be insanely busy over the next few days. Just… call it a hunch. Glenna stopped brushing her hair to take Zahra gently by the shoulders and met her eyes sincerely. “If’n you do well wi’ that… Dougal and Himself will no’ forget it. Ye’ll be in their good graces, make no mistake.”

God, wouldn’t that be something? If she could get into Colum and Dougal’s good graces, maybe she could finally breathe. No more shadow, though she’d probably still keep Rupert around. She had just barely gotten him housebroken. Most importantly, though, could she and Jamie actually be Jamie and her without all the secrets? She could only hope.

Once she was dressed, with Glenna’s help, the ladies exited her chambers a short time later, with Rupert as their escort down to the kitchens for breakfast. Glenna wouldn't let Zahra do any real work like she normally did, even when Zahra offered. If she was really scrapped for something to do, Glenna tasked her with folding the napkins and linens for dinner that evening. A menial task to be sure, but Zahra was grateful for something to do. She seemed to have a bottomless pit of energy, something Glenna was envious of.
Even in her small task of napkin folding, Zahra wasn’t content to just fold napkins, no. She had started folding said napkins in fancy designs, the likes of which Glenna had only ever seen served at royal dinner parties. First there was a crane. Then a bishop’s hat. A snowflake. Even a simple rectangular square with pockets for holding the silver was fancier than Fitz had ever seen done in her kitchen. Zahra even got Rupert in on the action, showing him how to fold a simple boat. Yes. Glenna really liked this girl. Hoped she would find a reason to stay. Or maybe, just maybe… Glenna hoped she’d already found it?

Glenna wasn’t a fool. She may not be the most educated woman, sure enough, but she’d seen the way young Jamie had taken to the foreign woman, and her to him. She was pretty sure that might have been what Zahra had been about to tell her in the vanity upstairs, but she’d backed out at the last minute. Glenna’s poke about settling down with a MacKenzie had not been entirely innocent or by accident. Both of them were a smart match. Could understand each others pain on a level no one else around here could. Lord knows, no other lass had ever held young Jamie’s attention; not even her own granddaughter. Maybe they wouldn’t care for her opinion, but, for what it was worth, Glenna approved.

When they were finished with the fancy napkin tricks, Glenna helped serve Zahra and Rupert some warm breakfast and they ate over light, friendly conversation.

When breakfast was over it was only past eight. Rupert and Angus switched out their duties for the day and Zahra made her way down to the clinic, or surgery as she had been told by Colum. She was already familiar with a lot of things about it, as Colum had shown it to her that first day, when they’d made a contract. If she was going to be getting an influx of sick people over the next few days, however, she wanted to make sure she knew where everything was and what it did.

She hadn’t needed to use it yesterday or the day before so she was surprised to see a present waiting for her when she went there today. Her hiking bag. Zahra smiled and moved to open it up. Thankfully, all she had brought with her were some hiking snacks, a steel water bottle, and her first aid kit. She’d gone tech free for the trip, wanting to get in touch with nature. Well, Zahra would say she had gotten in touch all right.

Everything was still there, even her first aid kit. Granted, most of its supplies had been depleted treating Jamie in the forest, but, either they hadn’t gone digging through her bag, or they had and found nothing necessary to confiscate. It was a very small thing, meaningless really, but it made her overcome with joy. To have something from home. It gave her hope that things would work out somehow. She sat on the table in the middle of the surgery and took out the brown paper bag full of trail mix she had mixed herself. She poured some in her palm and popped the handful into her mouth, which was when she saw Angus looking. “Want some?” She asked politely as she held out the bag in offering.

Angus stayed quiet and just folded his arms over his chest and turned away to lean against the wall out of view. “Trail mix. I made it myself.” She said as she munched on a few more pieces. “It’s got yogurt covered raisins, peanuts, cashews, chocolate morsels, some almonds, some honey oats.” Angus had been peeking his head around, interest piquing as she described the sweet and salty treat. Zahra smirked and offered the bag in his direction once more and gave it another shake. “It’s delicious!” Zahra sing-songed at him.

“Yeah, well, comin’ from you Miss ‘I cannae taste anythin’,’ tha’s hardly a vote o’ confidence, now is it?” He huffed and, if possible, crossed his arms harder.

Zahra shrugged. “Your loss.” She popped another handful in her mouth and crunched on it thoughtfully.
Angus sighed, and eventually came from around the corner and approached the table, trying to peek into the bag. Zahra raised her brow at him questioningly and offered him the bag once more. Before he could reach his hand inside of it though, she pulled it back. “Ah! When was the last time you washed your hands?” Angus made a face like he didn’t know, and looked at his hands which were positively filthy, then he sort of hid them behind his back.

Zahra smirked and pointed at the wash basin and pitcher on the nearby table. “Only people with clean hands get snacks.”

Angus sighed and rolled his eyes but apparently his desire for snacks outweighed his stubbornness and he stomped over to the basin to wash his hands, which he just sloshed in the water a bit before turning around. “Ah, ah, ah!” Zahra interjected. “With soap!” Angus groaned again, but he turned back around and reached for the bar of soap next to the basin.

He lathered up his hands, then rinsed them thoroughly before he marched back over to Zahra and showed her his hands. “Satisfied?”

Zahra actually took each hand in turn and inspected them. “That’ll do,” she said, and rewarded him with the bag. He took the whole thing out of her hand, and leaned up against the table next to her before he promptly shoved his hand inside. He brought out his handful and opened his palm to looked and see what he got. He picked out the almonds, the oat clusters, and the raisins like a picky child, before popping the fistful into his mouth. Zahra couldn’t help it when she giggled at him.

He looked at her confused, “Wha’?”

Zahra shook her head, smiling. “Nothing. You just remind me of my friend Jim, that's all. He was a picky eater, too.”

“I am no’ a picky eater,” he said as he plucked the same items from another fistful.

“You’re literally picking all the really good stuff out of your food right now. Which, you are going to clean up, by the way, right?” She said as she nodded at the floor where he’d dropped a few almonds and such, then she laid him with a stern gaze, single chestnut eyebrow raised, daring him to argue.

Angus paused what he was doing, looked down at the mess, looked like he was about to argue, then started dropping the almonds and such back into the bag instead of on the floor.

Zahra laughed again. “Jim would order a Greek salad and pluck out the olives, onions, and the tomatoes, which at that point he might as well have just ordered a plain green salad.” Zahra chuckled softly at the memories, then sighed a bit wistfully before her smile fell into a soft frown.

“Sounds like a smart man, to me,” Angus said with a cheeky grin.

“He was,” she said with a sigh. He is? He will be? God! Zahra sighed and hopped down off the table, and went to the basin to pour some fresh water to wash her own hands with the soap. She then set about to refamiliarize herself with her clinic. Started an inventory of supplies, what she had, what she may need, what she didn’t need. Jeeze. Live lice? Bllehwhhehh! So gross!

She may have been so involved she started to lose track of time until she remembered when the clock on the mantle chimed 12. Her eyes widened and she literally dropped what she was doing. “Ah, shit!” She cried before she tossed her hiking pack over her shoulder (She’d repacked it with emergency supplies; Angus had eaten all of the snacks.) Then she hiked up her skirts and took the stairs two at a time.

“Where are we goin’?” He asked, upset she was interrupting his snack time, and making him run.
“Ah, bollocks!” he said before shoving the last handful in his mouth and chasing her up the stairs.

Jamie was afraid she wasn’t going to show, it was almost a quarter past. He glanced at his pocket watch again, and paced another ways back and forth. He stopped and pulled out his pocket watch, again, and yep it was still a quarter past. He looked up, and saw a woman running towards him, her skirts partially lifted and whipping around her legs as she quickly approached. Jamie breathed a sigh of relief and a huge grin spread across his face as he watched her.

Eventually, she made it to him, gripping onto his arms, and breathing laboured. “Ye’re late,” he accused.

“I know. I’m so sorry.” She spoke between breaths. “I was inventorying my clinic. Lost track of time. I’m so sorry.”

Her clinic? Jamie thought with a grin. Had she meant to call it that? If possible, Zahra was even more attractive when she was winded, rose kissed cheeks and nose from the chilly autumn air. Jamie reached his hand up to brush her hair behind her ear but Zahra flinched away and did it herself.

“Uhmm,” she said before she stepped to the side and pointed at a lagging Angus, who looked like he was about to die, and was shouting curses in Gaelic. He may be thinner than Rupert, but not in much better shape.

Zahra and Jamie exchanged glances and started giggling until Angus came close and they schooled their features.

“Damn ye--devil woman. Auch.” He braced his hands on his knees and bent over trying to catch his breath.

“Ye a’right there, Angus?” Jamie asked teasingly.

Angus gave Jamie a two fingered salute which had both Jamie and Zahra laughing again. Zahra wanted to hug him, to hold him, to be held by him, to kiss him, but Angus wasn’t Rupert. She and Angus didn’t have as good a rapport. Yet. She was working on it. But, surely, if he got wind of Jamie and Zahra's budding relationship, he wouldn't hesitate to tell Dougal about it.

“So, uh,” she adjusted the strap of her bag over her shoulder. “What did Dougal want?”

Jamie wanted those things to. Hated that he couldn’t just take her face and kiss her right then and there, but... “Oh. Uh, same thing he always wants. Information mostly. Wanted ta’ know my plans for the Gathering. Reminded me it's prob’ly best to keep myself scarce.”

Zahra’s brow furrowed. “But--I thought all MacKenzies came to the Gathering? It's some huge family reunion party thing?”

“Aye, they do. They do, and it is, at that.”

Her brow furrowed more. “But not you?” Jamie shook his head. “I thought you were a MacKenzie, too?”

Jamie nodded again. “I am, from my mother's side.”

Yeah. He was Colum and Dougal’s nephew, wasn’t he? “I’m sorry. I don’t--understand.” Zahra was beyond confused, and there was obviously something here she was missing.
“We’ve a Tanist system!” Angus called from his guardian like vigil about twenty feet away, apparently frustrated by her lack of understanding.

“Tanist?” She asked Jamie for clarification.

Jamie nodded. “Aye. It’s our system for passing on titles and lands; goes from Laird to heir-apparent or second in command, not necessarily father to son. Right now, I’ve no fealty to Colum or Leoch, but if I attend the Gathering I’d have to swear fealty to Colum or risk being murdered by my own kin.”

Glenna had said that every MacKenzie man attended the Gathering. That they all swore an Oath of fealty to the Laird. But being Colum’s nephew, according to this Tanist system, if Zahra was understanding correctly, would make Jamie a candidate for succession, wouldn’t it? And if Jamie became a candidate for Laird, that would put Dougal and him at a race for succession? Dougal probably wanted to be Laird more than anything, which put Jamie in a dangerous predicament if he became this heir-apparent. God it was like Lion King. Dougal was Scar and Jamie was Simba. Dougal would murder Jamie in a heartbeat, Zahra had no doubts about that.

“But if you do swear fealty, you risk being killed by your own uncle?” Yep. Definitely Simba.

Jamie had almost been able to see the cogs working in Zahra’s brain, and he was impressed that she understood their laws well enough to come to that conclusion so quickly. “Aye. And I’ve no desire to be Laird here. So, y’see. Best fer everyone if I jus’... lay low.”

Zahra nodded in agreement, though she was frowning. “I’m sorry. From what I’ve heard this is supposed to be a big hullabaloo and you’re gonna miss it.”

Jamie nodded again, and sighed a bit wistfully. “Aye, but... there’ll be another one soon enough, I’m sure.”

They locked eyes for a while, and Jamie reached out to take her hand and twine their fingers together. Jamie had a better view of Angus than she did, so she assumed he would be able to see if Angus was looking or not. She worried on her bottom lip and happily twined her fingers with his.

“You’ve no idea how badly I wish to kiss you right now,” Jamie said in a whisper only she could hear.

Zahra blushed and brought her hand up to rub her neck. “Probably about as much as I want to kiss you,” she whispered back. Jamie lifted a hand to her cheek and she covered his wrist with her free hand and nuzzled her face into his palm. She turned her face to lay a kiss in the center of his palm, then with a darkening expression she sucked his thumb into her mouth. A cruel mockery of what she’d done to him the night before. Jamie’s mouth fell open slightly, pupils dilating as he exhaled harshly. Then he noticed Angus out the corner of his eye turning around and he quickly dropped both hands, his thumb audibly popping out of her mouth, and he cleared his throat.

Zahra giggled softly, but cleared hers as well, then glanced back at Angus and gave him a wave. “So umm,” she said as she gave Jamie a sultry smirk.

“I ought to bend ye over my knee for tha’,” he whispered, voice low.

Zahra’s grin just widened and she licked her lips. “So, umm, the reason I’m here--” she spoke a little loudly, for Angus’s benefit mostly. “I should really change the bandages on your shoulder.” Again she was being a little overly loud. Angus didn’t seem to notice.

“Right, well... Best get on wi’ it then,” he answered back. “We’ll be right here in the stables, Angus.
Dinnae want tae expose m’self out here in the open, ya ken?” Angus followed behind them but he didn’t actually enter the stables, he just waited outside, leaning over the fence and gazing at the horses.

Jamie was practically pushing Zahra into the small privacy that the stables offered a moment later. “God, could you be more obvious?” Zahra whispered as Jamie’s hands reached for her hips.

“Oh, right, like you were any better?” he whispered back as he squeezed her waist. “I’m pretty sure they could hear ye the next paddock over.” Jamie pinned her gently to the nearest stable wall, careful of her back, but he still had his whole body pressed against her, which made it easier for her to feel the hardness of him through his kilt and her skirt.

“Did I do that?” She asked teasingly as she rolled her hips against him, making him groan softly.

“Aye,” he confirmed, as his hands curved down over her backside. “Ya did.” He gave her bottom a firm slap, which made Zahra bite her lip and moan softly. Jamie’s nostrils flared when his arousal spiked at her reaction. Zahra had enjoyed that? How was he supposed to ‘punish’ her when she misbehaved? “Ye weren’t supposed to enjoy tha’.”

Zahra smiled slyly up at him. “I’m sure there are a lot of things--I’m not supposed to enjoy--but I do.”

Now Jamie was deathly curious what she meant. Was it more of that ‘not all pain is painful’ stuff? He ground his hips forward into her, and his hand curved over her bottom and down her thigh, which he then lifted to rest above his hip. “Like what?” He asked as he ground himself against her once more.

“Like this,” she said before grabbing a fistful of his hair in one hand, and his shirt collar in the other, then she pulled his hair to expose his neck, pulled his collar to the side and clamped her teeth over his uninjured shoulder, biting and suckling hard.

Jamie felt like he was about to pass out from trying to hold the moan that was trying to escape his throat. She was biting him, biting him so hard he knew it would leave a mark. He shouldn’t like it, shouldn’t be enjoying it, but holy Mary mother of god! He pressed his hips harder against her as his arousal spiked and his member twitched. He then reached up to take both of her wrists in his hands and pinned them forcefully to the wall behind her with a soft growl.

Zahra gasped, and her lips were slightly swollen from her actions, but she was grinning like a madwoman. “What?” She breathed out. “You didn’t like it?” She whispered as she took that moment to lift her other leg over his other hip, fully expecting Jamie to take her weight, which he did easily. He was now holding her up against the stable wall with just his body. She had wrapped her legs securely around his waist and was rolling her hips against him wantonly. “From the feel of it… I’d say you did.” The look he gave her was dangerously sexy and Zahra shivered from hair to feet. “You want to mark me too, don’t you?”

Yes. Yes he did. His eyes were transfixed on her neck, the swell of her breasts. Jamie didn’t know where this was coming from, this deep primal urge, no need. He just wanted to take. Take until he couldn’t take anymore, until she had nothing left to give. It scared him a little, but it was also thrilling.

Still, a part of him knew she had to be feeling the pressure on her back, even if she made no painful sounds. “Leeloo?” he whispered softly, pressing his forehead to hers as he released her hands and gripped her thighs, rutting himself against her despite their layers of clothing.

She grabbed his face in both hands and made him look at her. “You’re not hurting me Jamie. I would tell you if you were. I promise.” Jamie groaned softly, and buried his face in her cleavage and
continued rolling his hips into her, seeking release.

“Ye bloody finished, yet?” Angus’s voice called. No they weren't, but it was like someone had suddenly just doused them both with a bucket of ice cold water. It was cruel and jarring how quickly they broke apart from each other. Zahra almost lost her balance and her footing from being dropped too quickly onto sex wobbly legs.

“Almost,” she called out as she tried to compose herself as best she could. She adjusted her bodice and her skirts, and combed a few fingers through her short hair. There was nothing she could do about the flush on her face though, just as Jamie couldn’t hide the obvious tenting of his kilt.

Zahra moved forward and helped Jamie adjust his collar to cover the bruising she’d left on his good shoulder, then she took the opportunity to actually check the bandages on his wounded one. When he looked down at her he had a wicked smile on his lips, and he whispered something in Gaelic. While Zahra didn’t understand the words, she didn’t need a translator for the look he was giving her. “Meet me tonight?” he asked with a husky whisper, as his hand reached for her breast, which she promptly swatted away.

“Where?” she whispered back, while her stomach did somersaults.

The grin didn’t seem able to leave his face. “Here. After nine. I want tae show ye somethin’.”

She worried her bottom lip, then went to retrieve another clean bandage from her bag, then returned to replace the old one easily. “If what you plan on showing me is your cock, Jamie, I hate to break it to you but I’ve already seen it,” she teased playfully, keeping her voice low. Her comment made him laugh, but, no, that wasn’t his intention. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s very nice. Ten out of ten, but--”

He made a shushing noise and pressed his finger to her lips to silence her. ‘It’s no’ that. I want to take you somewhere--special.’

Ok that was a different story. “And how am I supposed to get here if you-know-who is still hanging about?”

Jamie smirked and reached down to grab her hips. “I trust a lady such as yerself can figure it out,” he teased with a grin, then moved his hands to grip her bottom, lifting her off the ground slightly as he pulled her against him. She swatted at his chest and he lowered her back down. God. Who knew James Fraser was such an exhibitionist?

“Tonight, then,” she said as she tied the new bandage tight.

“Don’t be late,” Jamie said with a grin and a wink.

They stole one final kiss that left them both a little breathless, before Zahra broke away. ”We can probably remove the bandages tomorrow but you should still be cautious you don’t bust those stitches.”

Jamie nodded and Zahra packed her kit back up into her bag and tossed it over her shoulder before she exited the stables. Jamie followed, stopping to lean on one of the support columns, watching Zahra depart with her 'guard'.

“Finally!” Jamie heard Angus griping. “I’m bloody starvin’.”

“Really, Angus?” Zahra sounded incredulous. “You ate my entire bag of trail mix.” She gave Jamie a last, longing look before heading off with Angus.
“Aye. Twas as delicious as ye said it was.”

“And my granola.”

“Tha’--was surprisingly good.”

“And my sunflower seeds.”

“Auch, far too much work for tha’ wee little seed.”

Zahra laughed. “Angus?”

“Aye, lass?”

“Never change.”

Jamie laughed, listening to them bicker until they were out of earshot. He took in a deep breath and let it out on a sigh as he turned and rested his head back against the post. His hands came up to scrub his face a moment later, then he gave his own face a rousing slap, which had him wincing at the soreness of his jaw that still smarted from Zahra’s punch the night before. He rubbed his jaw slightly, smirking and chuckling to himself at the memory, and every memory of her since they met.

Zahra was an incredibly remarkable woman. Bold. Brave. She was a fighter. A survivor. Not afraid to get her hands dirty. She knew and had experienced firsthand the ugliness and evil this life could offer, yet she also seemed to still be able to see the beauty in it. She herself was a creature of extraordinary beauty, but there was no daintiness or frailty about her. Maybe that was what drew Jamie in the most. He lived a hard life, and for the first time in his life, he’d met a woman who he believed could share that life with him, not apart from him. That was why his plan tonight was so important.

With renewed determination and vigor, Jamie clapped his hands together, and pushed himself off the wall to get to work. He had a lot to do before their rendezvous that evening, and not a lot of time to do it. He needed to find Murtagh. Jamie had no secrets from him. Hopefully, the man would help him.

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After lunch, Zahra spent most of the rest of her day in the clinic, finishing the task she had started that morning. She catalogued her inventory, read through the books and journals The Beaton had left behind. If she wanted to get through the next month, she had to brush up on 18th century medicine. Too much 23rd century healing could land her in hot water. Zahra's extensive knowledge of herbology would definitely come in handy.

In her old life, before Starfleet, a knowledge of poisons, antidotes, and natural/homeopathic remedies was a necessary skill. Not just because she needed to know a hundred and one ways to off someone without leaving a trace, but because a slave didn't always have access to modern medicine or doctors or hospitals. That required money, or items to barter for trade, which she rarely had, either, and she tried to avoid selling her body at all costs. So she had to learn at a very young age how to take care of herself with whatever was available to her. That was partly where her knowledge of medicine, and chemistry had come from. The books in Jargen's library were free for her to read. He had preferred her to be educated. The photographic memory had helped. Starfleet had only further developed and honed her skills and knowledge.

So, she had spent the afternoon studying, and thinking, and looking for ways to incorporate, or adapt her own knowledge to that of 18th century medicine. It was barbaric and archaic, she knew, but a
sure-fire way to earn her a trip to a burning pyre would be for her to apply too much 23rd century knowledge to an 18th century world. She actually had a couple patients that afternoon, and she’d noticed that Angus had buggered off, but there’d been no Rupert to replace him. Zahra had taken that as a good sign. It hopefully meant she was starting to earn the man's trust.

She'd found both of her loyal shadows in the kitchens, in their cups up to their necks. "Gentlemen. I need your help in the clinic. There are some discarded medicines that need to be disposed."

"What're you two drunkards doin' still takin' up space in mah kitchen?" Fitz asked, sounded positively scandalized. "If ye're no’ workin’ here be gone wi’ ye."

"We’re just following orders, keepin’ an eye on this one.” Rupert grinned pointing at Zahra with a wink. Zahra just rolled her eyes.

"Ooh. And has she been hidin’ at the bottom of your mug for the past two hours?" Glenna said cheekily, which made Rupert and Angus chortle at each other.

There was a loud crash of breaking porcelain, which made Zahra jump and turn to look at one of the scullery maids, who’d just dropped a load of dishes. “Oh, Shona,” Glenna said and approached the woman slowly. “Dinnae fash yerself over this. Go on home now.” The woman was barely containing her sobs, and Glenna continued. “Be wi’ yer other wee bairns.”

Zahra watched the exchange with a gently furrowed brow, then approached Glenna as she watched Shona leave. “Carry on workin’!” The older woman order to the other servants.

“What was that all about?” Zahra asked as she came up along side Glenna, and plucked a green bean sprout from a huge bowl of them, tore off both ends to put in the waste, then grabbed another to do the same. She seemed to always have to be doing something with her hands, but Glenna was not complaining.

“Tha was Colum’s chambermaid. Suffered a great loss last night.” Zahra’s brow furrowed slightly and she continued her task as she waited for Glenna to expand on her meaning. “Her boy died last night. Wee Lindsay MacNeill.” Glenna crossed herself, then Rupert and Angus did the same.

Zahra’s brow furrowed. “What happened? Why did no one come get me?”

“Oh, lass. Ye had ye’re own ailing and things to tend to last night.” Zahra heard Rupert chortle, which turned into a cough, and he and Zahra met gazes for a moment and Rupert just held up his hand. “What ailed wee Lindsay has no mortal cure.”

Zahra did not believe that. “He went up to Eaghais Dhubh, he did,” Angus stated somberly.

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Zahra did not believe that. “He went up to Eaghais Dhubh, he did,” Angus stated somberly.

“Where?” Zahra needed more information.


Her brow furrowed. More superstitious nonsense. “You think--somehow the ruins killed him?”

“Twas not the ruins, ya daft woman,” Rupert began. “But the demons that roam free inside the ruins.”

Demons? Seriously? Zahra was dying to investigate now. There were no such thing as demons. Whatever had made the boy sick had to be environmental.
“Poor wee soul,” Glenna mourned softly. “Sickly boy on his best day. No match for old Nick.” She crossed herself again which Angus and Rupert once more followed suit.

A boy with unruly brown hair made an appearance shortly after declaring that The MacKenzie was looking for Zahra. Glenna fussed over him and his unruly hair, declaring him her nephew and his name was Tammas Baxter. Apparently Tammas and Lindsay were best friends, close like brothers.

“The MacKenzie is waiting, ma’am,” the boy repeated and Zahra nodded her understanding.

She gave Rupert and Angus a stern look. “The medicines are on the steps, you can’t miss them.” They both nodded, but instead of getting up to do their task, they each poured themselves another draft.

In Colum’s chambers, the man’s attendants were preparing a table, and he seemed to be meeting with a tailor. They were having words, and Zahra could hear Colum’s barely contained anger, and insult at the man assuming the Laird MacKenzie wished to hide his deformity as if he should be ashamed. Zahra inhaled sharply when Colum drew a knife, but his point had been made. The Tailor would not make the same mistake again.

Colum put his knife away and grabbed his mug to take a drink. “Do ye sew as well as physick Mistress Zahra?”

Zahra smiled. “When I was a small child I had no mother to teach me such things, but that also meant I had no one to mend or sew for me, so I had to learn, yes. My skills are nowhere near the Tailor’s, though, I assure you.”

“You physick, you sew, from what I hear ye also know yer way ’round a kitchen and a household, ye can carry a tune, and pack one helluva left hook.”

Zahra smirked a bit crookedly and worried on her bottom lip. “What can I say? I’m a Jack of all trades.”

“And a master of none?” He said with a soft chuckle. Zahra smiled back and nodded, relieved that he seemed to be pleased rather than upset. “Just as well,” he continued, hobbling towards the table that had been set up almost like a bed. “I’ve called ye here on another matter,” he’d begun to undo his kilt buckle and undressed all but his tunic. “Davie Beaton… He used to massage me. It made movement easier.” After he stepped out of his kilt he climbed up on the table. “I’d hoped ye’d do the same.”

“Of course, my laird.” She watched him lay out, glancing from his legs to his back. She wished she knew how to cure him but it was a malady that went far beyond her expertise. She was an emergency medic, not an actual surgeon. Still, she could only see so much benefit from massaging his legs.

“What’s wrong?” He asked when he noticed her hesitation. “Do you find my legs as repellant as the tailor does?”

Zahra shook her head. “No, not at all. I’m just—I’m thinking—it might be better for you, might help relieve more of the pain and increase movement and blood flow if I massage your spine and lower back, as well as your legs.”

Colum seemed to ponder that a moment before he nodded and lifted his tunic up to his waist, exposing his bare backside. Zahra had turned to pick up the decanter of spirits which she uncorked
and took a whiff before pouring a little on her hands. “Don’t tell me my arse offends ye, too?”

Zahra smirked and rolled her eyes before she lifted his shirt a little higher and began to expertly massage Colum’s lower back and spine. His muscles would be tender after the massage, and a good hot water bladder or hot towel would do him wonders. “Moist heat can be very soothing after a deep tissue massage. Is there any water for boiling or some clean cloth?”

“No. Mrs. MacNeill, my chambermaid, she lost her son last night,” Colum replied. “She hasnae been in this morning.”

Zahra frowned softly. “Yes. I was very saddened to hear about her boy.”

“Aye. Tis Satan’s work,” Colum responded solemnly. “The foolish child. He went up to the Black Kirk.” There was a weight pause where Zahra could almost feel the darkness of Colum’s thoughts. “Sometimes I wonder what I did to make the devil punish me like this.”

“On the contrary,” Zahra spoke up to that, hating to hear Colum pity himself so. Colum turned to look at her, eyes asking her to elaborate. “Well, the way I see it is, I can’t imagine anyone else with your ailment possibly making it out of their adolescence, let alone to survive and thrive with it as long as you have. I mean, you’re The MacKenzie. You have a beautiful wife. An adoring son. A people who love and respect you and your leadership. I don’t think your legs are a weakness in the way that you may think. I think they’ve helped you overcome great adversity, and have helped craft you into a stronger, better leader, father, chieftain.” Colum seemed solemn and reflective at her words, and Zahra worried she may have overstepped. “I’m sorry, Laird Colum. My mouth has run away with me again. I didn’t mean to speak so--”

“No, lass, calm yerself. I appreciate yer honesty, and your candor.” Zahra smiled and nodded, then turned to pour a little more oil onto her hands. “Do they have demons in--New York, was it?”

Zahra knew a little about New York, just what she’d read in history books and magazines. She would have rather’d said San Francisco but California didn’t even become a territory until the 1800s. “I’m sure we do, but back home we call them Brits… Or the Irish,” she said with a smirk, hoping to play on the fact that at this time America and Scotland had a somewhat common enemy. It was only 30 years or so until the Revolutionary War, after all. Her comment indeed made Colum laugh, but then he groaned audibly and Zahra paused. “I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No, no. On the contrary,” he shook his head. “Ye’re easing the pain considerably.” There was another long pause where Zahra focused on the areas where she felt the most tension of muscles in Colum’s back. “Gwyllyn the bard will be singing in the hall tonight before the Gathering,” Colum began to say. “I’d like ye to come along... as my guest.”

Thank you, my lord.” A genuine smile spread across her face. Very little else was spoken after that as Zahra worked his back, then his sciatic, then his legs, and feet. She covered Colum with a towel and took the liberty to fetch him some water and other things Mrs. MacNeil had been unable to do for him that morning. She heated some water by his fire, then dropped some clean cloths into it to lay across his back and thigh. The relieved sigh Colum exhaled afterward was a good sign. Zahra tidied up his room as she let the warm towels set and do their thing for his fatigued muscles.

When the heat had left them, she removed the towels to be cleaned. She left Colum a packet of herbs and instructions to steep them in hot water for 15 minutes, then drink the tea. It would be bitter, and unpleasant, but should help with muscle cramps.

By the time she left Colum he definitely seemed to be in much better spirits than Zahra could ever remember seeing him. She took that as hopefully a very good sign that she had done well, and the
MacKenzie was pleased with her. The thing about Zahra was that, no matter how long she may have been living as a free woman, no longer under the bootheels or restrictions of a slave, and with decades of therapy to work through and get over her slave conditioning, there was still a part of her, deep down, that responded to having someone to serve, and earning their praise. Colum was hardly someone she would call a master, but he was a man in a powerful place and his satisfaction with her work was something she definitely desired. If for no other reason than it would ensure her survival. Colum was a powerful ally to have in her arena.

She left the castle pleased with herself, but dwelling heavily on two things: 1) she wondered if it would be possible to find someone, anyone to escort her to Black Kirk so she could find out what environmental hazard lurked there that was making people sick, and 2) she needed to tell Jamie that Colum was inviting her as a guest to the performance tonight. She didn’t know how long it would last, but she had a feeling she may not be able to make their 9 o’clock rendezvous.

She’d searched for the greater part of the evening after Jamie’s whereabouts but no one seemed to know where he was. She’d eventually spotted Murtagh by the stables, however, returning a horse. He was carrying a satchel, and when he saw Zahra approach, he froze and gripped the bag tighter to his side. Zahra thought nothing of it and just smiled kindly at him. “Evening, Murtagh.”


“First of all, I just wanted to say--well, I never thanked you properly for saving me by the river, from Captain Randall. Jamie told me about him--”

“He did now did he?”

Zahra gave the older man a knowing look and nodded. “Yes. And I realize I owe you a great deal of gratitude for intervening when you did.”

Murtagh huffed, and his lips actually turned up at the corner in a slight smirk. “You actually seemed to have it well at hand, at the time. I just wanted to hurt the bastard, and you’d provided the perfect distraction.”

Zahra shared his smirk. “Well, whatever the reason--I probably owe you my life, or at least my sanity so--you ever need anything, just say the word.”

There was a silent exchange then between them, two old souls sharing a mutual understanding. Murtagh realized the gift Zahra was offering by in essence saying she owed him a life debt. It wasn’t something to sneeze at. “A’right, lass. Was there anything else?”

Zahra smirked and gave him a sheepish look. “Am I that obvious?” Murtagh adjusted the strap on his bag and Zahra continued. “I haven’t been able to find Jamie anywhere--”

“He’s on a mission,” the man answered quickly before she’d even finished her query.

“A mission?” Zahra asked with a furrowed brow. Murtagh nodded. Jamie had said nothing about a mission, but then she supposed what he did for Dougal as a Scottish soldier wasn’t necessarily her business. “Hmm, ok. Well, could you get a message to him for me?”

Murtagh nodded. “Aye. I can try.”

“Can you just let him know that I’ve been asked by Laird MacKenzie Himself to attend Gwyllyn’s recital tonight.” Zahra didn’t know how much Jamie had told Murtagh about her, about them, but she decided to play it safe and not expand on why it was so important for him to know that. Murtagh, for his part, didn’t seem to think it was so odd a request. Maybe he knew more than Zahra thought,
which would make sense. The man was Jamie’s best friend, his godfather.

Murtagh just nodded. “Aye. I can tell him that. Anything else?”

That she missed him. “No. That’s—that’s all. Thank you, Murtagh.” He nodded again and Zahra gave him a soft smile before turning and wrapping her shawl about her shoulders and heading back to the castle.

A few hours later, Zahra was leaning on a pillar in the main hall, sipping from a glass of Rhenish as she watched a high-spirited Colum tease and play with his wife and son. She was wearing a formal dress this evening Fitz had picked out, and her hair was up in French braids against her scalp. She eventually felt someone move to stand next to her, and heard Dougal’s voice a moment later. “My brother looks very well tonight,” the war chief said. Zahra didn’t know why, but there was always something about Dougal’s voice that made her feel dirty. “He says it’s down to you and your healing touch.”

Zahra looked over at Dougal, then at Colum, then back at Dougal. “I’m just glad I was able to help, even a little. I can’t imagine the kind of pain he lives with every day.”

“Aye,” Dougal agreed with a nod. “Seems the feral cat we picked up on the road is tryin’ to pull in her claws.”

Yep. Everything he said made her feel dirty and awful. “I’ve always considered myself more of a bengal tiger than an abandoned house cat,” Zahra responded to his slight with a clever repartee. Before he could dissect her meaning, or ruin her night further, however, Zahra leaned away from the pillar when she saw the bard moving to set up. “Now if you don’t mind, I think I would enjoy the view better from over there.” She left Dougal to his own musings, not giving him a second thought as she found an empty place to sit. She scanned the hall vigilantly trying to find Jamie, or Murtagh even so she could ask if he’d been able to give Jamie her message. She was devastated at the thought that Jamie would be waiting for her, and thinking she stood him up. Granted, she definitely would have much preferred to be with the Highlander and whatever he had planned, but to not accept Colum’s invitation would have been a huge insult; one she could not afford to give.

Someone occupied the space next to her, and Zahra turned to see the blonde from several nights ago. The brunette smiled brightly and leaned over to whisper, “Hello. I don’t think we’ve formally met.”

Zahra extended her hand for the girl to shake. “I’m Zahra.”

The girl smiled nervously and worried her bottom lip as she shook Zahra’s hand. She had sat here on purpose once she’d seen Zahra sit here. “I know who ya are, miss. I’m Laoghaire MacKenzie.” They shook hands, and Zahra couldn’t help but notice that ‘Leeree’s handshake was like a fish.

She smiled politely and took her hand back, just as Laoghaire happened to look up and the young girl froze, inhaling sharply. Zahra looked in the same direction and she saw Jamie talking with a few men. Zahra’s reaction was similar but not as frightened rabbit, more excited puppy. He was here. Laoghaire’s presence seemed to slip her mind entirely as Jamie and her locked eyes from across the hall, and in that one look Zahra could feel a bolt of heat shoot straight to her core. She’d gotten his message.

Next to her, Laoghaire was giving her a confused look, especially when Zahra lifted her hand to wave, and Jamie made excuses with his comrades and started making his way over to her. Zahra scooted closer to the girl, making room for Jamie on the other side. The redhead sat next to her, smiling and greeting the younger girl in the process. “Laoghaire,” he said, plain and simple, then
turned a bright smile on the brunette next to him. “New dress?” he asked conspiratorially.

Zahra smirked and nodded. “Fitz picked it out. Wouldn’t let me wear anything else.”

“Aye. I’m sure if ye had it ye’re way we’d all be wearin’ slacks,” he said as he teasingly played with a lock of her hair that had fallen from her braid at her temple. “Fitz’s doin’ as well?”

Zahra shook her head. “Nope. That one’s all me,” she said with a bright smile. She felt good tonight. More relaxed than she had since she’d been there. Well, excluding her alone time intrigues with Jamie. In public, this was the most relaxed she’d felt since she arrived.

“I like it,” he said out loud, then leaned in to whisper close to her ear. “But I hope ye know neither will last the night.”

First of all, holy goosebumps Batman. Second, she didn’t know how wise it was to be so openly flirtatious and casual with each other in this particular setting. She swatted his chest and nudged him with her shoulder, before she leaned in to share her own secret. “We have an audience.”

Jamie glanced over and saw that not only was Laoghaire watching them closely, but he saw Zahra indicate her head behind him. Sure enough, when Jamie turned, he spotted his Uncle, leaning against a pillar across the room, glaring daggers into them both. Jamie looked over at his uncle, smiled, then waved to him in greeting. Zahra covered her laugh with her hand.

Dougal left the pillar a moment later to take a seat closer to his brother Colum.

Zahra laughed softly, then swatted Jamie on the elbow, the noticed Gwyllyn was starting to play. “Sshh! He’s starting,” she whispered as she sat up a little straighter and took a sip from her wine. She absolutely loved the music. The harp was so mystical, and Gwyllyn’s voice was so angelic and melodious. A true bard indeed. She closed her eyes halfway through, letting the music transport her as it was wont to do. Eventually, almost of its own volition, her head found its way to Jamie’s shoulder, and just as gently Jamie’s arm lifted to wrap around her back. “It’s so beautiful,” she whispered as her hand sought out his and their fingers laced together.

“Aye,” Jamie agreed, but he wasn’t solely talking about the music. “Colum pays Gwyllyn well, he has to. The Welshman would be welcome at any Laird’s hearth.”

“Hmm,” Zahra lifted her head, feeling relaxed from the music and the wine. She was still working on her first glass, but the small fuzzy feeling was already filling her head. It was pleasant. “Has he been here long?” Welshman meant he was from Wales right? Wasn’t that near England?

“O, Aye.” Jamie removed his arm from about her shoulders, but brought that hand to switch with the one Zahra was holding so it wasn’t as conspicuous. “I visited Leoch for the first time when I was sixteen and he played for us then, as well.”

“I remember when you were here, before,” Laoghaire attempted to add to the conversation.

“Ye canna been much more an’ seven or eight yoursel,” Jamie said teasingly, making Laoghaire laugh. She really was a beautiful girl, with moons and stars in her eyes for Jamie. Zahra almost felt sorry for her. “I doubt I was much to see then, so as to be remembered,” Jamie was directing the conversation at Zahra.

“Well, I do remember, though. I mean, you were so--do you not remember me from then?” Zahra’s brow furrowed softly as she watched Laoghaire try to steer Jamie’s attention to her. Definitely felt sorry for the lass.
“No. No I dinna think so. Still, I wouldnae been likely to.” Zahra squeezed his hand. It made her wonder if she wasn’t here, if she hadn’t fallen through time, would Laoghaire and Jamie be together? Jamie had been about to sacrifice himself for her, and Laoghaire obviously had stars in her eyes for him. God what was Zahra interfering with? What historical events was she fucking with?

Jamie pulled her from her thoughts when he continued playfully. “A young birkie of 16’s too taken up with his own grand self to pay much heed to what he thinks are not but a rabble of snot-nosed bairns.” And there it was. Zahra could almost see Laoghaire’s dream bubble just pop. Zahra squeezed Jamie’s hand a little too hard and nudged him with her elbow. “What?” He asked, completely oblivious.

“Sshh!” She just said, and gave Laoghaire a sympathetic smile, then reached over and squeezed her hand, trying to be comforting. For what it was worth, the girl did not pull away. She actually seemed grateful for the kind touch.

The bard was halfway through another ballad, and Zahra was halfway through another glass of wine. “Colum’s rhenish, is it?”

Zahra smirked and looked at the half empty glass. “It’s insanely good. I’ve had two--no, three glasses.” She worried her bottom lip, giggling softly. Jamie grinned at her affectionately. “Umm, you should drink the rest. I’ve had more than enough.” She offered the glass to Jamie which he happily took.

“Most folks who drink with Colum are under the table after the second glass,” he said with a smirk before raising the glass and taking a drink.

Zahra huffed, and leaned in a little closer. “Are you saying that I’m drunk?”

“I’d be impressed if ye weren’t,” he responded with a shit-eating grin that made Zahra’s insides go all warm and fuzzy in no relation to the booze.

“Hmm.” She wanted to kiss him so bad in that moment, but she ended up worrying on her bottom lip instead. She caught Laoghaire staring at them again, so she cleared her throat and turned to watch Gwyllyn again just as the song was coming to a close. The audience clapped, Zahra clapping along with them. “That was lovely!” She said enthusiastically.

It seemed the bard was not finished, though, as he stood to address the audience. “It has been brought to my attention by my Laird Himself, that we have a special guest in our audience whom it would please his Laird very much to have join me here on stage.” Zahra looked around to see if she could spot who the mystery guest was, but when she looked Colum had turned to look at her, and Gwyllyn the bard had even found her in the audience and was extending his hand to her. “Mistress Zahra. If you will.”

Zahra glanced at Jamie like a deer caught in the headlights. “What--I--” she exhaled, and let out a nervous chuckle or two. “I couldn’t--”

“It would please me greatly, Mistress, if you did,” those words spoken directly from Colum himself had Zahra swallowing hard and butterflies going crazy in her gut.

She glanced nervously at Jamie, who just nodded his head. “It’s all right.”

Zahra bit her bottom lip then reached for Gwyllyn’s hand. Jamie and the gathered audience clapped as Gwyllyn walked her to the small stage in front of the hearth. He took up his position on his chair with his harp, and another seat was set beside him. “What would you wish to sing?” he asked.
politely.

Zahra felt like she was gonna puke. “I umm--I don’t--” she swallowed hard. “I don’t know any--Scottish songs but--” She had her eyes locked with Jamie’s, his gaze being the only thing centering her in that moment as she wrung her hands in the fabric of her dress.

“Then sing me something from yer home,” Colum requested. Something from home. Something from home. She’d been singing the ladies in the kitchen just simple verses and excerpts from Norah Jones, who’d once been her favorite singer from the 21st century. Her vocals and lyrics spoke to Zahra on a spiritual level. Something from home. She glanced at Jamie again and knew almost immediately what she could sing, and she nodded.

“Does the madam wish to play?” Gwyllyn offered his harp.

Zahra shook her head. “Unless--you have a mandolin or guitar?”

“A mandolin, yes!” Gwyllyn answered then stepped off stage to pick up his mandolin from a table on the side where he’d rested several of his instruments. He picked up a small cloth drum for himself. If she was going to play strings he could try to back her up on beat.

Jack of all trades, master of none indeed. She could pluck a mandolin or guitar on the chords. Nothing spectacular, but it would help. She sat as Gwyllyn handed her the string instrument. “It’s a, umm, three over four.” She provided the tempo and after testing the tune of the mandolin, she nodded a beat to let Gwyllyn follow her in as she started to play. Again, it was mostly chords on her part, with maybe a few lyrical pluckings, before she started to sing.

“Come away with me in the night…” she began singing, her voice a beautiful, almost haunting alto. “Come away with me and I will write… you a song.” She swallowed hard again, and briefly met Jamie’s eyes from across the hall and the butterflies went crazy again, and she was still trembling slightly. “Come away with me, the two of us… Come away where they can’t tempt us… with their lies…”

Arlight, so maybe this song might have come to mind for a reason and maybe in this moment she was declaring to the entire hall gathered that she and Jamie were secret lovers. Maybe this wasn’t the best idea she’d ever had but she’d already lit this firecracker, and now she was gonna have to watch it explode.

“And I want to walk with you on a cloudy day… In fields where the yellow grass grows knee-high.”

She only had eyes for Jamie at this point, keeping his gaze from across the hall, lost in his eyes, and the feelings she was feeling because the lyrics had definitely, suddenly taken on a much deeper meaning and tone than she had intended.

“So won’t you try to come… Come away with me and we’ll kiss… On a mountaintop… Come away with me and I'll never stop… loving you.”

Laoghaire was watching Jamie watch Zahra, and her eyes watered slightly. She wanted to hate Zahra in that moment, but she owed the woman a lot, and she didn’t know if she could blame Jamie for looking at her the way he was doing in that moment. The way she had so long pined and yearned he would look at her. In that moment, Laoghaire knew Jamie may never be hers. Not while Zahra was around.

“And I want to wake up with the rain… falling on our roof… While I’m safe there in your arms.
“And I want to wake up with the rain… falling on our roof… While I’m safe there in your arms. So all I ask is for you to come away with me… in the night. Come away with me.”

The last line sort of floated off on a wistful note and a rolling chord from the mandolin. When it was over, Gwyllyn started the applause, and the rest of the gathered followed suit. The most important though, was Colum, who was smiling fondly, proudly even, and he bowed his head at her in thanks. Colum was pleased, which made Zahra smile despite her nerves. She stood and bowed to him in return, then to Gwyllyn, before she handed the bard back his mandolin. She nervously shook hands with him before she made her way back to her seat where Jamie was standing and waiting for her.

“So, this dressing’s been chafing me for days,” Jamie said loud enough for those around them to hear but not obnoxiously so. “Would ye mind helping me with it?”

Jamie’s wounds and dressing said wounds had sort of become his and Zahra’s code for private time over the past few days, so Zahra was very well aware of what he was not saying. “Of course.”

Jamie downed the rest of the Rhenish, and handed the glass to Laoghaire. “Take that glass back will ya, lass?” he asked before he stood and followed Zahra out of the hall.

They had barely made it through the door of her clinic, and down the steps before Jamie was pressing her up against the nearest surface and trying to devour her from the mouth down. He’d been trying to behave all night, but that song… That song had been his undoing. The words. The emotions and feelings behind it. The way she looked at him while she sang it. Jamie was only human. He was only one man, and could only withstand so much temptation. There had been so much vulnerable honesty laid so plainly bare before him. He had wanted to wait; wanted everything to be perfect. He’d had so many plans, so many ideas, the perfect setting, the perfect speech, but he couldn’t wait.

He broke their heated kiss just to hold her face in his hands, gazing intently into her eyes. “I love you,” he admitted softly and Zahra felt like her chest was going to explode. Tears definitely filled her eyes and she was trembling softly. “I don’t need ye to say it back, Leeloo, I just need you to know… I dinnae care what Dougal, or Colum, or anyone else says. I love you, and I want to someday take ye as my wife.”

Zahra’s eyes threatened to overflow and she closed them before turning her face upward, as if that would make the tears recede back into her head. “Tonight,” he continued. “Tonight I wanted to take you to the glen where my father proposed to my mother... I wanted to get down on one knee and ask ya properly but tonight… Watching you… hearing you… seeing you…”

Jamie swallowed hard as he got down on one knee, and from inside his coat he pulled out a sash of Tartan in Fraser colors. It was no wider or longer than a small scarf, but it was embroidered at one end with their names, and his family crest. “Leeloo Zahra… I pledge to spend every day for the rest of my life devoted to you, and only you. Dedicated to your happiness, and mine. If I must swear fealty to anyone, it would be to you, and no other. Will you take me, and my name, damaged as we are, and make me the happiest man in the world?”

Zahra was openly crying at this point. She wasn’t sobbing, or blubbering, just silent tears falling from her eyes as she watched this beautiful, amazing, wonderful man profess things to her she never thought she would ever hear in her lifetime. Was she being selfish? Surely, if Starfleet ever found her, she would be tried and court-martialed for breaking the first rule of the prime directive. She was interfering with Earth’s history; with the fabrics of time itself. She was an officer, a soldier of Starfleet, held to a higher standard of duty, loyalty, and living… She had Jamie’s fealty, but did he have hers? Was he more important to her than Starfleet? Would she ever be able to go back? Did she even want to anymore? Duty had been all she had ever had back in her time, and she had been
miserable. Absolutely miserable. Sure, she hid it well; kept herself busy and distracted by taking on more work, more duties. She had been alive, but she wouldn’t have called it living.

Truthfully, Zahra couldn’t remember a time in her life where she had ever felt as happy, or as good as she felt ever since coming here. Her mind thought back to the dream she’d had that morning and her heart ached. Had it been a dream or a prophecy? It didn't matter what it was, she supposed, only that maybe she could make it come true. Zahra slowly lowered herself to her knees before him and held his face in her hands.

Did he have any idea the gravity of the question he was asking her? No, Zahra didn’t think he did. The only question she now had, was could she carry her secret to her grave? “I was lost when I came to Inverness,” she started to say, rubbing her palm across Jamie’s cheek. “I don’t know what I was searching for, but I never expected to find someone like you. Never expected I’d fall in love so easily... I never expected any of this really, but—meeting you has quite literally changed my life, Jamie, and only in the best way... I don’t—I honestly can’t remember a time before you that I ever felt this--whole.” She had tears threatening again but these weren’t tears of fear or anxiety any longer. These were tears of love; of joy.

“Is that a yes, then?” Jamie asked, needing to be sure.

Zahra smiled nervously and bashed at the tears on her face. “Yes, James Fraser. That’s a yes.”

Jamie was suddenly pulling her into his arms and kissing her as if his life depended on it. Zahra’s cheeks may not have been the only ones stained with tears. “Ye dinnae ken how happy you’ve made me,” Jamie whispered as he pressed his forehead to hers, and carded his fingers through her hair.

Zahra rubbed her hands against his face. “Oh, yes. Yes, I ken.”

Jamie smiled, and opened his eyes to meet hers, their foreheads still touching. “I need to tell Murtagh.”

“Is that what your mission was this afternoon?” Zahra asked, smiling. "All that planning?"

Jamie nodded. “Aye. While I was making arrangements, he retrieved my mother’s sash for me so I could have it embroidered for you.”

She looked down, took the scarf gently from him and inspected it, running her thumb over the embroidery at one end. "It's lovely. How--how do I wear it?"

Jamie took the scarf and placed it about her neck and shoulders. "Similar to a fichu," he explained as he crossed the end and gently tucked them into her bodice. "Though, perhaps, until I can properly declare our engagement, ye might want to wear it under yer bodice." Zahra nodded in understanding.

Jamie took her hands, holding them firmly in his as he raised each one to press a kiss to her knuckles. He then rested her hands against his chest, holding them there with one of his, while the other raised to touch her face. His thumb gently grazed the healed cut on her cheek that was almost invisible now. Zahra sighed softly and nuzzled her cheek into his hand. "Penny for your thoughts, lad?" She said, a teasing homage to the first time he asked her that question.

Jamie's lips turned up in a smile, and he met her eyes. "Just thinking about you, our future. I want to do this right... I need to clear my name."

Zahra leaned in to place a tender kiss on his lips. "I will help you if I can… Outlaw or not, though, I am with you," she said seriously. "We can be outlaws together if it comes to that. Where you go--I
will go. To the ends of the earth if needs be."

"To the ends of the earth," Jamie repeated then pulled her in for another kiss.

For the first time since they'd started kissing, their embrace did not immediately give way to this overwhelming need to have and to take. It was a tender, emotional embrace filled with warmth and affection and contentedness. He was not desperate to take her because he now knew that she was his. He now had the luxury of taking his time because they had all the time in the world. Their whole futures together, now.

"I love you, James Fraser," Zahra said when there was a momentary break in their kiss where Jamie had begun to kiss down her throat. Hearing those words on her lips did something to him, and it felt like a heavy vice that had been squeezing his chest suddenly loosened and he could breathe.

He leaned back and gripped her face in his hands. "And I love you, Leeloo Zahra."

"Leilani," she replied with a blush. "My full given name is Leilani Zahra Quigley. I was named after my mother. Leeloo is what--she used to call me."

Jamie sat back off his knees, against the wall and pulled Zahra into his arms. "Tell me about her?"

Zahra sighed and tucked herself against his side. "I remember she was--so beautiful. She had this really long blonde wavy hair and a smile that took up half her face. She had a beautiful voice and used to sing to me while she danced. Used to weave flowers into my hair." Zahra's eyes teared up and she rested her head on Jamie's shoulder and gripped his coat in her fist. "It's hard to remember the good… I was only five when I watched her die at the hands of the slavers who took me."

So it was slavers. Jamie pulled her even closer against him, holding her tight and pressing a kiss to her hair. "I was afraid it was slavers," he said softly. It explained so much, though. "This Jargen? He was your--"

"My master?" Zahra nodded. "Yeah. I was special to him. I didn't get the normal slave training like everyone else. I was honed, and conditioned to be his personal weapon. Isolated, brainwashed, tortured. All to make me stronger, better, faster." She took in a deep breath. "I'm sorry, can we--" she sat up and rubbed at her face, deliberately avoiding looking at him. She swallowed hard and bit her bottom lip. "I'm sorry. There's a reason I don't like talking about it, why I've not told Colum or Dougal. Just talking about it makes me feel sick… thinking about what I used to be… all the things I've done… I don't want anyone to think they can use me that way ever again."

Jamie reached for her, turning her to look at him. "Leeloo look at me, please?" She took in a deep breath but finally opened her eyes to meet his, her own brimming with unshed tears. "Your life hasnae always been your own, but what matters is how you chose to live when it was. I wish I could take all the bad away, but at the same time those experiences are what make us stronger, but they do not define us. All I see when I look at you is someone who is brave, compassionate, strong, intelligent, gifted, stubborn." They both smiled at that last one. "No matter what the circumstances were that shaped you, they are what made you the woman you are today. And I happen to be very much in love with that woman."

Zahra kissed him firmly on the lips. "Just make sure you remember all that when you start doubting yourself, Mr. Fraser."

Jamie smirked and brushed her hair behind her ear. "I'll try to remember that, Miss Quigley." It was a very foreign name to him, must be American. "How did your father survive the slavers?" He didn't mean to bring it back up but his curiosity was getting the better of him.
"He wasn't there." Apparently it was story time again. "My father was a Governor's son and my mother was a florist. Their marriage was something my grandmother was completely against from the start, so she had my mother sent away, not knowing she was pregnant with me. We struggled a lot, mother and her illegitimate child. We spent a lot of time drifting in backwater ports and such, but she always did right by me. Always protected me. Took care of me, even to the last."

Zahra took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "When I was rescued from Jargen and re-established my citizenship, my grandmother found out and started keeping tabs on me. She died last year but her machinations extended even beyond the grave when she dropped this on us in her will. My grandmother had told my father that Leilani, my mother, had run off with pirates, so he had no idea I even existed." As wild as it may sound, that was all honest to God truth. Zahra had long ago resigned herself to the fact that her life was a soap opera.

"Sir Adam Quigley," that's where her last surname came from. She had added it to her name several months ago. "He's still a Governor's son but he has his own estate and business now. I have a beautiful stepmother, who isn't the least bit wicked, and two half siblings."

"I hope I get to meet them one day," Jamie said with a grin.

Zahra's heart constricted in her chest. Unfortunately, she couldn't have her cake and eat it, too. She couldn't exist with one foot in each world. There was no straddling the fence in this scenario. "I hope so, too," she managed to say with a smile while fresh tears swam in her eyes.

Jamie moved to stand and helped her to her feet as well. He started tucking the tartan scarf under the fabric of her bodice so it was out of view but she was still wearing it. "Come with me," he said as he took her hand and led her back up the steps. She didn't bother asking where they were going, because frankly she would follow him anywhere at this point, and trusted he wouldn't lead her to harm. Plus, she rather enjoyed the mystery and intrigue.

Back in the hall, there was more lively music playing now, with a fiddler or two who'd joined Gwyllyn, and there was dancing and wine a plenty. Jamie tracked down Murtagh near the kitchens with a drink in his hand. "Murtagh!" Jamie declared.

"Aye!" The man turned, obviously several cups in and he offered a mug to Jamie. "Have a pint with me, boy." He then seemed to notice Zahra was there with him as well, and when he glanced down they were openly holding hands. He then seemed to gaze more intently to the hemline around her neck, where he spotted the faintest bit of tartan peeking out. "Auch, ya couldnae wait for me, lad?" Murtagh slapped Jamie in the arm, then pushed past him to wrap Zahra up in a fond embrace, where he whispered low in her ear. "You hurt him in any way, and I'll break your legs."

Zahra couldn't help but smile, and she returned the hug. "I would sooner cut off my own hand, old man." Murtagh smiled, actually smiled, then clapped her on the shoulder and offered her a mug.

He grabbed a fresh pint for Jamie and himself then held his aloft. "To finding family where'er they be."

"To family!" Zahra repeated.

"To the future," Jamie added and they tapped their mugs together, then took a drink.

Zahra impressed them both when she downed her entire mug in a few swallows. She then set her mug down and grabbed Jamie's hand. "Dance with me!" She all but commanded and Jamie shared a helpless expression with Murtagh, who just took Jamie's mug from him as he was pulled to the dance floor.
They were cheered and celebrated as they joined the others on the dance floor. Zahra found she rather liked Celtic music and dancing and aptly followed along as some of the ladies showed her how to do a jig or two. Zahra was a quick study and soon enough was able to join in when they started a partners folk dance. Rupert eventually cut in and she laughed as she danced with him and he cracked jokes. Murtagh even went a few laps with her before Jamie cut back in and shared a lively dance or two.

The air between them crackled, and sparked with passion and heat, as their bodies moved and touched. Soon enough they had managed to sneak away without anyone’s notice and had barely made it through Zahra’s chamber door before Jamie was pulling the laces from the bodice of her dress, fingers snagging in their attempt. Why did it have to be so complicated? Zahra personally couldn’t agree more, as she fumbled with the buttons on his coat, and untied the scarf around his neck. “Too--many--buttons,” she moaned between kisses as she worked to get his coat off.

Admittedly, they were both a little too drunk for this, a proven fact when they stumbled and ended up quite literally falling into bed, just not in the sexy way. Zahra started laughing, along with Jamie, who was looking down at her with glassy eyes. Zahra smiled and touched his face. “You’re drunk,” she said softly.

Jamie nodded in agreement. “Aye. So are you,” he countered with a grin and leaned in for another kiss, which ended with him nuzzling a lazy, drunken trail down her jaw to her throat, were he sort of buried his neck and settled in. “I love you,” he whispered against her neck.

Zahra combed her fingers through his hair and held him there. “I know,” she said with a cheeky grin, chuckling softly at her own joke. She knew full well it was only she who would find it funny, seeing as Han Solo wouldn’t exist for another 200 years or so. She continued carding her fingers through his hair, and they were both of them fast asleep a few moments later, still fully and completely dressed. Looked like Zahra’s braids and her dress managed to survive the night after all.
Zahra witnesses her first ever exorcism. She is not impressed. A few allies are made, but also one powerful enemy. All in a day in the life, right?

Jamie takes some risks in the name of love and eventually gets the answer he never knew he'd been waiting for.

I don't feel so bad about taking so long getting this chapter out to you as it is another long one. I again, could not find any appropriate places to reasonably break it up so enjoy.

Unlike the previous morning, Zahra found herself rousing slowly to a feeling of warmth and contentment as the light shone in from her window and the sleep cleared from her head. She still felt a little muggy from the night before, a mild headache, but was otherwise right as rain. She found herself being aggressively spooned near the edge of her bed and she couldn't help but chuckle softly at her predicament. She gently tapped Jamie on his arm to wake him, but he ended up just wrapping that arm further around her and pulling her in close, then pressing his face against the back of her neck and inhaling deeply. He whispered something in Gaelic against her ear, and that deep, husky brogue of his breathed against her skin, causing every hair on her body to stand on end.

Zahra moaned softly, then exhaled a hot puff of air as her back bowed slightly from the sensation, which only caused her to press her bottom back against Jamie’s hips behind her. The man let out a muffled moan of his own, as his other arm came around from under her neck and delved beneath the fabric of her bodice to cup her breast. Meanwhile, his other hand moved down over her hip and her thigh, where he started pulling and bunching the fabric of her skirts, lifting them higher and higher until his calloused palm pressed against painted skin, and pushed the fabric the rest of the way up until her entire hip was exposed.

He leaned back, desperately wanting to see her, but his curiosity was caught on the beautiful work of art that spanned her entire left thigh and hip. “What does this one mean?” Jamie asked as calloused hands and fingers brushed over the design of the two fish on her hip.

Zahra turned her face to watch him, watching her. “They’re Koi fish,” she spoke softly, her voice thick with emotion and lust. “In Japanese legend, they represent overcoming great adversity.”

Jamie unfurled his arms from around her and moved down her body so he could place several loving, open-mouthed kisses against her skin. He kissed a trail further down over her hip and her thigh. “And this?” fingers traced the blue masked figure on her calf.

Shit! How did she explain that one? Again, she decided the direct approach might be the best option. “That is—or was—Rick’s favorite American fairy-tale hero. He’s a mythological, super-soldier called
Captain America. He fights injustice and evil in all its forms.”

Jamie knew very little about America or any of its folk tales or myths, so he had no reason to question her about who the masked figure on her calf was. His only question was why have his face immortalized on her skin? “What does he mean to you?”

“Captain America?” Jamie nodded. Zahra took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I guess--since he was Rick’s idol, I got him to--kind of memorialize Rick, so it’s like even though he’s gone I still have a part of him wherever I go. If that makes sense?”

“Rick was--yer first love?” Jamie asked as he rested lazily on his arm and gently grazed his fingers up and down her leg, causing goose pimples to raise all over. Jamie remembered her speaking about Rick in the briefest sense. “He was the one who rescued you from slavery?” He clarified. Zahra sighed then merely nodded in response. Jamie laid a kiss on the back of her calf, just below the hollow of her knee. He nuzzled her leg a little as he made his way back up her body, whispering a Gaelic prayer of gratitude to the heavens as he went. He whispered his gratitude to this Rick who had saved Zahra’s life, and vowed to protect her as he’d done.

Zahra may not understand what he was saying but for reasons she could not explain, his words had her eyes watering with fresh tears, and she gripped at her chest when her heart suddenly felt near to bursting, but also so light and floaty at the same time.

Jamie had moved back to lay beside her and held her in his arms. “What was that?” She asked softly, as the feeling faded but the warmth remained.

“Hmm, I was just thanking him--for saving you,” he said as he pressed his cheek to her hair. “And I vowed to protect and defend you as he’d done... Asked him to watch over us, and--if he finds me worthy, to bless us as well.”

Zahra’s eyes had filled and overflowed with tears as Jamie explained his words. Is that what she had felt? Zahra was not normally a spiritual person, but she couldn’t explain the sensation that had just come over her other than calling it a spiritual experience. She’d had no idea what he was saying, only what she could feel. “I think--I believe he would--he does.” She sniffled softly and nuzzled her face against him. Jamie turned her face to look at him, then he leaned in to gently kiss her tears away before finding and sealing his lips to hers in a tender, loving kiss that was full of so much emotion and heat, that Zahra could barely breathe. “I love you,” she whispered between kisses.

Jamie leaned back, breaking the kiss for a moment, to hold her face and gaze into her eyes. A loving, affectionate smile spread across his lips as he brushed his thumb over the apple of her cheek. That had been the first time Zahra had ever said that without being prompted, or without Jamie having said it first. The first time she had initiated those words on her own. He pressed his forehead against hers, breathing slow and shallow. “Do you’ve any idea how badly I wish to make love to you right now? To hear you say those words as I make ye come apart?”

Zahra sighed as the hairs raised up all over her body once more. Oh, she had an idea. She opened her eyes to lock onto his. “Then why don’t you?” she asked. They both obviously wanted it.

Jamie swallowed hard and his hand moved down her side to curve over her waist and grab her hip. “’Cause, unlike any others, I am no’ goin’ anywhere anytime soon.” He pulled her against him, pressing their hips so closely together she could feel his hardness even through the multiple layers of their clothing. “And I’m no’ afraid to wait--for what is rightfully mine.” He pulled her thigh up over his hip and rolled their bodies together, making them both moan softly from the contact. “When I take you proper--” He said in a husky whisper as he rolled her to her back, kneeling between her thighs. “--and I will take you--properly,” he vowed as his hand gently circled her throat. He was
testing, seeing how she would respond, which Jamie took her gasp as a good sign. “–it’ll be as my wife.” His hips drove down against her, making them both dizzy with want and need from the endless friction that came without relief. “Ye ken?” he asked as he applied gentle pressure to his grip around her throat. The action elicited a very heady, very needy moan from the woman beneath him, but she did not answer him, so he snapped his hips forward for emphasis.

“Yes!” Zahra cried, answering his question out loud. “I ken… I ken!”

“Good,” he said before he wrapped his arms around her back and pulled her up against him as he sat back on his heels, making her straddle him as their bodies moved together. It was a cruel, cruel mockery of what Zahra desperately wished they were doing without their clothes on, but she couldn’t deny that it was so fucking hot and she was so unbelievably turned on that she didn’t doubt she would be able to come just like this. Jamie actually seemed hell-bent on that very thing as he held her so close she could feel his hardness press against her through the layers of their clothes, and she rolled her hips against him. His mouth kissed and his teeth grazed a trail down her neck and shoulder, where he suddenly pulled back the material of her bodice so his teeth could bite into the soft flesh there, mouth suckling hard, marking her as she’d done him the day before.

That one added sensation was enough to push Zahra over the edge. With a muffled, throaty moan that she tried to stifle by burying her face in his shoulder, Zahra came apart. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as if he were the only thing keeping her grounded, while her body was wracked with shivers and tremors of pleasure. Jamie gripped her hips, helping her grind roughly against him a few more times before he, too, was coming undone beneath her. His own moan was muted against her shoulder and the grip of his teeth lessened as his orgasm struck him with surprising force, making him whine softly against her shoulder.

They stayed that way for a moment, both trembling slightly from after-shocks, until Jamie moved to lay Zahra down on her back. He attempted to roll off of her, but Zahra had wrapped her legs and arms securely around him. “No, please? Stay.”

“I’ll crush you,” he said, questioningly.

Zahra shook her head. “No, you won’t.”

Jamie didn’t have the mind or the strength to deny or argue with her further, so he simply collapsed his weight down on top of her. Zahra sighed; she actually sighed, as if she were the epitome of contentment. Honestly, in that moment, she was. She felt secure, and safe with Jamie’s weight settled on top of her. It was difficult to explain. It was like Zahra had to always sleep with one eye open, ready to spring into action, even from a deep sleep, at the slightest provocation or notice. It was the burden of a soldier who’d seen and experienced the worst things in life like she had. When she was with Jamie, however, it was like that reflex, that super-hyper-vigilant overdrive she lived with day in and day out, asleep or awake, could finally take a break. It was like she could actually, legitimately just--relax, and breathe.

It was similar for Jamie. He had to remember that Zahra was no fragile spring flower here that could wilt at the slightest touch. So he relaxed, and let out his own sigh as Zahra held his head to her breast. He could hear her heartbeat that was rabbiting in her chest just as fast as his was, and it was a beautiful sound; one that threatened to lull him back to sleep if he didn’t take heed. He felt a similar calm and peace as to the one she did when he was with her. They eased each other’s burdens that way, it seemed.

Zahra felt tingly all over, and while it was nice, she was also sweating to death in all her layers. “Next time--can we please do that naked?” she asked with a huffy laugh.
Jamie snickered himself, and pressed a kiss to her chest. “Aye, we can... On our weddin’ night.” As tempting as she was, Jamie was determined to keep his vow. Even though he could easily take what Zahra was so willingly giving, he wanted to prove to her and himself that her worth to him went far deeper than simple physical gratification. To him, she was worth waiting for; worth making their bond official before God and man.

“Can our wedding night be tonight?” she asked, though she was surprised even at herself at how not joking she was about that.

Jamie lifted his head to look down at her, smiling. “And here I thought all lassies dreamed of being married in the Spring...” Which was two seasons away. He was teasing her, obviously, and she flicked his ear in reprimand, which made him actually react with a soft, “Ai!” as he reached for said ear.

“I am not all lassies. In fact, before I met you I used to believe I’d die an old maid with a pack of dogs as my only companions.” Because she hated cats. “I’ve never had the whole--fantasy wedding idealistics or anything of that nature. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

She was definitely not like any other lass, Jamie was well aware of that fact, but, honestly, considering everything he knew about her, it didn't surprise him that she believed she would never wed. It saddened him greatly, sure, but did not surprise him. She was a rare specimen and far too independent and outspoken for most men's liking. Jamie, however, seemed to love all that about her. Loved her strength and her spirit. Her tenacity, her bravery. She was not some wee little lamb or damsel in distress, desperate for him to save her. If anything, it was like she had saved him.

Before Jamie could answer her question about when they could get married, however, there came a rapping on her chamber door, which made them both startle the slightest bit. Zahra thought it might just be Rupert once more, but the voice that called to her was not what she expected. “Mistress Zahra?” It was Geillis Duncan. Zahra had completely forgotten that she had asked Geillis to meet her so they could forage in the garden for ingredients and supplies.

"Shit," Zahra whispered to herself. "I forgot we were going to the garden today." Jamie rolled off of her and clambered out of bed. “Just a moment!” Zahra called back as she crawled out of the bed as well, and straightened her skirts and such in the mirror. When Jamie was hidden out of sight behind the door, she unlocked and opened it to greet Geillis. “I'm sorry, Geillis, I completely forgot. Celebrated a little too much last night.”

Geillis took in Zahra's appearance, her rumpled dress, sex mussed hair, and the rosy flush of her cheeks, not to mention the slight musky smell that she detected when Zahra opened the door. With a smile, Geillis pushed her way into Zahra's chambers, not giving Zahra the chance to protest. "Oh, tha's a'right," she said. "I'll help ye wash and dress."

She turned and spotted Jamie, whom she already assumed would be there. She gave him a knowing look and a teasing wave.

"Isn't what?" She thought she had made her warning clear to young Jamie about the dangers of sullying Zahra's reputation, but apparently not.

"I've asked Zahra to marry me," Jamie clarified quickly.

"And I accepted," Zahra confirmed as she plucked the tartan sash from under her bodice to show Geillis. Geillis gently lifted the sash and ran her thumb over the embroidery.
"Well... Now, this does change things," Geillis said with a Cheshire grin directed Zahra's way. Geillis did note that they were both still completely dressed. "A'right. Off with ye now," the woman said to Jamie.

He was honestly grateful Geillis and Zahra were friends. Zahra needed someone she could trust, a friend and confidante that wasn't just him. He gave Geillis a grateful smile and moved to give Zahra a kiss. "I'll see you tonight at dinner?" He confirmed to which Zahra nodded. They shared one final kiss before Jamie poked his head out into the hall, and, finding it vacant, he slipped out and away.

Zahra closed and locked the door behind him, then turned to Geillis with a nervous smile. "Geillis, I-"

"Are you happy?" Geillis asked, interrupting her with a contemplative look, as if she were seeing into Zahra's very soul.

The brunette worried her bottom lip and nodded, smile widening into a blissful grin. "Honestly, and surprisingly, yes."

"He's not taken advantage of you?" Geillis probed further.

Zahra gave a huffy laugh and shook her head. "Unfortunately, no. He's been a true gentleman. He seems to have an iron will that insists on waiting til our wedding night."

Geillis suddenly beamed at her. "Good. And when will that be?"

Zahra shrugged. "I don't know, exactly. Dougal has still been very--cautious towards me." That was putting it very mildly. The man was practically venomous at times. "And with the Gathering and everything, there hasn't really been a good time to declare our intentions. He just proposed last night."

Geillis made a soft squeal and took Zahra's hands leading her to the bed. "I want to hear all about it... but first..." Geillis went to open the window to let some air in. She then helped Zahra prepare a light, refreshingly chilled bath.

While the ladies got Zahra ready for the day, bathing and dressing, Zahra regaled Geillis all about the concert last night, the song she sang that she realized she had chosen specifically for Jamie, then their trip down to her clinic and how beautiful Jamie's speech had been, and everything. It had been one of the best nights of Zahra's life.

After they exited her chambers, they made their way down to the kitchen where Angus was waiting. They grabbed a few bannochs for the road but otherwise did not stick around for the full meal, much to Angus's chagrin. The man whined and complained as he had to practically hoover down his breakfast to follow the ladies out of the castle and to the gardens.

"On my way here this morning I got stuck walking with that pompous windbag, Father Bain," Geillis said as she plucked a few herbs. "He plans to perform an exorcism on the Baxter boy." She suddenly gasped, which made Zahra turn in surprise before she could fully process what Geillis had said. "Hawthorn berries!" The redhead declared. "You rarely see them so late in season." The woman started plucking the berries and dropping them into her basket.

It was then that Zahra seemed to finally catch up to what Geillis had said before. "I'm sorry did you--did you say 'exorcism'?"

Geillis nodded. "Apparently, Tammas Baxter went to the Black Kirk with wee Lindsey MacNeil. Now the young fool is seized with the same evil." More demons and evil; holy gods, Zahra wanted...
to tear her hair out. She gazed at Geillis with a contemplative frown. “D’ye want some?” the woman asked.

Zahra shook her head. “No thank you.”

“What is it?” Geillis asked, concerned by her friend’s change in mood. She had been positively glowing and giddy that morning, which Geillis was pretty sure she knew what, or rather who had been the cause, but now she was downright sour. “What’s wrong with ye?”

“The boy, Tammas—he’s Mrs. Fitz’s nephew,” Zahra said. First, Glenna’s granddaughter was almost flogged, and now her nephew was struck with sickness. “Ok, so… When you say ‘seized with evil’ what exactly do you mean? Like, is he sick?”

Geillis made a face. “He’s not ill; he’s possessed.” Zahra sighed and shook her head. “Do you not believe in demonic possession, Zahra?”

Zahra huffed out her nose. “Do you?”

Geillis gazed at her for a long time, again, that same soul piercing gaze that made Zahra think that it was possible this woman could see right through her. “I believe there are powers beyond our ken,” Geillis said as the ladies continued their walk of the gardens, in search of useful herbs and plants and such. Geillis continued in a soft almost reverent tone. “Beyond what we can see, and hear, and touch.” Zahra stopped to pick a few medicinal roots and leaves. “Demon, faery, devil, it doesnae matter what name we put on them.” Zahra sighed heavily, looking downtrodden and lost. ”But surely ye believe in the powers of magic d’you not?”

The brunette shook her head. “I believe that ignorance is one of the gravest dangers we face in this world.”

“You mean to say, you’ve never found yourself in a situation with no earthly explanation?” Geillis asked.

Zahra stopped suddenly. That question hit a little too close for comfort. Could Zahra explain her fall through time? No. But neither could she exactly explain the radiation poisoning that had once caused her to de-age to her six year old self. Nor could she fully explain the phenomenon that had swapped her mind with her best friend and she’d been stuck in his body for a week. Some things had no earthly explanation, but that didn’t mean it was ‘magic’. There was so much about the universe they still didn’t know. Magic was intangible, but science. Science was real. Science she could see, could explain. Science had been able to explain the things that had happened to her, just as she was sure if they did a full scan of the stones at Craig na Dun, they might be able to explain what happened to her. Just like she believed that there had to be a scientific explanation for what had made young Lindsay and Tammas seem like they were possessed. “You have to admit—” she turned around to face Geillis. “It’s possible the boy is actually just sick and not—possessed... And if that’s the case, then perhaps there’s something you and I can do to help?”

Geillis adjusted the ties of her wool shawl to secure it closer about her shoulders. “People believe the boy is possessed, Zahra. You challenge that at your peril. I’ll not go near ‘im and neither should you.”

Unfortunately, sometimes telling Zahra she shouldn’t or couldn’t do something, was like reverse psychology, and meant that she would have the urge to do the very thing she was cautioned against. She refused to believe the boy was possessed by some demon bullshit. Whatever was making him sick had to be environmental. With renewed determination, Zahra marched out of the gardens.
“Oi!” Angus called after her. “Where are we goin’?... Oi!” He dashed off after her.

Zahra determinedly hiked her way through the forest down to the village. After asking around a little, she found her way to the home of Tammas Baxter. “Colum will no’ like ye interferin’ with the workings of the spirits,” Angus said, a touch of anxiety in his voice. “It’s not your place.” Zahra took in a deep breath to calm her temper, then turned to Angus with a stern glare. “I thought that might change yer mind,” Angus said. Zahra had just earned a way into Colum’s good graces and Angus was just starting to like her. He’d hate for her to do anything to screw that up.

Zahra huffed stubbornly. “Since when have you known me to understand my place?” She said before turning back around and going through the door. Angus stayed back and crossed himself to ward away evil.

What greeted Zahra on the other side of that door was horrific, to say the least. The boy was attached to his bed like some sort of psychotic monster and it broke her heart. She set her basket down and perched on the edge of the bed as she examined his eyes.

“My sister has gone to fetch Father Bain,” Glenna said as she held two small children in her arms, watching Zahra closely.

“Why is he tied?” Zahra asked as she tried to find the knot on one of the straps.

“In case he gets violent,” Glenna answered, sounding hopeless. The boy made a gasping, retching sound and Zahra held his face. “The demons ye ken?”

Zahra touched his face. “Tammas?... I’m here to help.” He was clammy, but not feverish. Skin was pale, but not hot. His eyes were sunken with dark blue circles. “Are his symptoms the same as the other boy?”

“Aye. Much the same, wee Lindsay was weak to begin with, so the devil took him much faster.” Glenna was near tears.

It wasn’t an infection, or he would be burning up with fever. “Are any of the others ill?”

“No. All right as rain,” Glenna said gratefully.

So it wasn’t contagious then, which meant it had to be something Tammas had personally come into contact with. Either something he touched, something he ate, or drank, or inhaled. His heart rate was slow, pupils pinpoints. Zahra knew what poisoning looked like, and if she had to guess that was what was happening here. Tammas had touched or ingested something that was making him sick. The same something that had made Lindsay sick. Something that was growing at Black Kirk. “Tammas?” She touched his cheek, trying to rouse him a little. “Tammas? What have you eaten recently? Was it something at the ruins?”

“He’s taken nothing but a bit of broth in the last day, and most of that he brought back up again” Glenna was trying to be helpful, but she was afraid.

“Nay, don’ come near meh,” the boy moaned in his sleep.

“He sees the demons even now,” Glenna said as she crossed herself.

“It’s all right,” Zahra tried to calm her. “He’s just hallucinating; it’s another symptom.” Zahra tried to pull at the binds. “Give me something to cut these ropes?”

“Nae, miss, I wouldnae do that!” Glenna was terrified.
“I should say not!” A deep voice called to them as the door opened and in walked a stern looking man and another woman.

“What’re ya doin’, Glenna? Lettin’ a stranger in at a time like this?” A woman asked Glenna. It had to be Mrs. Baxter, Zahra assumed.

“Mistress Zahra is a healer, and a good one!” Glenna defended. “She may be able to help!”

Zahra felt her skin crawl as the father approached the boy, pressed his rosary to the boy’s forehead, and marked an invisible cross on it. He also spoke something in Latin.

“Mrs. Baxter,” Zahra said. "Tammie has been poisoned, not possessed. He needs to be untied and fresh air needs to be let in." She was trying to appeal to the boy’s mother, who was sobbing as the priest splashed holy water on him. “I believe I can help him; just give me a chance?”

Mrs. Baxter and Mrs. Fitz shared a look, and Zahra was hopeful they may see reason, but it seemed superstition and nonsense had a stronghold in this house. “Nae, Miss. Ya better stand back and let the Father do his work.”

Dammit! Zahra stepped back and glanced from Father Bain, to the boy, to Glenna, and back again before she marched out the door. As she’d said, fucking ignorance was one of the most dangerous weapons facing her in this age. The boy was poisoned and he needed to be cured, not exorcised. She glanced at Angus, who actually looked mildly concerned, but she ignored him as she crossed her arms and marched back in the direction of Leoch castle.

Zahra felt deflated and disgusted when she got back inside the halls of Leoch. “Did ye feel a chill when you got near ‘im?” Angus asked.

“What do you mean?” Zahra responded.

“Well, they say you can feel Old Nick’s presence by a chill in the air.”

She sighed. She was surrounded by ignorant fools. “Sorry, to disappoint you, but no. There was no chill.”

“Was he speaking in tongues, then?” Her guard persisted.

“Again, no. He was just a harmless, sick little boy. Probably terrified at what they were doing to him.”

“Well, I heard tell that wee Lindsay howled in five--” Angus caught sight of Rupert in the kitchen, in his cups. “--lazy, fat bastard.”

Zahra stopped and saw what had given Angus pause and she smirked when the other man waved at her with his mug. “You--wait right there.” Angus ordered.

Zahra sighed, for once doing as she was told, until someone grabbed her by the arm. She gasped as she was pulled into a hidden alcove, and a moment later Jamie had his hand over her mouth and was shushing her gently. Mischief was plain in his eyes and on his lips.

“Are you mad? Angus is right there,” Zahra whispered.

Jamie chuckled and pressed her firmly against the wall with his body. “Hmm, are you wearing it?”
He teased as he nuzzled his nose against her throat.

“Wearing what?” she teased back.

Jamie smacked her bottom and lifted his head to meet her eyes. “Ye know exactly what I mean.” He pressed his hand to her chest, teasing at the fabric of her fichu. “Are you wearing it?”

Zahra sighed, and reached her hand inside under her fichu and her bodice then pulled a bit of tartan loose for Jamie to see. “Yes.”

Jamie held her face in his hands and nuzzled his nose against hers. “Good,” he stole a heated kiss, which Zahra eagerly returned.

“He’s gonna be back any second,” Zahra mumbled against his mouth and started pushing on his chest.

Jamie eventually let her go, albeit reluctantly. “I’ll see you at dinner,” he promised and disappeared out of view just as Zahra stepped back out to wait for Angus.

“Good. Very good. Ye ken how to obey a man’s orders for once,” Angus said as he lovingly pet a bottle of wine. “Move.”

Zahra sighed and made her way down to the clinic to put all of her gathered herbs and such away. Her thoughts dwelt heavily on Tammas, frustrated beyond all belief that Fitz would not let her examine the boy. Frustrated even more at herself because, even if she could somehow discover what had poisoned him, did she have the resources or the ability to cure him? She needed to go to Black Kirk to figure out what was poisoning people, but how?

With a heavy sigh, she removed the thick woolen scarf she had been wearing, and adjusted her fichu and the hidden sash underneath so it was out of sight once more. She realized then, gazing out her small window, that she hadn’t gone for a run in two days. She supposed that the lack of exercise may just be contributing to her sour mood. “I’m going to go for a jog before dinner, Mr. Mohr. Would you care to join me?”

“A what?” he asked, not believing what he had just heard, but following the lass out of the castle anyway. It would be his hide if Dougal found out he’d lost her.

“A jog. You know, to exercise?”

Angus thought Rupert had been joking about that. He had no idea the man had been serious. “Auch, no. No! I’m puttin’ my foot down!”

“Suit, yourself.” She didn’t delight in the idea of running in a dress, but the grounds were far too busy for her to get away with wearing slacks unnoticed. In the wee hours of the morning when no one was awake that was one thing, but now? She’d have to manage in her petticoats. After all, she’d done far more strenuous things while wearing a corset in her life. She gave Angus a teasing wave of her fingers before she hefted her skirts a bit and took off in a light jog through the castle courtyard.

Angus stubbornly held his place, leaning with arms crossed against the castle wall, his bottle of port held in his arms like a baby. He watched her, thinking he didn’t care, but then he realized how angry Dougal would be at him for letting her run free, so he groaned, set his bottle down, and took off after her.

She kept her exercise at a light jog, still feeling the pain from her back, that combined with her general weariness from the past few days had her ending her jog early and heading back, much to
Angus’s relief. “Rupert was right,” he said, breathless and wheezing. “You are daft.”

Zahra sighed, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Maybe. But you gotta admit it feels good, yeah?”

Angus just rolled his eyes and shook his head. Zahra made a huffy laugh and headed up the stairs to her room. She needed to freshen up a bit before dinner. “See you at dinner?” she said, to which Angus nodded and headed towards the kitchens and a tankard of ale.

When the dinner bell rang, she joined the others down in the main hall, laughing at Rupert and Angus bickering. She made up a plate for herself, then found Jamie who waved her over. She sat next to him with a heavy sigh, and a tired smile. “Everythin’ a’right?” he asked as his hand gently touched her thigh below the table.

She wished she could just snuggle up against him in that moment but they had to behave. Still, she nudged him softly with her shoulder in response. “Yes. Just been a trying afternoon.”

“I heard ye visited the Baxter’s home today,” Jamie said, taking his hand back and reaching for his drink.

Zahra nodded. “Lot of good it did. Neither Fitz nor Mrs. Baxter would allow me to examine the boy.”

“Ye cannae save everyone, a graidh,” Jamie said as he brushed his shoulder against hers.

She gently pressed her forehead to his for just a brief moment. “I know that. He’s just one boy, though. He’s Fitz’s family. That makes him family.” She took in a deep breath and exhaled a sigh.

It was inspiring to see how much Zahra genuinely cared about others, even strangers; how selfless, and driven she was by this need to make the world and the people around her better. Jamie did not know many people in this world who weren’t driven by their own selfish needs, even he, on occasion, was more concerned with himself than anyone else. Even now, he didn’t want Zahra to have to deal with this because of how it could affect their future together. “Aye, lass. This world doesnae deserve you,” he said softly and lifted his hand to brush the hair off her forehead.

Her eyes closed gently at the touch, but when she opened them again, she caught sight of Dougal, at the head table, staring at them over the rim of his wine goblet. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat, which Jamie took as his cue. When he looked where she was looking, he, too, saw Dougal staring, so he lifted his glass to his uncle in salute, though it was not just Dougal he was saluting. Colum was watching, too. She and Jamie exchanged a knowing look before Colum raised his glass in Jamie's direction. Dougal stared at his brother as if he didn’t know him, then suddenly set his glass down, stood up and walked away. Well, stormed out was more like it.

Jamie watched Dougal go, frowning softly before he turned back to Zahra, who had been watching the whole spectacle with interest. "What was that about?” She asked.

Jamie took a sip from his glass, then reached over and took her hand in his. "I informed Colum of my intentions this afternoon and, for what it's worth, he's given his blessing.” Zahra's brow furrowed and her focus turned to the dais at the front of the dining hall where she met Colum's gaze. He offered her a pleasant smile, then tipped his glass in her direction with a slight nod of his head. He then turned his attention back to his wife and son as they chatted merrily over their supper.

Zahra looked back at Jamie and he squeezed her hand before lifting it to his lips to press a chaste kiss to her knuckles. It may not be shouting their feelings from the rooftops, but it was a sight better than
having to hide even the smallest gestures of affection. It was such a relief to know she had at least one of the Lairds MacKenzie who didn't utterly distrust or despise her. Geillis knew and approved. Murtagh also knew, and approved as well. Rupert knew. Colum now knew... Soon the whole village would know, no doubt as gossip seemed to travel faster in this place than wildfire, but Zahra couldn't bring herself to care so much in that moment. Jamie had said he wanted to court her properly, and he had actually gone and done it.

They maintained polite conversation over dinner, with Murtagh, Rupert, Angus, and anyone else within earshot who bothered to join in. Zahra told another engaging tale about a time her friend, Jim, had brought an adorable mouse-like creature back from one of their travels. They named it Tribble, and apparently it had been pregnant, ended up spawning like mad, and infested the ship. They'd eventually caught all the little buggers, and managed to save the ship, but it had been treacherous there for a while. Angus, as usual, called horse shit, but he'd enjoyed the tale just like everyone else.

After dinner, Zahra offered to help clean up, but Jamie had other ideas. "I was actually hoping ye'd take a walk with me," he asked which Zahra had accepted. Jamie managed to convince her 'guards' that she didn't need watching while in his company, to which they had politely acquiesced.

Arm in arm, the couple enjoyed a leisurely stroll along the ramparts of the castle, where they witnessed the final vestiges of the setting sun to the west. "Thank you," Zahra said as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"What for?" Jamie asked as he wrapped his arm behind her back while they watched the sunset.

"For everything. For being you. For--letting me be me. For--accepting me for who I am. For trusting me."

Jamie turned, reaching for her to turn her to face him as well. He held her face in his hands, thumb brushing her cheek. "In that case, I should really be thanking you... For being you. For letting me be me, for accepting me for who I am and trusting me." He smiled slyly at her as he threw her own words back at her. Zahra let out a huffy laugh and worried on her bottom lip.

Just as he was leaning in to kiss her though, there was a deliberate, gravely throat clearing behind them. Still holding Zahra loosely in his arms, Jamie turned and they both saw Dougal, standing at the bottom of the stairs, seeming almost embarrassed at having interrupted. "Uh, I just--" he cleared his throat and coughed softly into his fist. "I was wondering, Mistress Zahra, if ye may like to visit Geillis Duncan, the fiscal's wife; to restock yer shelves before the Gathering."

Well, this was a good sign, wasn't it? Dougal being civil to her even after having caught her and Jamie nearly in the act? She glanced up at Jamie who only nodded encouragingly. A genuine, but soft smile lifted her lips and she gave Dougal a nod. "Yes, I would appreciate that very much." She would love to see Geillis again as well.

"I'll be headin' to the village tomorrow morning. I'll take ye with me to Mistress Duncan’s." Dougal nodded then turned to leave without another word.

"Thank you, Dougal," Zahra called after him, to which he did not respond.

She grinned up at Jamie, who just pinched her chin to hold her face as he leaned in to steal a kiss. With his arm still about her shoulders, the two continued their walk, which ended at the bottom of the stairs that led to her room. With the now 'public' status of their relationship, sneaking off for private moments was going to be much more difficult because now everyone was watching, which was insanely evident with all the eyes Zahra could feel on her and how she had caught a few of the scullery maids speaking out from the kitchens when she and Jamie had gone by. For a moment,
Zahra almost wished they could go back to it being their secret, but the cat was already out of the bag.

"Goodnight, Leeloo," Jamie said as he brushed his palm against her cheek.

"Goodnight, Jamie," she repeated just before Jamie leaned in to press a tender but chaste kiss on her lips that had them both desperate and wanting for more but unable to do so when it ended way too soon and hadn't even had a tiny hint of tongue.

With a heavy, wistful sigh, Zahra turned and made her way upstairs. Once in her room, she leaned back against the door and pressed her hands to her stomach and chest, which were all a flutter with warm, tingly feelings. Zahra had never felt this way about anyone or anything. Not only that, but there wasn't a single lover in her life who had ever treated her the way Jamie treated her. Like she was valued, cherished, worthy. As much as she had loved Rick, she couldn't tell you how often he had made her feel like an utter disappointment because she didn't act the way he wanted her to, because she didn't comprehend how to express herself like a normal human woman. His love had come with many conditions; conditions that she constantly struggled with, and often failed to meet.

Jamie loved her and was not afraid to admit it; did not expect her to fall into some ideal of how he supposed a woman should be; wasn't trying to force her into a role or behaviors that were foreign and uncomfortable for her. It was like, for the first time in her life, Zahra actually understood the meaning of the term unconditional love. She had only had to fall back in time about 500 years to find it.

She might have gone to bed alone that night, but, for once, she did not go to sleep feeling lonely.

She had roused early the next morning and managed to get in a quick run with Rupert before she'd bathed and dressed and met Dougal in the castle courtyard. He had a horse for her, but did not say much by way of greeting before they were on the road, making their way down to the village together. Dougal escorted Zahra to the Duncan residence, where he planned to leave her to attend to business of his own. "Thank you, Mr. MacKenzie," she had said to him again, to which he just nodded curtly before leaving.

Inside, Zahra was greeted by her friend with a warm hug before Geillis showed her around her house, then to the redhead's apothecary. "I'd say ye need to lay in a goodly amount of white willow bark," Geillis said as she made her way over to one of her shelves and started selecting some items to put in Zahra's basket. "It eases a whiskey headache." The ladies exchanged a little giggle together. Scotsmen definitely liked their drink.

"I take it my little adventure with Dougal this morning was your doing?" Zahra asked as she looked over all the assorted bottles and bobbles what adorned Geillis's shelves, reading their labels carefully and selecting ones she thought would be useful.

"As I told ye, there's many things in this world we cannae explain." Geillis was at her fireplace now, scooping some sort of liquid from a cauldron into a bottle for Zahra. "I heard ye made a visit to the Baxters after all?"

Zahra continued to sort through the various herbs, poultices, potions, and powders that Geillis had in her shop. "I did, yes. Father Bain was--" He had looked and sounded more evil than the supposed spirits he was exorcising. "Well, I've never seen an exorcism before it was--difficult to watch."

"Was the exorcism successful?" Geillis asked.
Zahra glanced up at the redhead and shrugged. “I don’t know. I left before he was finished.” She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I can tell you, though—if Tammas were my child I would never have left him at the mercy of that man.”

“Steer well clear of him, Zahra!” Geillis cautioned her with a serious edge to her tone. “There’s no mercy in his Bible, nor his heart… He takes the view that every woman since Eve is a born temptress who should be beaten daily by her husband to keep evil at bay.”

“Holy fuck,” Zahra whispered in response, her face distorting in disgust. She covered her mouth and shook her head softly. “I’m sorry.” She hadn’t meant to say that out loud, just what Geillis was describing sounded absolutely terrifying. Geillis was looking at Zahra as if she knew some delightful secret, but Zahra had her back turned as she moved to sit on the bench next to Geillis. “Sometimes… I can’t believe this is really the world we live in, and then I remember that I’m just a stranger in a strange land.”

“I know it cannae be easy, but is where you come from—is America so different?”

Where she came from, gender was practically non-binary and, in many species, it didn’t even exist. Gender roles, stereotypes, while they existed, they were almost a thing of the past. Men could wear dresses to work. Women could command entire legions of ships and officers. The only thing that was giving Zahra any voice in this place was the fact that she had skills as a healer. None of her other skills could help her succeed in this world, unless she happened to throw in with pirates or something, which she refused to even consider. Zahra may be chaotic good, but she was still good. “I guess I’m a special case. I wasn’t raised in America. I was raised in captivity as a slave until I was rescued about fifteen years ago. Ever since I’ve served loyally on my father’s ship and he’s treated me more like a son than a daughter. So, yeah.” She sighed again. That was the same story she’d told Colum. “I suppose where I’m from is very different.”

Geillis had moved to sit next to her and as she spoke, the redhead moved her hand to gently touch Zahra’s back, pulling back the scarf she had around her neck and grazing her fingers over the scar tissue at the top of her bodice. Zahra sighed and closed her eyes at the almost calming sensation.

“Does Jamie know?” Geillis asked as she continued to gently trail her fingertips over Zahra’s shoulder, and back.

Zahra nodded. “Yes. I’ve told him—everything.” Well, not everything. She wasn’t about to go declaring herself a time traveler to anyone. Not even Jamie, which she just realized meant that their entire relationship would be based on lies. Even if it was a lie of omission, it was still a lie.

“Everything?” Geillis asked as her hand now rested on Zahra’s cheek and they gazed into each other’s eyes. Why was it every time they were alone like this Zahra was almost overcome with this urge to just spill her guts to this beautiful woman? It was something about her eyes, that smile, that look. Like Geillis was the Mona Lisa and she knew something no one else did.

Before Zahra could say anything, though, a loud commotion suddenly caught both their attention. Zahra stood and moved to gaze out the attic window. “What’s going on?” A crowd of people were shouting as a very young boy was being led by the neck by Father Bain into a building across the street.

“Lad was caught stealing, most like,” Geillis said with a very flippant attitude and tone. “Usually is with the Tanner’s lads.” The redhead moved around to casually lay back on a brocade chaise. “They’ve brought him to Arthur to dispense justice.” Zahra’s brow furrowed heavily in concern as she sat on the closest chair. “If his breakfast had agreed with him this morning,” Geillis continued. “Lad might have got off with a whipping. But since he’s most likely costive or flatulent, the lad will probably lose his hand.”
Zahra’s eyes widened in horror yet again. “For stealing food?” It wasn’t an unheard of punishment to Zahra. Her years as a slave she had seen worse punishments for less but still. This was supposedly civil society. She was beginning to think she understood why they were sometimes called the dark ages, though that was more medieval than now, wasn’t it? Geillis shrugged as if it were entirely ordinary. “That’s horrifying.”

There came a shuffling of heavy feet, and an unpleasant moaning sound from the stairs. Zahra stood up out of her chair as a portly gentleman ascended the staircase to the attic. “I need some peppermint, my dearest.” He bemoaned as he made his way to Geillis who reached for the man with a beautiful smile. “I cannae render judgment with a roiling gut.” Geillis helped him to sit then went to fetch one of her medicinals for the man, whom Zahra realized must be Geillis’s husband. This ‘Arthur’ that was going to pass judgment on the boy. ‘Going to’, being the operative word. Not ‘had already’.

“So, you haven’t decided on a punishment for the boy yet?” Zahra asked.

The man looked up at Zahra as if he hadn’t even known she was there, and in his pain maybe he hadn’t. “This is Leeloo Zahra,” Geillis answered the man’s unspoken question. “From up at the castle.”

“Oh, yes.” He was looking at Zahra like she were a piece of meat and Zahra had to fight the urge to cross her arms in disgust. “Yes, of course.” Geillis was handing him a mug to drink a moment later. “Ah, thank ye, my darling.” He drank the cocktail back in one swallow, and immediately began to break wind. “Ah, I believe it’s working already.”

Zahra covered her nose, trying not to show her disgust. “I’m not sure what evidence there is against the boy, but--”

“He’s confessed, actually,” Arthur interrupted her. “Stole two bannochs from his employer. Father Bain is arguing for taking his hand. Says it’s the only way to save his immortal soul.”

Of course he was. It did not surprise Zahra that the man who thought it was acceptable to latch a sick boy to a bed, would have no qualms with taking another starving little boy’s hand for eating a couple biscuits. Holy fucking shit, how could this be reality right now? This was a fucking nightmare! “He’s just a child,” Zahra managed to state calmly even though every part of her being wanted to lash out at these people. “A starving child, from the sounds of it. Are you really going to mutilate him for eating a couple biscuits?”

“Auch, away!” Arthur declared.

Zahra looked up and her and Geillis locked eyes. Geillis didn't want to intervene, but with a soft roll of her eyes, she patted her husband’s shoulder and moved to kneel before him. “Arthur,” she began in a sultry voice, as she reached for her husband’s hands. “Imagine. If our own union had been blessed, then how would you feel if your son were taken so? Surely it was but hunger what made the lad take to thievery.”

“Aye… Aye,” Arthur was all but moaning, puddy in her hands.

“Can ye not find it in your heart--” Geillis pressed her hand to his chest. “--to be merciful?” She then touched his neck, his face. “And you the soul of justice?” Oh, she was good.

He lifted a hand to touch her cheek, and Geillis smiled. “Oh, my sweet, tender heart.” Geillis giggled girlishly. She was either really, seriously in love with him, or a really good actress. Zahra, unfortunately, knew this game and this role well and she could see through it just as Geillis seemed able to see through her. “Since he’s confessed, I cannae let ‘im go. But perhaps, one hour in the
pillory, and one ear nailed?... Uh huh.”

Geillis smirked, and pressed her hands against his thighs. “It is you who are tenderhearted,” she whispered as she gazed lovingly into his eyes. Oh yes. She was very good.

Arthur brought her hand to his lips and gave it a deep kiss, before he stood, breaking more wind as he moved. Geillis watched him go. “I’ve reached a decision Father Bain…” They heard the man say as he disappeared from view.

Geillis turned to Zahra with a grin. “There… Easily done. The man has no notion of guile,” she said as she took her perch on the chaise lounger once more.

Zahra knew what a pillory was, and one ear nailed could only mean one thing that Zahra could imagine. Again, such types of punishments were not entirely foreign or unheard of to her, just, yet again, not often in civil society. Still, having to suffer his ear being nailed to something and giving himself a cool new scar when he freed himself from it, was definitely a helluva lot better than losing his entire hand. Zahra had to pick her battles here. This was a win, and no mistake. “Thank you, Geillis. It’s still horrifying to think about that being done to a child, but--” These were horrifying times.

“Better than losing a hand,” Geillis finished for her. Zahra nodded as she crossed her arms over her chest and moved to stand to gaze out the window where the commotion was picking up again. Zahra watched with anxiety roiling in her gut as Bain led the boy through the crowd, to the pillory in the town square. The boy was sitting on a stool with his head against the side of the stocks, and a burly looking man with a hammer and nail climbed the stairs.

Zahra had tears filling her eyes and she was biting her thumbnail as she watched, trembling slightly. She flinched when the first stroke of the hammer pierced the boy’s ear and he screamed. She closed her eyes and a tear fell from each of them as the hammer struck and the boy screamed again. And again. She opened her tear-filled eyes to see father Bain stroke the boy’s hair then walk away. She felt nauseous and, when Geillis touched her shoulder, she jumped.

“Are ye all right, Zahra?” Geillis asked.

Zahra sniffled and nodded her head, bashing the woolen mittens around her wrists against her eyes to dry them. “Yes, I’m fine. We should--get these herbs and things pounded. I don’t want to keep Mr. MacKenzie longer than his business demands.”

Geillis handed Zahra a mortar and pestle. “Then we can go downstairs and have a nice glass of port… and tell each other all our secrets.”

Zahra smiled and the two worked together to prepare all the herbs, medicinals, potions, and poultices Zahra was going to be taking with her to stock her own shelves back at the castle. When they were finished, and all her new ingredients packed away in bottles and parchments, and loaded securely into her satchel, the ladies did, in fact, retire downstairs to have a couple glasses of port. Zahra had only managed a few sips before the view out the parlor window took up all her focus. The poor boy was sitting there, being teased by young cretens. It was despicable and every fiber of her being wanted to go out there, pull the nail from his ear to free him, and yell at every single person how awful and evil they were for mocking the plight of an innocent boy.

“You do puzzle me, Zahra,” Geillis’s voice startled her from her inner musings.

“Hmm?” She said, smiling and turning to give Geillis her attention. “How so?”
“One might think you don’t have pillories or punishment where you come from,” Geillis stated.

Zahra smirked and shook her head. “Oh, I am very well educated in the use of pillories and punishment, just not something I ever expected to see in--civil society.”

“Surely, your New York cannæ be much different?”

Zahra shook her head. “For all I know, it might be. I’ve not been there long. I’ve been on my father’s ship. We’ve sailed many places, but--I’ve not seen a punishment like that since before I was rescued. Those types of--punishments--” She really wanted to say torture “--they were things reserved for disobedient slaves, to ingrain obedience through pain and fear.” She was trembling slightly as she took a sip from her glass. “No child should ever be terrified in such a way, least of all by those who claim to love them, or have concern for their soul.” Zahra downed the rest of her glass in one swallow, just as there came a knock at the parlor door.

“What--is it?” Geillis asked through gritted teeth. They were just getting to the good stuff and now to be interrupted.

Her maid apologized then stood back to make way for a young gentleman. “In here.”

“Mistress Duncan,” Jamie greeted as he entered the parlour. Zahra’s heart immediately started fluttering in her chest at the sight of him. He removed his beret, as he turned his gaze to Zahra and her smile almost made her go weak in the knees. “Mistress Zahra,” he said, noticing the tears that were giving her eyes a glassy appearance. His brow furrowed in concern and Zahra shook her head.

“Mr. MacTavish,” Geillis returned the greeting, watching them both with a beguiling smirk.

“Dougal was called back to Leoch. I’m sent to fetch ye,” he said to Zahra with a tender smile. “Brought yer cloak to keep you warm.” He handed her the thick tartan cloak she had left with her horse.

“Mistress Zahra was just telling me all about her unusual childhood upbringing,” Geillis said as she got up from her chair. “Why don’t you have a glass of port, and join us?”

Jamie glanced at Zahra. He could now understand the tears if what they were talking about was indeed what Jamie thought they may have been talking about. Jamie knew full well the spectacle that was waiting right outside. Had Zahra witnessed it? Had it reminded her of her own torture? The way he’d glimpsed her so intently focused out the window as he came in, he was thinking perhaps it had. Jamie set the cloak down on the back of the nearest chair and reached for her, pulling her into his arms, then holding her face gently in his hands. “Are ye all right?” he asked softly.

The anxiety induced nausea she had been feeling earlier was back suddenly, which made her insanely grateful for Jamie’s unexpected presence. Her hands reached out to grip the lapels of his frock coat and she nuzzled her face into his hand. “I’m fine. They were gonna cut off his hand.” She swallowed hard, blinking back the tears that threatened before she turned to look at Geillis. “Geillis managed to--persuade Arthur to lessen his sentence.”

Geillis was holding two full glasses of port as Jamie turned to look at her. She smiled sweetly and extended a glass to Jamie. The man smiled politely but shook his head. “More time, I would,” he declined politely, then took Zahra’s hand in his own. “But we should leave or we’ll get naught but scraps for our dinner.” Zahra sniffled and nodded in understanding.

She walked over and gave Geillis a very tight, very fond embrace. “Thank you, Geillis. Your hospitality and your friendship have meant the world to me.”
“As has yours, Zahra,” Geillis said returning the hug. “Don’t forget these!” Geillis said as she grabbed Zahra’s satchel and the basket that were loaded with supplies. Geillis touched her hand to Zahra’s cheek and smiled. “Don’t be a stranger now, ye ken?”

Zahra nodded, smiling. “We’ll do it again, soon. I promise. Next time you can come to me and regail me all about your childhood.” Jamie had her coat over one arm and he extended his hand for her to take as he escorted her out of the Duncan’s house.

Out on the street, Jamie helped Zahra into her cloak, and relieved some of the burden by taking her satchel from her to hoist over his own shoulder. He then took her hand again, not in the least bit concerned about the small display of affection being seen in public. It was just hand-holding but Zahra assumed it would be a big to-do in a puritanical town such as this.

The horse was not far, but Zahra could not take her gaze off the boy still pinioned to the pillory. “How much longer will he have to stay there?” Zahra asked as Jamie loaded their supplies onto the horse.

“He can leave any time he wants. His hour is long done. Just the lad’s not got up the courage to tear his ear from the nail.”

Zahra’s hand squeezed in the fabric of Jamie’s coat once more. “They’re going to make him tear himself loose?” It was better than losing a hand, but it was still awful and Zahra couldn’t stand it.

“Aye. He’s still a bit nervous but he’ll set his mind to it soon enough.” Jamie said it so casually, it made Zahra want to hit something. Jamie wasn’t who she was angry at, it was Father Bain. It was this place.

“You have strong fingers,” Zahra said, seemingly at random.

Jamie obviously did not understand why she was asking the question, but his mind immediately went to a dirty place. “Aye… Though ye nearly broke ‘em t’other night, when ye--”

“Not what I’m talking about,” she said as she clicked her tongue and slapped his shoulder in reprimand, then pointed at the boy on the pillory.

Jamie seemed to catch on as he watched the boy as well. “Oh… Aye.” He met Zahra’s gaze and knew he would do anything in the world for her, even if it meant risking the ire of the village by freeing a disobedient boy. He brushed his thumb against her cheek, and gave her a wink before he made his way to the pillory. “Now, then, novelli. Got yerself in a right swivet, have you no?”

Just as Jamie’s hand touched down atop the boy’s head, Zahra moaned suddenly, and lifted her hand to her forehead. “Ooh, oh… Ah!” She feigned as if she were fainting, swooning on her feet before falling completely backward and knocking over a fire pit in the process and calling everyone to gather around her to help. It was in that moment of prime distraction, Jamie yanked the nail free, which caused the boy to shout, thinking Jamie was gonna tear his ear off, but then, suddenly, the pain was gone. “Away home!” Jamie ordered the stunned boy.
Meanwhile, one Geillis Duncan watched on from her parlor window, grinning at the couple’s theatrics.

“She’ll be all right.” Jamie hurried to help Zahra to her feet. Zahra continued acting the part of the woman with the weak constitution. “Just doesnae like the sight o’ blood.” Which was funny, considering Zahra’s known ‘profession’ in this time. Jamie held her close as he escorted her back to their horse.

Zahra worried on her bottom lip, before a smile lifted one corner of her mouth. “Thank you, Jamie. I know that was risky.”

Jamie shared her crooked smirk. “Ye wouldnae expec’ me to be less bold than a wee seafaring maiden, now would ye?”

Zahra turned her head and met his gaze briefly before turning and gripping the lapel of his coat. “Would you be willing to take another risk with me?” she whispered lowly so only he could hear.

Jamie exhaled through his nose, and lifted his hand to touch her cheek. He would honestly follow her to the ends of the earth; through hell and back if she asked him to. It was a special kind of power she had over him, but somehow he expected she would just as easily do the same for him.

“You know the Black Kirk?” she said and Jamie’s heart fell to his feet, which Zahra seemed to be able to sense so she hurried to try and explain herself and ease his worries. “I know--I know it’s asking a lot… Maybe too much, and I would not blame you for denying me… But I know it isn’t evil spirits making people sick, Jamie.” She took in a breath and exhaled a sigh. “I know what poisoning looks like and I’m telling you that boy was poisoned… but I can’t help him or anyone else who might suffer the same fate until I know exactly what is poisoning them.”

Jamie sighed again, then met Zahra’s gaze and held it intently for a long moment. Jamie was better educated than many of his Scottish kin. He didn’t believe in demons much himself, but it was better to err on the side of caution. Zahra, however, seemed to be even more educated, smarter even than him and maybe his entire clan combined. If she wanted to find these ‘demons’ then Jamie would help her. “All right, a graidh. I’ll take ye.” They were definitely going to miss supper at this rate.

It wasn’t a terribly long ride to the Benadictine ruins, and an even shorter walk to the ‘Black Kirk’. Zahra was honestly amazed and awed by the ruins themselves, they were so beautiful. They made their way through an archway that must have once been an entrance to the building but was just a wall now. “It’s so--peaceful here. Nothing like I expected.” With a name like Black Kirk she had expected some war ridden, smokey cesspool. Not this. “How could anyone be afraid of this place?”

Jamie, too, marvelled, not at their surroundings, but at the woman herself. Seeing her utter delight and joy of the place was more enchanting than the beauty of the nature around them. He approached her slowly and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. “With you here to protect me?” He teased, speaking quietly against her ear. “Satan doesnae stand a chance.” He lifted his hand to hold her face and leaned in to steal a warm, sensual kiss… Which she broke much too soon for his own liking.

“You’re trying to distract me,” she accused.

“Is it working?” he asked with a smirk. He really didn’t want to be here.

“Maybe. But seriously,” she said as she pried herself away from his tempting arms and lips. “This place is like a beautiful summer getaway.”
“Aye, well,” he approached another archway that had a gate covered in vines. “They say Satan’s clever. He’d hardly catch many unsuspecting souls if he laid his traps in bogs and tunnels, now would he?”

Zahra turned and looked at him, her smile fading slightly. “Do you--actually believe demons live in this place?”

Jamie took in a deep breath. “Well… I know wee Lindsay and Tammas are no’ the first boys to sicken or die after a visit up here.” Which only confirmed to Zahra that there was definitely something environmental. She only hoped that it wasn’t spores and that they hadn’t already breathed it in. Shit. Fuck, what she wouldn’t do for a tricorder right about now. “To tell the truth, visiting the Black Kirk--” Jamie pressed his hand to a symbol on the wall. “--and living to tell the tale is a way to prove your manhood.”

While he spoke, Zahra snuck through the overgrown gate to the open room on the other side. Jamie stepped through a separate arch and paused at a window to watch her as he recounted the tale of his own adventure here. “Did it myself when I was a lad with no harm done, but my own cousin…” Zahra turned to watch him as his tone grew sad and she stepped up to the window to touch his hand. “He fell under the spell and was sick near a week.”

Her hand moved to touch his face and his own reached up to hold her wrist, brushing his thumb over the pulsepoint there. “And… you believe that demons were responsible?”

Jamie smirked and pressed a kiss to the center of her palm. “I’m an educated man, mistress… if I may be so bold,” he said with a chuckle, then broke contact to walk further into the ruins wanting to join her without walls to separate them. “Maybe not as educated as you,” he said as he rounded a corner. “But I had a tutor.” He came to another window, this one slotted with planks, and Zahra watched him from it as he approached. “A good one.” He said as he leaned in to steal a kiss, then played with a lock of her hair. “He taught me Latin, and Greek, and such. Not childhood stories of faeries, devils… Water Horses in Lochs,” he teased with a grin.

“Are you saying Nessie isn’t real?” she joked, sounding incredibly put out. They shared a laugh at the joke and Jamie was captivated by her mouth. Her lips so perfectly plump. Her teeth so sinfully white and perfectly aligned. He’d never known anyone with as perfect and beautiful a smile as hers.

Jamie held her face as he leaned in for another kiss that lingered much longer than the last one, that maybe they should be grateful for the wall separating them or else he might have just dragged her to the ground with him to have his way with her. When the kiss broke, Zahra was pleasantly flushed, and tingling from his touch. “Alas, I am also a Highlander,” he continued his previous thoughts. “Born and bred… I dinnae believe in tempting fate, nor making light of Old Nick in his very own courtyard.” He pulled away from her then, to cross himself before he disappeared from sight.

Zahra couldn’t help but think she had slighted him, wronged him in some way, insulted him maybe, and it made her heart ache to think she had offended him. She jogged back out the gate, to meet him on the other side of the wall. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you or your beliefs, that’s the last thing I’d ever--”

Jamie held her shoulders and shushed her gently. “It’s all right, love, they aren’t necessarily my beliefs.” He pinched her chin to make her look at him. “No offense given or taken, ye ken?”

She took in a deep breath and nodded. “So…” she cleared her throat. “When you would come here as a boy to prove your manhood,” she quoted with a smirk. “What exactly would you do?”

Jamie took her hand and led her further into the gardens. “Not much. Caper about mostly.” He
waved his hand generically at the open grounds. “Climb the walls.” He pulled her up onto a short wall with him. “Maybe defy the devil by pissing on the stones.” Zahra laughed. “Ye might be lucky and find some, eh, berries or wood garlic to eat.”

Wild berries and wood garlic? Zahra’s brow furrowed slightly. “Wood garlic? Just growing about? And you’d eat it?”

Jamie nodded. “Aye.” Holy lord, how did any of them survive?

“Can you--show me?” Zahra asked, thinking she just may have found her culprit, or was that too much to ask?

Jamie took her hand and led her through the ruins, a few more archways, and half walls, until they reached an actual space that had probably been the monk’s gardens at one point. He showed her a plant growing on the walls that were sprouting dark red berries and had thick emerald green leaves. Zahra almost immediately knew what it was, but she needed to investigate. “I didn’t much care for the taste of it myself, but some folks find it a treat.”

“This isn’t wood garlic.” Zahra shook her head. She could very clearly, clearly recall the picture of the plant in her herbology book, its scientific name, species, origins, descriptors, uses, and warnings. “It’s *Convallaria Majalis*, Lily of the Valley.”

Jamie gave her a blank look. “Lily of the Valley,” he repeated, testing the words on his tongue. “Never heard of it.”

“That’s because this particular variety is only native to--” She tore off a full leaf. “The monks that built this place, where were they from?” Because Zahra’s 1743 world history was not extensive by any means. She didn’t have a full encyclopedia in her brain, only what she had ever personally read or seen, but she knew that the names she knew countries by in her time, may not be the names of the countries that existed in this time.

“Uh, Prussia, I believe?” Jamie answered with a furrowed brow.

Prussia… Prussia… Prussia… Zahra racked her brain, mentally flipping through walls of text from her Earth history datapad… Prussia was... founded in 1871… and was a united German empire. Germany! She clapped almost excitedly, which startled Jamie. “Of course!” She declared as she grabbed his hand. “We need to get back to the village, now.”

Jamie nodded and the two raced back to their horse, which they rode at a gallop back to the village with Zahra gripping tightly to Jamie’s waist. She had absolute undeniable confirmation that the plant was in fact Lily of the Valley, and it was in fact, insanely poisonous. Young Tammas was in danger, but Zahra now knew how to cure him. If there was such a thing as God in this time, she hoped and prayed to him now that they wouldn’t be too late.

Zahra leaped down off the horse before Jamie had even come to a full stop and raced for the Baxter’s front door. She opened it slowly, dreading the sight before her as she recognized the priest giving the boy last rites. She was breathless as she approached Glenna and her sister. “Mistress?” Glenna questioned, not thinking she would see Zahra in this house again after the last time. “The poor bairn is near gone.”

“Satan has claimed his body,” Mrs. Baxter wept. “Father Bain can only hope to save his immortal soul.”
Zahra took a deep breath and sat on an empty chair. “I think I can save his life,” she spoke quickly, and earnestly, then showed the ladies the leaf she had brought with her. “I think Lindsay and Tammas ate this believing it was wood garlic, but it’s not! It’s called Lily of the Valley and it is highly poisonous.” She took in another deep breath trying to slow her words. Jamie entered the small house, standing stoically by the door. “I can give Tammas medicine that will counteract the poison, but I have to move quickly. He needs it now.”

“What blasphemy is this?” Father turned to her with anger and venom in his voice, and Jamie’s fists wrung the beret in his hands.

Zahra stood to face the priest. “It is not blasphemy, Father. It is medical scientific fact. I simply--”

“I--am the Lord’s disciple!” He all but shouted, anger rising, and Jamie’s hands moved to clench at his sides from the way Father Bain was threatening his woman. “You are not ordained to drive away the demon!” The priest yelled, his anger rising with each passing moment. “Now, leave this house this instant!”

Zahra exhaled angrily out her nose and clenched her teeth. The arrogance of this bastard thinking he was above saving a child’s life! Zahra was so angry she was near tears from it and positively aching to pummel this man to a pulp. “The boy has been poisoned. It is not a demon!” she said through clenched teeth, managing to inject a calm in her tone that she quite simply did not feel in that moment. Jamie recognized that she was about to explode only because she had looked at him very much the same way that night she’d clocked him and sent his ass to the ground. “If you don’t let me tend to him, now, you are good as striking the fatal blow yourself.”

“Let her pass, Father,” Glenna asked nicely, much more nicely than Zahra felt in that moment towards this man.

Bain turned wide eyes to Glenna and his ire did not abate. “I will not be ordered about by a woman.” Zahra could almost see the moment Glenna’s respect for the father broke. “This boy is a slave to Satan and must be purged or have his soul doomed to eternal damnation.”

Mrs. Baxter turned, weeping, to look at her sister for strength. Glenna was strong. Probably stronger than any woman Zahra had ever met and she had seen Father Bain’s true colors. “This--is my sister’s house… And my father’s before that.” She approached the priest with confidence and strength. “And we’ll decide what is done under its roof.” She stared the Father down for a moment before turning to Zahra, who was trying to keep her cool when all she wanted to do was shout for joy for her girl Glenna standing up for herself. “Tend to the boy.”

Zahra didn’t even spare Father Bain a second glance before she approached the bed, but he grabbed her arm forcefully, and this time Jamie did move to a defensive position closer to his future wife, but a subtle signal from Zahra reminded him that she had things under control. “I smell the vapors of hell on you,” the Father accused at a volume only she was meant to hear, but Jamie had heard it as well. She should have kept her mouth closed. She was an intelligent woman, and she knew better than to spout off at men in power, but she had always had a problem with male authority. Even as a slave. She bore many marks and brands to testify to that fact. So she tried to keep her mouth shut, but her willpower and self control only went so far. “Are you sure you’re not smelling yourself?” she all but spat at him and he released her as if his hand had been burned.

Jamie watched the priest move away, and the redhead subtly placed himself in a position where he was standing to defend Zahra against the man if need be. Zahra perched herself on Tammas’s bed, uncorked the small vial she had brought with her, and brought it to Tammas’s lips to help him drink. “It’s a decoction of Belladonna,” she answered anyone’s unspoken questions as to what she was
giving him. She silently praised her friend Geillis for having the medicinal on hand, and for giving it to her to stock in her clinic. It could not have been more perfectly timed.

If they caught it in time, if the decoction worked, the Belladonna should normalize Tammas’s heart rate, lower his blood pressure, and bring him back to consciousness within moments. If she had been wrong, though, about the type of poison, or even the dosage of the Belladonna, it would cause Tammas to seize uncontrollably and kill him almost instantly. Zahra stood and Jamie wrapped his arm about her shoulders, holding her tight as she reached for his other hand. All they could do now was to watch, and, in some of their cases, pray.

They didn’t have to wait long, but it still felt like they had been waiting forever, until Tammas moaned softly, his first sign of life all day, then his eyes opened a moment later. Mrs. Baxter wept, and Zahra’s own eyes were filling with tears as she watched the mother reach for her boy, stroking his face. “Tammas?”

Clear but tired eyes opened and looked at her. “Ma…” he called weakly.

Mrs. Baxter was wrapping the boy up in her arms and climbing into bed with him in the next instant. “Oh, my boy’s come back to me. It’s a miracle.”

Zahra had barely managed to stand out of the way, when Jamie took her back into his arms, holding her firmly and pressing a kiss into her hair. Glenna came to stand next to her, grabbing her face in her hands and pressing their foreheads together. “God bless you, Mistress.”

Father Bain glared at them both before turning and collecting his things. “Satan may like to make a fool of God, but God will have the last word.” He opened the door, letting the evening sun shine in. “I promise you that.” It was a threat and no mistake. Zahra had definitely earned herself a powerful enemy that night, but in the face of Tammas Baxter’s survival, of a boy being able to live a full life, of a parent not having to bury their child, Zahra could not seem to care. If there was a God, and if he would smite Zahra for using her knowledge and skills to save a small boy, then fuck him because that was no God she wanted to pay homage to.

Jamie took her face, stealing her gaze away from the now closed doors, and he pressed his forehead to hers, whispering something in Gaelic that almost immediately calmed her down. Zahra had a very grateful mother, and a couple small children wrapping her up in warmth and hugs a moment later, thanking her for saving the boy, her son, their brother. “Please, Mrs. Baxter, don’t thank me. I was almost too late.”

“But ye weren’t!” The woman was sobbing tears of joy as she leaned in and gave Zahra a kiss on each cheek. “Bless you, Mistress. Oh, bless you!” She fell into a fit of laughter, so full of joy and delight that it made Zahra’s eyes tear up again.

“You did that, a graidh.” Jamie whispered in her ear as he wrapped his arms about her shoulders from behind. “You did that… Come,” he urged as he took her hand to lead her out back to their horse. They were in no hurry to rush back to Leoch now, and so took the horse at a slow canter through the trees.

“Remember the first time we shared a ride together?” Jamie asked over his shoulder.

Zahra was seated behind him, instead of in front of him like their first time, but she was gripping onto his waist from behind, and resting her head on his shoulder. “You mean when your stubborn ass almost died from a gunshot wound you were too arrogant to tell me about?” She smirked, chuckling softly.
“Aye. That would be the one.”

Zahra chuckled softly. “I remember… I remember sitting in your lap with these strong legs on either side of me.” She let her hands trail down his waist, then rub down the tops of his thighs. “I think, even then, a part of me was already imagining how it might feel to have all that strength driving into me.”

Jamie swore in Gaelic and licked suddenly too dry lips. “Shite, I thought it was just me.”

Zahra pressed a kiss to his exposed neck, then trailed her lips up to his ear where she briefly tongued the lobe. “Nope.” She popped the P hard against his ear.

“Bollocks, do ye’ve any idea how hard it was for me to not-get excited with your very round and supple bottom resting right up against my--waist?”

“Tell me,” she laughed softly against his ear, then slowly moved one hand up his thigh and around his waist. “How hard was it?” she started to slide her hand down his waist, intending to rub him through his kilt, but his hand grabbing her wrist stopped her.

“Ah, ah. None o’ that now.” Jamie scolded her. “Ye’ve already made me ruin one kilt. I’ll not have ye making me soil another.”

“You’re no fun,” Zahra pouted teasingly, making Jamie grin. She kept her hands to herself for the rest of the ride, though. She, honestly, just enjoyed being a tease. “But seriously, if your kilt needs washing, I can wash it for you.”

“Eh, ye’ve got other more important things to do than fash yerself over my laundry.”

Zahra rested her head against his shoulder. “I honestly don’t mind. Gives me something to do. Besides… since you won’t let me practice my primary wifely duty,” she teased with a subtle rolling of her hips against his back. “I might as well start somewhere. Why not laundry?”

Jamie let out a huff of laughter and sighed. “All right. If you insist. I’ll drop it off to you tomorrow after breakfast?”

Zahra nodded and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Sounds good.”

The ride back to Leoch was filled with companionable silence for the most part, maybe a little humming on Zahra’s part, some light conversation here and there but nothing too serious. They’d had a rather serious afternoon after all.

The sun was still in the sky, just starting to set as they arrived at the Castle stables. Jamie had helped Zahra down before climbing off himself and moving to tend to the horses. He unsaddled the beast to give him a break after their hard gallop to the village, and was soon brushing some straw over the creature’s back. Unwilling to leave Jamie yet, Zahra stayed with him and let the animal get acquainted with her smell by petting his muzzle. “You know, I firmly believe Bain would have preferred I let that boy die than be responsible for saving him.”

“Aye,” Jamie responded sadly. “Don’t doubt that. A man’s beliefs are how he makes sense of life, and death.” He dipped the straw in the water, and continued running it over the horse’s back. “Take that away what do you have left?… Is it so different from where you come from?”

“You’re right.” Zahra leaned against the fence, watching him work. “I guess it’s not.”
Jamie turned to dip the straw in the water once more, then continued brushing the horse’s pelt. “Well… if it makes ya feel better, I heard Mrs. Fitz call ya ‘Caileag nam Mìorbhail’ before we left.” Zahra raised an eyebrow; he knew she didn’t speak Gaelic. “Means the Miracle Worker,” he clarified with a grin.

Zahra scoffed, letting out a huff of amusement. “Holy Jeez, what would Monty say?”

Jamie stopped and looked at her with a smirk. “Monty?” he asked.

Zahra grinned a bit wistfully and tilted her head. “He is, or was our ship’s architect slash engineer, and a self-proclaimed ‘miracle worker’.” Zahra made quotes in the air with her fingers, which Jamie didn’t fully understand what she was doing, but he didn’t mention it. “But… we all know he just multiplies his work estimates by four, so it seems like he gets things done in less than half the time.” She chuckled at the memory of her friend. He really was a freaking miracle worker with Starships.

“Sounds like an intelligent man,” Jamie said as he returned to his task.

“Oh, yeah. He’s a literal genius… You’ve actually got a lot in common,” Zahra teased with a grin.

“Do we now?” Jamie took that as a compliment. He’d never been compared to a literal genius before.

Zahra nodded cheekily. “He’s a redhead, incredibly Scottish, and stubborn to boot.”

Jamie paused what he was doing to approach her and wrap his arms around her waist, though the hitching fence was still between them. “Will I have to duel him for yer hand, as well?”

Zahra lifted her arms around his shoulders, crossing her hands behind his neck. “Nah. Everyone knows Monty’s greatest and only love is his ship. He’d probably marry it if he could.”

Jamie chuckled softly and leaned in to press a soft kiss to her lips, which made Zahra sigh contentedly. The moment was short-lived, however, as they might be back at Leoch, but it was still a highly public setting. They rubbed noses before they untwined their arms from each other and Jamie went back to his task.

Zahra moved to perch on the edge of a watering trough nearby. “At the very least, I just hope this entire event will have earned me more of Colum and Dougal’s trust.”

“Aye,” Jamie said as he walked over to fetch a bucket of water from the trough. “He’s already been taking credit for bringing ye on as healer for the MacKenzies. I doubt he’ll want to see you leave anytime soon.”

Zahra’s head tilted to the side and her hands disappeared inside her skirt pockets as she watched Jamie work. There were honestly a million other fates she could think of that were worse than being stuck here in this beautiful country with her own loyal, kind, and insanely handsome rogushian Highlander. She was just terrified of how deep she was already in. Terrified of how far, far past the point of no return she was that she may never return again. Terrified that this was all some fever or pollen induced dream that she was going to wake up from at any moment.

Two strong hands were suddenly holding her face and bringing her focus back to reality. “There ye are,” Jamie said softly and pressed a kiss to her forehead. He then leaned back to gaze down at her with concern etched into his brow. “Where’d you go?”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she suddenly had her arms wrapped fiercely about his waist, and her head was pressed closely into his chest. “Promise me you’ll never let me go?” she asked.
Jamie’s brow furrowed but he hugged her back just as tightly. “I promise.”

“No matter what happens?” she elaborated.

“No matter what,” he agreed easily.

“Even if it’s something awful, or something that you don’t or can’t understand?” Jamie was so confused. She was being very specific but then not specific at all, both at the same time.

There was already so much about Zahra that he didn’t, or couldn’t understand, and he didn’t expect that to change any time soon. All Jamie knew was how he felt about her, that he wanted to be with her forever. Zahra obviously had abandonment issues, though, which he didn’t exactly blame her for all things considered. He wasn’t going anywhere, wasn’t about to let her go anywhere that he wouldn’t follow, and he needed to get this through to her somehow, once and for all.

Jamie gripped onto her shoulders, making her look at him and he held her gaze. “Leilani Zahra Quigley.” He gripped the back of her neck and pressed his forehead to hers, holding her gaze intensely. “You have somehow become a part of me, just as vital as the lungs I need to breathe, the heart I need to live.” He took her hand with his free one and pressed it to his chest. “As long as there is life beating in my chest, nay, even after it has stopped—I am yours, and you--are mine.”

“And may God have mercy on the schmuck who ever tries to take you from me,” she whispered a vow of her own before they were locked together, mouths sealed in a passionate kiss.

“Auch, Jamie, are ye not finished with that beast y--” Alec rolled his eyes when he rounded the stable wall and saw the two of them engaged in a very public, very graphic display of affection.

Always with the intrusions, it was like some cosmic joke at their expense. They sighed as they broke apart. “Aye, I’ll be right there, old man.” Alec huffed angrily and crossed his arms. Jamie stole another gentle kiss before hoisting his bucket of water into his hands. “I’ll see ye inside,” he promised before getting back to work.

Zahra gave Alec an awkward, apologetic look as she walked away from the stables and back towards the castle. She retired to her room to wash and dress for dinner and she met Jamie downstairs so they could go together. After dinner, Colum personally invited both her and Jamie to join them for another performance by Gwylynn the bard, to which the Laird vowed he wouldn’t embarrass Zahra with another of his boorish requests. She still got special treatment when she was poured a glass of Colum’s private Rhenish. Unlike the other night, though, she only sipped on this one lightly, not trying to get drunk again.

Her and Jamie walked hand in hand through the concert hall, and Zahra could practically feel all the eyes on them. On her. It wasn’t just their relationship that was new and stirring gossip, but by now the entire village had heard of her miraculous healing skills. For someone like Zahra who thrived in the shadows, behind the scenes it was a walking nightmare. She hated the spotlight, but she had definitely been thrust into it over and over again ever since she came here. The only positive she could see was the way Colum’s attitude had drastically changed towards her, the way he had smiled at her and lifted his glass to her in a salute. She might hate the attention, but if it earned her a place in Colum’s trust, then she couldn’t be too upset about it.

“Stay low and quiet,” Jamie said as they walked through rows of guests. “Or they’re likely to stone us.” They eventually found an empty spot and sat close enough that their sides touched without trying. Jamie did not bother releasing her hand. Zahra sighed and took a sip from her drink as she
listened to Gwyllyn sing. He really did have such an enchanting voice, and the words were so beautiful even if she couldn’t understand them.

“Now this one is about a man out late on a faery hill on the eve of Samhain—” Jamie explained to her without her needing to ask. He knew how much she loved the music. “He hears the sound of a woman singing, sad and plaintive, from the very rocks of the hill.” Zahra closed her eyes and sighed again, letting her head drift to his shoulder as the music filled her mind. “I am a woman of Balmain… The folk have stolen me over again, the stones seemed to say… I stood upon the hill and wind did rise and the sound of thunder rolled across the land.” Zahra’s eyes popped open and she squeezed Jamie’s hand, watching him as he further translated. “I placed my hands upon the tallest stone and traveled to a far distant land… Where I lived for a time among strangers who became lovers and friends.” Her breathing heavied slightly, and her heart was rabbiting in her chest. “But one day I saw the moon came out and the wind rose once more, so I touched the stones and travelled back to my own land and took up again with the man I had left behind.”

Zahra swallowed hard, and Jamie made a pained sound when her grip on his hand became too hard. “Ye tryin’ ta break my hand, love,” he asked jokingly, which prompted Zahra to relax her grip. When she turned to him, however, it was with the look of a frightened rabbit which had Jamie’s brow pinching together, and he gently touched her face. “Leeloo? What’s wrong?”

She’d just been given confirmation that there was a way for her to travel back through the stones. It was possible. It had obviously been done before. Folktales did not just come up out of the blue. They were always based on some sort of truth that eventually became myth. Zahra knew now that it was possible for her to return. She could go back to her own time, but the problem now was… she didn’t want to go back.

“Dinnae want to go back where?” Jamie asked, and Zahra blinked rapidly, not realizing she had said that last part out loud.

She swallowed hard, and licked her lips. “To New York, obviously. I don’t wish to go back there.” She smiled, heart still rabbitting in her chest and she held his hand to her cheek. “I want to stay with you. I want to go where you go.”

Jamie’s lips turned up into that devastatingly charming, boyish grin that made Zahra feel weak in the knees. He muttered something in Gaelic, then stole a kiss from her Rhenish flavored lips, before he suddenly stood. “My lords and ladies. Forgive my interruption, but my heart is so full that my chest may actually burst… for I am soon to be a happily married man, to a woman who is the kindest, bravest, most caring, most beautiful, most spirited, and certainly the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met.” Jamie and those gathered laughed softly at his tease. Zahra just worried on her bottom lip and covered her face in embarrassment as Jamie boasted. “But she makes me feel whole in a way I’ve never known.” He took her hand in his and bent over it to place a kiss on her knuckles.

“And here I thought I needed to apologize for my boorishness,” Colum heckled his nephew, causing the gathered crowd to laugh at Jamie’s expense. “All right, ye’ve made yer announcement, now shut your gob and kiss her already, and let Gwyllyn get back to his music!”

Jamie could see how anxious this entire spectacle was making her, so he didn’t force her to stand and kiss him as Colum had suggested. “I think I’ve embarrassed her enough,” he said. “Please, Master Gwyllyn. As you were.” Jamie sat back down next to her, and took her hand. Zahra was still covering her face with the other one.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke softly next to her ear. “I didnae mean to put ye on the spot like that.”

She lowered her hand, and laid him with a look. “Yes, you did,” she whispered back, but she wasn’t
angry. A little anxious maybe, but not angry. “But I’m not mad or anything.” Jamie sighed in relief. “I just–don’t like all the attention. It gives me anxiety.”

The younger man nodded. “Aye. I’m sorry. I should’ve known that.”

“I forgive you, but how exactly should you have known that?” she asked softly and nudged his shoulder with her own.

“You have been at the center of attention a lot since ye arrived,” Jamie stated observationally.

“And I have been a huge, messy ball of anxiety ever since,” Zahra responded with a smirk, then pressed a brief kiss to his lips.

Jamie pinched her chin to prevent her from pulling away. “I’ll remember that for the future then,” he promised and placed another, longer kiss on her lips.

“Sshh!” Someone shushed them from behind.

Jamie made an apologetic wave of his hand, then wrapped his arms behind Zahra’s shoulders so they could just enjoy the rest of the show together in peace. Everyone knew now. It was one less thing Zahra had to worry about keeping secret, one less weight she had to carry. She felt light, free. She gazed lovingly, joyfully at Jamie as Gwyllyn engaged the audience to participate in a song by clapping a rhythm with him. It must have been a well known song for most of the audience began to join in, including Jamie, and Zahra could not remember a time she laughed so much, or so jovially. Jamie did that. Jamie and this place did that. Would she miss her father, and Laurie, and Kai, and Jim and the others? Sure. Every day. But what would they say if they could see her now? If they knew what had happened to her in this place? Would they really wish her to return to a life where she had only her duty and nothing else? A life that offered her no real fulfillment or purpose beyond said duty? Would they really expect her to abandon the only time in her life where she had ever felt whole, and happy, and truly, unconditionally loved?

No. If Laurie were here, if Jim or Kai were here, she was pretty sure they would all give her a kiss and a hug goodbye before wishing her all the best. At least, that was the dream that had helped her fall asleep that night after her and Jamie had parted ways again. That and the Rhenish.
The Gathering

Chapter Summary

With the night of the oath-taking drawing near, and the wild hunt on the horizon, what shenanigans will the inhabitants of Leoch get up to?

Chapter Notes

I was going to include the events of the hunt with this one but decided to actually end this at a decent place for once. The hunt will be next. Brace yourselves! And as always, your kudos and feedback are always welcome. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

The next few days were a huge bustle as MacKenzie men and their families began to arrive for the Gathering. Zahra was busy in her clinic, seeing to ailments of all sorts: from scraped knees, to gout, to urinary tract infections. They all came through her clinic door, and she helped everyone as best she could. She hadn’t seen much of Jamie, as the man was making himself scarce as he said he would. She was missing him something fierce, but she took her mind off of it by taking on a special project for the children, who she heard on multiple occasions bemoaning how bored they were because the adults were busy.

She’d spent the past day or two gathering supplies, some fabric rope she’d braided herself, a couple long twigs she’d smoothed down with a whittling knife she had borrowed from Rupert. There were also some beads she’d gotten from Mrs. Fitz, a large bucket to carry water, and the other ingredients she already had in her medicinal supplies. She found herself with a rare break where she had no patients to attend, so she grabbed her special items and made her way out to the castle grounds. Some of the boys were climbing the fences to test their balance as they walked across them, and a few girls were picking flowers and playing with each other’s hair.

“I heard that you lot were complaining of boredom,” Zahra said as she set her bucket on the grass. “So I thought I’d teach you a science lesson.” She heard a few of them groan, and Zahra laughed. “Oh, really? You think science isn’t fun, huh? Well watch this.” Zahra suddenly lifted the two long sticks from the bucket of water, and with the cotton ropes tied to the ends soaked in a soap solution, she ran a few paces and with the help of the wind she made a huge, huge bubble about ten feet long before she brought the sticks together to seal it. The children gasped and oohed and aahed at the sight of the giant bubble.

Zahra opened the sticks and after a few quickpaces made yet another huge bubble, that glistened with every color of the rainbow in the sunlight. “How do you do that?” Young Hamish asked. “Is it magic?”

“Pfft, no. Child, please. There’s no such thing as magic.” Zahra snickered and shook her head, then moved the sticks to hold in one hand. “I told you this was a science lesson.” She approached Hamish and tapped him playfully on the nose. “Would you like to learn?” Hamish grinned and nodded.
enthusiastically. Zahra stood back up and addressed them all. “Would you all like to learn?” There was a chorus of ayes and yesses. “Very well. Come, come, come.” Zahra motioned Rupert over, who was carrying a wooden crate with supplies for her, which he sat next to her full bucket. Angus followed with a small standing washing basin. They didn’t understand what they were for but Zahra had asked them to bring them before promising they could go back inside for the ‘festivities’.

“Why, thank you, Rupert. Angus,” she said as she gave them each a clap on the shoulder. “All right, gather round, gather round. So what does it look like we have here?” Zahra asked the children, referring to the items she had in front of her. There was the washing basin there, and inside the crate there was a pitcher of water, a bar of soap, and a few other bottles of liquids, and some unknown powders.

“It looks like someone’s about to take a bath?” Hamish said.

Zahra smirked and touched the side of her nose. “That’s a very good observation, Hamish.” She tapped his nose as well. “This does look like bathtime doesn’t it? We have water, a basin, we have soap, a few bath salts… But actually what we have here are all the necessary ingredients for—what do you think?” They all kind of looked at each other at a loss for words. Zahra tilted her head. “Come on guys, what did you just see me doing?”

“Making the biggest bubble I’ve ever seen,” Hamish said.

“And what do you think all of these things are for?”

Hamish’s eyes widened. “Are we gon’ to make bubbles, too, Zahra? Like the ones you made?”

Zahra grinned. “Exactly! Though, maybe not quite that big, because that actually takes a lot of practice, but that’s why I made these for you!” She held up a small wooden stick that looked like it had a piece of straw looped in a circle and tied to the tip. 18th Century bubble wand. “This is what I like to call a bubble wand. I think I made enough for each of you,” she said as she started handing them out. “But you may have to share… Ok so!” She clapped her hands together. “Hamish was right, with all of these basic ingredients we’re gonna make bubble water.”

Zahra listed each ingredient, what it was, what its normal use was, and where it could be found, or how it could be made, before adding each necessary ingredient to the pitcher. “So we’ve added all of our ingredients and we give it a good stir until everything is dissolved…” She stirred the contents of the pitcher with a wooden spoon. “And then…” She poured some into one of the saucers she had borrowed from the kitchen, then dipped one of the wands into it and brought it towards her lips. With a soft blow, a stream of bubbles escaped the circle of straw at the tip, and the children giggled and chased after them.

“I wanna try!” “May I try?” “Let me try!” They all spoke up at once.

Zahra nodded. “Of course!” She set out several of the saucers and pie plates she’d ‘borrowed’ from the kitchens with Fitz’s approval, and she poured some of the soapy water from the pitcher into each one, grinning as the children eagerly dunked their ‘wands’ and blew bubbles of their own. “You don’t want to blow too hard or you’ll burst your bubble.” She smirked at her own cheesy joke. They really seemed to be enjoying themselves and Zahra had a huge grin on her face as she watched their delight. “See? Science can be fun!” That earned her a few giggles at least.

Zahra observed them play for a while, before she picked up a small wand of her own, and started blowing a big bubble which she let go, then caught on her wand again, earning the attention of a few of the children as they watched. She then started blowing another bubble attached to the first, which she released and carefully caught once more. A third bubble was added the same way, then a
fourth... it was in attempting to add a fifth that the entire group popped in her face, making all the children laugh. Now, they were all trying to do it on their own.

“Do another huge one, Mistress Zahra?” Hamish requested with a puppy dog smile. “Please?”

Zahra beamed and ruffled his hair before walking back over to her special bucket. She had made a standard large rope wand, but she’d also done one where the rope was secured with beads in several places so it would make multiple large bubbles at once. It was this one she picked out of the bucket this time, and she made a huge, long cluster of bubbles that had the children awed once more. Even Rupert and Angus enjoyed the spectacle, though they did very much wish they could be enjoying the more ‘adult’ festivities back at the castle, namely drinking and getting to know the buxom beauty from the kitchens better.

“All right, all right! Who wants to try an experiment?” Zahra asked them conspiratorially.

“What kind of experiment?” A young girl asked.

“Well, why tell you when I could show you? But first I’ll need a volunteer.” They all eagerly raised their hands, but it was Hamish who Zahra ended up choosing. What could she say? She’d grown rather fond of Colum’s son. He was a very sweet boy.

Apparently, she’d had Angus bring the wash basin for a reason, after all. She poured some of the soapy water into the bottom of it, just enough to cover the surface, then arranged her bubble rope in a sort of circle so there was space enough for someone to stand in the middle. “You’re just gonna stand right here in the center of the rope, ok?” She instructed young Hamish, then held his hand as he climbed into the basin. She grabbed each stick in one hand then whispered. “Ready?” Hamish grinned and nodded. “One, two….” On the count of Three Zahra lifted the rope quickly out of the soapy water and a clear bubble wall lifted to surround the boy in the middle. Zahra managed to pull it all the way past his head before it popped to a chorus of cheers and laughter. The pop made the boy flinch before succumbing to a fit of giggles.

Each child was clamoring to be next, and Zahra patiently encapsulated each one in turn, which was taking for-bloody-ever and seemed like it may never end. “Zahra!” Rupert practically whined. “I’m pretty certain the MacKenzie wouldnae approve ye wastin’ the whole day out here.” It might be amusing watching her play with the bairns but they had other things to do. “Besides, we’re missing the festivities, and it’s nae since I was a bairn we’ve had a Gathering at Leoch.”

“You promised if we helped ye--” Angus started to say.

“All right, all right. Calm your tits!” She huffed through her nose. “Uncles Rupert and Angus are right.” The children all responded with a chorus of highly disappointed ‘Awwws’. Zahra giggled and rolled her eyes before she ushered them all away to go play on their own with their new ‘toys’. “Tell ya what, you can keep the rope wands, ok?” The disappointed moans turned into delighted cheers and Zahra laughed.

“Will you come play with us again tomorrow, Mistress Zahra?” Hamish asked as he attempted to make a big bubble with the ropes, but it kept popping.

Zahra looked at Rupert, who rolled his eyes but nodded. “I’d be delighted to, Hamish. Thank you. I’ll try to think of something else special for you.” They cheered and Zahra chuckled softly as she watched them for another moment longer.

“Can we go now?” Angus asked impatiently.
“Yes, Angus!” Zahra said as she turned and took Rupert and Angus each arm in arm with her in the middle as they walked back to the castle.

“Thank you, both,” she said. “For helping me. That was--a much needed distraction.”

“You know what else is a good distraction?” Rupert said with a teasing lilt to his thick brogue, and he and Angus exchanged knowing glances with each other.

She’d seen that look. “Jeez Laweeze, do I dare ask?”

“Drinking til ya cannae see straight,” Angus finished for his friend with a grin.

Zahra laughed then rolled her eyes as she shook her head. “You’re both incorrigible; you know that.”

“I didnae hear a no,” Angus teased.

“Neither did I,” Rupert agreed.

Zahra elbowed each of them in the side, making them both flinch simultaneously as she dropped their arms and continued walking by herself. The men both grinned at each other before catching up with her. Dougal might still have them officially on watch duty, but, by this point, they had all developed an actual camaraderie. Yes, Angus had finally come around just as Rupert had done, so his duty of ‘guarding’ Zahra had become less like a chore, and more like friends shooting the breeze. The two men tended to watch her in pairs more often than not these days and Zahra was grateful for their company and the distraction they provided. It kept her mind off of how much she missed Jamie. It had only been two days since they’d been able to spend any time together, but she was missing him something awful. The brief glances, or momentary locked gazes across distances was just not enough. Not by a long shot.

Angus and Rupert took her to the outdoor encampment where most of the visiting MacKenzie had set up tents and campsites. Roughing it in a way that Zahra very much admired and respected. She loved camping, especially with friends. A bag of marshmelons(hahaha Bones) and a guitar to pluck out some nonsensical tune. Or, better still, she could be curled up by the fire under Jamie’s tartan. Making love with him under the stars to the sound of crickets and nature around them.

She broke herself from her thoughts when she realized she’d lost her escorts, and she moved to catch up to them. “Doubt ye’ve ever seen anythin’ as braw as this where ye’re from, eh?” Rupert asked.

Zahra smirked and huffed in amusement. “A few of my friends and I would go camping quite frequently, actually. Our favorite place was this beautiful range in Yosemite. There’s a mountain peak called El Capitan that my friend Jim and I used to climb together. Sometimes we’d race to see who could reach the top first.”

Rupert snickered. “Why am I even surprised?” he teased.

Zahra shrugged and the three parted ways briefly as Angus and Rupert made their rounds to greet friends, old and new. Zahra took it upon herself to explore the grounds, tease and chase a few children, greeting several women and men and asking how they were. In this she found another distraction she was looking for. There was something beautiful and thrilling about this simple celebration of coming together, of family, of friends. It reminded Zahra of the clan gatherings back on Orion. She was but a child back then, still Jargen’s slave, not allowed to be part of the festivities, but she had always enjoyed watching. Wishing to be a part of it. Wishing she had a family of her own. These people, they weren’t her family, not her kin, but they were Jamie’s. They were Rupert’s
and Angus’s. They were Colum’s and Dougal’s. And Glenna’s and Murtagh’s. By extension, maybe, just maybe that would mean they could be Zahra’s as well… someday.

She really wished Jamie were here.

The trio joined back together after a while, and they made their way through the encampment back towards Leoch. Zahra was vigilantly watching her surroundings because of all the strangers present, which was when she happened to notice a buxom beauty gazing at her male companions, both of whom were totally oblivious. Zahra smirked and moved between them to speak low enough only they could hear. “Gentlemen, averteth not thine eyes, but I believeth yon fair maiden of the mixing bowl doth fancy one of thee.”

Both of her escorts had given her a look like she’d grown a second head, until Zahra indicated her brow in the direction of said buxom beauty. The smile that practically lit up Rupert’s face was positively adorable. “Oh, aye,” he said. “She’s a pie-eater that one.” Rupert giggled. He actually giggled. Angus was grinning too, but otherwise quiet. “Well, I’ll just be settling my cock to roost in that tonight.” Rupert slapped his friend on the chest and started walking in the woman’s direction.

Angus’s eyes widened and he caught up to his friend quickly, holding him back. “Not so fast!” Angus gripped Rupert by the coat. “We said, ‘everra man for himself’ durin’ the Gathering.”

Rupert struggled to release Angus’s grip. “Aye, we did.” They’re struggling was about to come to blows, Zahra could almost see it. “But ye ken how much I fancy a hen wit’ o’ bit o’ meat.”

“Who doesnae?” Angus argued.

Zahra pinched them both by the ear, causing them each to back off and whimper at the unexpected pain. “Gentlemen, please. You’re embarrassing yourselves, and me.” She gave them each a stern look and when she was sure they wouldn’t continue bickering, she let them go. “Now, if I may offer a solution?” They were each still rubbing the soreness from their ears but they gave her a nod anyway, listening. “It is practically written female code that, for every buxom beauty, there is bound to be a buxom friend.” Zahra turned to look, and, sure enough, another maiden of equal or lesser size and beauty had joined the mixing girl to help knead some dough. The only difference was this beauty was blonde. The two ladies exchanged some words before both were suddenly looking their way. Zahra’s lips lifted up into a smirk as she turned back to her male escorts. “See... Girl code.”

They were both grinning like fools and gave each other a hearty slap on the chest before they were practically racing off towards their quarries. Sure enough, they still managed to start an argument over who would get the brunette, and who would get the blonde, but Zahra wasn’t going to touch that one. They’d figure it out. She stayed back, watching with a wistful smile as they wooed their ladies. She took in a deep breath, and let it out on a heavy sigh just as a pair of strong hands were suddenly covering her eyes. Zahra’s knee-jerk reaction was to elbow her assailant in the chest.

Jamie made a pained sound as the air was forcibly knocked from his lungs at the hit. “Oh my god!” Zahra turned and reached for him when she realized what she’d done. “I’m so sorry, Jamie. I didn’t mean--”

Jamie was grinning and shushing her a moment later, smiling. “Nae, nae, sshh. Just startled me is all.”

She huffed out her nose and worried her bottom lip. “I’m sorry. There’s so many strangers here, I’ve been hyper-vigilant and on edge all day and you--you surprised me and I just reacted without thinking.”
“Hey now, sshh, Leeloo, it’s alright.” He rubbed her shoulders comfortingly. “No harm done. Well, maybe a little to my pride, but…” He gave her his best boyishly charming grin which made the butterflies go nuts in her gut.

Zahra took in a deep breath and scrubbed her hands over her face. When she looked at him, she smiled brightly and her hands moved to rest on his chest. “I’m so happy to see you. You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

Jamie lifted his hand to brush her hair off her forehead, then held her cheek in his palm. “I may have an inkling.”

“It’s only been a couple days but it feels like ages.” She moved closer to wrap her arms around his waist in a hug.

Jamie wrapped his own arms around her and pressed a kiss to her hair. “Aye, I ken whatcha mean.” Among Dougal, Colum, and Alec giving Jamie duties and tasks to perform, the man had been run ragged. Even now, him being here had a purpose that wasn’t strictly social. “The MacKenzie asked me to help ye pick out a horse.” Zahra looked up at him with a furrowed brow. Jamie held her face in his hands and leaned forward to press a kiss to her lips. “For the hunt. Himself wishes to have a healer along, just in case.”

So this wasn’t a social visit. Still, she would take what she could get. “Did he ask you, or did you volunteer?” she had a playful smirk on her lips.

Jamie returned her smirk, then wrapped his arm around the back of her shoulders as he turned them and started walking leisurely towards the stables. “I might have overheard my uncles talking and offered my expertise.”

She wrapped her own arm behind his back and leaned into him. “Thank you,” she said softly. “I really needed you.”

“Aye,” Jamie responded, and turned to press a kiss to her hair once more. “I felt the same, a gràidh. Saw ya playin’ with Hamish and the rest o’ the bairns this mornin’ and I just wanted to drop everything right then to join you.”

“I keep telling myself it’s just a couple more days.” They were both so bogged down and busy with their respective duties and tasks. Jamie was still trying to keep a low profile on top of everything else, so the fact that he was here with her now meant a lot.

“Aye. Doesnae help much, though, does it?” he asked in a playful manner

“No,” she agreed with a huffy laugh.

“It is just a few more days, though. Once the Gathering has ended, we can focus on each other, and naught else.”

“Can’t wait,” Zahra responded with a sigh.

They kept their pace slow and casual, still wrapped up in each other’s arms as they made their way to the stables. Before they actually entered, though, with respect to Auld Alec and not wishing to scandalize him anymore than they’d done a couple days ago, the pair removed themselves from each other. “I best leave ye here,” Jamie said and nodded towards the door. “Alec’ll take care of ye.”

They shared one last, long, lingering kiss and warm embrace before Jamie made to leave, their hands and fingers lingering until they were too far apart to touch. Zahra watched him go for a minute before
she turned to enter the stables alone. “Auch, there’s no one in need o’ healin’ here,” the man said with a touch of irritation in his voice the moment he saw her.

“Jamie tells me my presence has been requested for the hunt tomorrow,” Zahra explained why she was there.

“Ye’ll be wantin’ a horse, then?” Alec asked, though he stayed focused on his task.

“Only, if it’s not too much trouble, Master Alec. Lord knows I enjoy a good run,” she said with a playful smile.

Alec had definitely been privy to her morning exercise with Rupert on a few occasions. What person in their right mind actually found joy in running for pleasure was beyond him. “Most of the horses have been spoken for.”

“Most doesn’t mean all,” she bantered with a smirk.

Her wit earned her a smirk from the old man. He finished brushing the horse he was tending then tossed the brush aside before he turned and made his way further into the stables. “Ye know how to ride one yer own?” he asked.

“I do,” she responded, hoisting her skirts a bit as she followed him over the uneven, hay-filled ground. In her life Zahra had been taught to ride horses, camels, a six-legged zebra thing, and even a giant lizard. Horses were a cake walk in comparison.

Alec stopped outside a pen with a black horse. “Brimstone,” Alec declared what must be the horse’s name. “I’m sure she’ll be all right for yer needs.”

“Brimstone,” Zahra repeated, then reached to gently pet the horse on the muzzle. A moment later, Zahra started gently blowing on the horse’s nose, which Brimstone seemed to respond to when her nose moved as if she were sniffing or tasting the air.

“What’re ye doin’?” Alec asked.

“This way--she gets used to my smell,” Zahra answered matter-of-factly as if that was common sense, giving the beast a loving rub on the snout.

Alec’s lips curled up on one side in a sort of smirk. Not many people knew that horses had an uncanny sense of smell, and what Zahra was doing was actually a very smart and clever way to get the beast accustomed to someone new. “Tha’s right,” Auld Alec said after a moment. He was now looking at Zahra in a different light. The woman wasn’t just a healer but she had practical smarts and skills as well.

“Well, I’m hoping her name is just an ironic metaphor; like calling a large man Tiny?” Zahra asked.

Alec actually chuckled at that. “Aye. She’s no’ fast, but she’s sweet and can go for days.” Zahra lovingly pet the girl’s muzzle as Alec continued his description. “Only thing is, if ye’re not mindin’ her every moment, she’ll turn for home first chance she gets.”

“Sounds like a smart girl,” Zahra said as she reached for a handful of oats from the bucket next to the gate of the pen, and offered it to the horse to munch out of her palm.

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” Alec said, feeling a lot more comfortable about this than he had been moments ago.
“Thank you, Master Alec,” Zahra said, and Alec just nodded before he left to get back to his duties. “You’re very beautiful, aren’t you, Brimstone? How’d you get a name like that, huh? Probably from the color of your mane?” The horse had a beautiful charcoal color that shimmered in the light. Alec said she was sweet and could go for days. Zahra liked the beast already.

Zahra spent some time bonding with Brimstone, before she eventually made her way back to Leoch, and her clinic therein. Rupert and Angus had trailed behind, but had left her at the stairs.

“I brought the port ye asked for,” a woman’s voice startled Zahra as she entered the surgery.

Zahra laughed softly and gripped at her chest, turning to the woman who’d surprised her. “Geillis, you startled me!”

Geillis beamed. “Mrs. Fitz told me I might find you down here,” the woman explained her presence. “Hope I’m not disturbing you.”

Zahra smiled and moved to give her friend a hug. “Not at all! I’m glad you stayed.”

Geillis handed her the small bottle of port. “Is Colum’s Rhenish not doing it for ye, then?”

Zahra smirked and reached for the bottle with a shake of her head. “No, that’s not it at all. I just needed a glass of deep red to show the children a really neat, and simple experiment that can turn water into wine” Zahra teased with a mischievous grin.

“Really, now?” Geillis questioned with a grin of her own. “Performing miracles wasnae enough to liken yerself to Christ?”

Zahra frowned a little and shook her head. “That’s not—what I intended. It’s simple chemistry. The wine is lighter than the water.”

“Oh, I ken whatcha mean, but I’m fairly certain Mr. Duncan’s port would be better intended as a drink, and not for science,” Geillis cautioned her.

Zahra was already in pretty hot water with Father Bain over the Baxter boy. Did Zahra really want to raise his ire against her even more by showing the children how to ‘turn water into wine’? “You’re probably right,” Zahra admitted and went to retrieve two clean glasses from one of the cabinets. She returned to Geillis to open the bottle and pour them each a drink. “Waste not,” Zahra said as she handed a glass to her friend. She invited Geillis to sit with her in the small lounge in the corner of the clinic.

“Oh dinnae worry. We have plenty o’ bottles collecting dust.” Geillis joined her friend in the small study and sat with her. “Something in port makes my husband fart like an ox.”

Zahra chuckled as she took a sip from her glass. “May I ask how you two met?”

Geillis shrugged. “Not much to tell I’m afraid... When I first came to Cranesmuir, all I had was my wits, ye ken?” Zahra nodded. “I had a fairish knowledge of the plants and their good uses, but I found a man with a respectable position, decent house, some money put away. I know he’s not much to look at, as ye well ken.” She giggled softly and took another sip of her wine. “But that doesnae trouble me much. I’m free. Can do whatever I please.”

Zahra nodded. “Are you happy?”
Geillis smiled and nodded. “Aye. I’m quite pleased.”

“Do you love him?” Zahra was asking the tough questions now. Oh, how the tides had turned.

“In a way, I suppose,” Geillis responded a bit flippantly as she busied herself by inspecting the bobbles on Zahra’s shelves. “Perhaps, not in the same way you and Mr. MacTavish have, but I can think of fates far worse than being a fiscal’s wife, can’t you?”

Zahra had to take stock in that moment of exactly how fortunate she was that her and Jamie did share the bond that they had. She imagined things might be playing out much differently for her if not. Lord knows Dougal seemed to have it in for her since the first time they met. Would he have tried to claim her instead? It was an unpleasant thought that Zahra immediately pushed out of her head.

“You’ve built quite the comfortable life for yourself.”

Geillis smiled, looking thoughtful. “Sometimes ye find yerself on a path ye never expected.” Zahra watched her fondly. “Doesnae mean it cannae lead you to a bonny place.”

Zahra’s heart swelled in her chest as Geilis, yet again, seemed to be able to speak to Zahra’s very soul, as if the other woman could see right to the core of her. Geillis was very intelligent and insightful. “I’m so glad I met you,” Zahra admitted with a soft smile. “I can’t imagine how—awful things would be if not for you and Jamie. I meant it when I said your friendship is precious to me. I hope you know that.”

Geillis’s eyes actually seemed to glass over, the first sincere show of emotion Zahra could remember seeing from the woman who was always so guarded and wore so many masks. Geillis reached out to touch Zahra’s hand. “Aye. And I hope you know I feel the same.”

Zahra turned her hand so their palms met and she squeezed, and the two shared a brief, surprisingly intimate moment. Zahra sniffled after a moment and took her hand back to take a drink of her wine. “Would you help me prepare for the hunt tomorrow?” Zahra asked after a spell.


Zahra nodded. “The MacKenzies have asked to have a healer along. I’m not sure what exactly I’ll need, but I’d like to be prepared for the worst.”

Geillis finished her glass then set it aside. Zahra stood and secured an apron about herself then handed one to Geillis as well. Together, the two ladies worked to prepare all sorts of ingredients and things Zahra may need on the hunt, for multiple worst case scenarios. A few pain draughts, a topical poultice or two to fight rashes and such, some clean bandages and cloths, and a few healing herbs. They chit-chatted and gossiped; Zahra regaled Geillis with a story from a time when her friend, Jim, had been stung by a wasp of some sort and his entire hand had swollen up as big as his head, and then the medicine their doctor, whom they called “Bones”, had given him had caused his tongue to go numb. It was a highly amusing story and had them both giggling and laughing by the end, though the port may have also contributed to their good moods.

They’d spent the majority of the afternoon, and had taken lunch together. Zahra had been highly disappointed when she hadn’t seen Jamie in the dining hall for the meal. She understood why he was ‘laying low’ as he’d said he would. She didn’t want him to be in any sort of danger, and the last thing he needed was to be dragged to the oath-taking by an overzealous kinsman, but she missed him. She was grateful more than ever for Geillis’s presence. Having a friend near was a great way to keep her mind off of it.

They parted ways eventually as they both needed to prepare for the Oath-taking event. “I’ll see you
tonight, then?” Geillis had said in the castle courtyard where Zahra had walked her out.

Zahra nodded. “Of course. I’ll be there with bells on.” Geillis smirked and tilted her head. That was not an expression she heard much. “Just means I’m excited.”

Geillis nodded. She knew what it meant, she was just surprised Zahra also knew what it. Geillis had that Mona Lisa smirk on her face again as she went in for a hug. “Til then, Zahra.” Zahra returned the hug and the two ladies parted company.

Zahra had a few surprise patients that afternoon, but, for the most part, had been left to her own vices. She took the time to have a fresh bath, and Fitz eventually helped her pick out a dress for the occasion. Glenna had insisted, since Zahra was Himself’s personal guest, that she needed to look her absolute best, to honor Laird MacKenzie. The dress she wore was a beautiful silky sort of plaid, with equally lovely petticoats, and an embroidered corset. It must have cost a pretty penny to make, and Zahra took that as an honour that Colum had left it for her. The sleeves were billowy at the ends, with lace trimming, and they covered her arms past her elbows. The silky green fingerless gloves she’d chosen covered the rest, and a matching choker ribbon had been secured about her neck. Yes, Glenna still didn’t approve Zahra to have her tattoos on display, but honestly Zahra didn’t mind. The discovery of the bioluminescent ink on her hand like the night Zahra had shown Jamie what foxfire was, was something she would very much rather avoid having to repeat.

By the time she was finished dressing, and her hair was braided formally as Glenna had suggested, the older woman guided her to a tall mirror and gazed fondly and proudly at Zahra’s reflection. Zahra had to admit, she looked very much the part. The dress was positively gorgeous, even if it was hot as hell, not to mention she felt uncomfortable not wearing any undergarments, but she could hardly sneak on her panties with Glenna there. The bodice and corset accentuated her bosom far more than Zahra was actually comfortable with, but then she’d asked Glenna if it was all right to wear Jamie’s engagement sash over her dress, to which Glenna had nodded her approval. So at least, she could use that to hide her chest if need be.

“Ye look sensational, dear,” Glenna said like a boastful mother.

“You’re sure it’s--not too much?” Zahra worried her bottom lip as she twisted and turned, inspecting herself.

Glenna said something in Gaelic, shaking her head. “Ye’re Colum’s personal guest, and ye look every bit the part, my dear. Worry no’.”

Zahra turned to give the woman a hug. “Thank you, Mrs. Fitz.”

Glenna returned the hug. “Ye’re welcome, dear. Now come. Ye’ve a gathering to get to, away with ye.”

Zahra laughed as the women exited her chambers and made their way down to the kitchen. Before Zahra could dare stop and offer to help and sully the work Glenna had done, the older woman shooed her away sternly. Before she left, though, Zahra spotted Angus, alone, so she approached the man. “Angus. Where’s your lovely lady friend?”

Angus leaned forward to glance out the open kitchen door, Zahra following suit, and she saw Rupert sat on the stairs with a brunette in his lap, and a blonde seated behind him, hanging on his shoulders. All three of them were talking and laughing and all otherwise engaged in a very public show of affection towards each other that bordered on scandalous. Zahra smirked, chuckling to herself then clapped Angus on the shoulder. “Oh, my dear, sweet Angus. Don’t worry. We’ll find you a nice supple lass before the night is through.”
“Ye’re a nice supple lass,” Angus teased with a grin, as his gaze dropped to her chest and he waggled his eyebrows at her. Zahra rolled her eyes, and moved the sash on her shoulder to cover her cleavage and she cleared her throat. “Auch, I’m jus’ playin’ wit’ ye,” he said in a sort of apology as he waved his hand in the air. “I’d never betray you or young Jamie like ‘at. ’sides… ye’re far too chatty and outspoken for my taste.”

Zahra rolled her eyes again, chuckling softly. “Thank heavens for that.” She nudged his shoulder with her own then got up to leave. “Save a dance for me, though, yeah?” Angus just lifted his mug at her and nodded his head in dismissal.

Zahra wandered a bit after that; grabbed a glass of rhenish to sip on the way. She eventually found Mrs. Fitz again who had done some pampering and dressing up of her own. The older woman was positively giddy with excitement. Glenna took Zahra’s hand and pulled her along into the main hall and onward through the castle. “We’d better hurry now. The beginning of the oath-taking is the best part... How do I look?”

The older woman’s excitement and merriment was infectious and Zahra found herself grinning, happily. “You look absolutely beautiful, Glenna.” Zahra lifted her skirts as she followed the older woman up the stairs to the balcony above the meeting hall reserved for the women, and onlookers who would not be taking part of the oath itself.

“Glenna!” A snooty looking brunette got Fitz’s attention.

“Iona,” Fitz responded and approached the woman with a smile.

“I see you have the place looking bright as a new pin.” Zahra could clearly hear the subtle sarcasm in the woman’s tone.

“Oh, that lovely dress again,” Glenna shot right back without hesitation. “Ye wore it so well to the last Gathering.” Zahra hid a smirk behind her hand as she stepped up beside Murtagh. “Murtagh,” Glenna greeted as she came in to touch his arm and encouraged him away from the wall.

“You don’t have to take the oath?” Zahra asked as he stepped up next to her.

“Nae. I’m no’ a MacKenzie,” Murtagh answered simply and since she remembered Angus and Jamie’s explanation of the oath-taking, Zahra understood why he didn’t have to. “Ye look bonny,” he said observationally, no hint of flirtation or lust in his words. The man eyed the sash she had pinned proudly to her shoulder and his mustachioed lips turned into what Zahra was beginning to recognize as his smile.

“Yeah, well, you can thank Fitz for that,” Zahra nodded at the woman. “All these layers, though,” she whispered out the side of her mouth. “--and I feel more naked now than ever.” Murtagh huffed a dry laugh and shook his head.

A piper began to play a marching durge as Colum entered the hall. Zahra watched with a smile as the man seemed to be walking better, with more ease since she’d started him on a regimen of physical therapy. He looked very regal and handsome, clean shaven, hair pulled back. He was very much every bit the Laird MacKenzie that night and the crowd parted and watched respectfully as he made his way to the stage set up by the hearth. Colum smiled, actually smiled as he leaned in to touch Hamish’s face and his wife said something very reverently, and affectionately in Gaelic.

Colum stood to look at the gathered company for a moment before he shouted something in their Scotch language and the crowd repeated it back excitedly. As Colum continued in Gaelic, Murtagh eventually leaned over to translate. “The MacKenzie’s welcoming the men to Leoch… He hopes
they had easy journeys.” A woman to her left shushed them very loudly, which caused both Murtagh and Zahra to turn and glance her way. The woman just nodded her head to the Laird. Murtagh shook his head and continued translating though a bit quieter now. “He also hopes that never a day will come when the clan’s fighting men will have to draw iron, but if they do… He couldn’t hope for a better lot than stands before him today—” There was a chorus of Ayes in response to that bit. “—to defend the clan’s honor.”

Zahra watched and listened as Colum continued his speech, then waited for Murtagh to translate. “Tis a right daft soul that would challenge the MacKenzies, weapons or no.” Colum was a very enthralling speaker. “And he’s proud to be called their Laird.” Zahra could see, could hear, could feel how seriously Colum took his role as Laird MacKenzie. It was inspiring. He ended his speech with a last, guttural shout, to which the crowd began to whoop and applaud. Zahra joined in their applause, which eventually died down as Dougal approached his brother.

The bald brother withdrew his dagger, before lowering himself to one knee before Colum, then lifted the dagger by the blade before he raised his head. “I swear by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the holy iron that I hold, to give ye my fealty… And to pledge ye my loyalty to the name of clan MacKenzie… and if ever I shall raise my hand against ye in rebellion, I ask that this holy iron shall pierce my heart.” It was a beautiful speech and Zahra wondered how much of it was an oath, and how much was a threat? Zahra watched as Dougal kissed the blade, then stood back to his full height and sheathed the dagger back into the holster at his belt. The two brothers then joined hands and Dougal placed a kiss on Colum’s knuckles.

Colum watched stoically before he leaned over to grab a ceremonial bowl and handed it to his brother to drink from. Dougal drank, then Colum took the bowl himself and he drank as well. The oath given and accepted for which they earned great applause, and a piper began to play as the crowd mingled and men began to form a line to swear their own oaths.

Angus was next, and his oath started the same as Dougal’s had. “Is every oath the same?” Zahra asked Murtagh next to her.

“Aye,” he said with a nod.

There were so many… This… was going to take a while. Zahra worried her bottom lip. She counted at least fifty men, and maybe two to three times that much waiting to get in line. This would take hours. Zahra was already going stir crazy and it was only five minutes in.

“I think I’m going to go get some air,” she said as she gave Murtagh and Glenna a wave and made her way down the stairs. Angus and Alec were exchanging a friendly embrace at the bottom of the stairs. Zahra smirked at their antics before coming to a stop. “All right, Angus my friend.” She clapped him on the shoulder. “Which of these pretty young things has stricken your fancy?”

Angus grinned at his charge then stood back to seriously look over the gathered crowd. “Oh, what about her?” He asked of a tall blonde with more bows in her hair than on her dress.

Zahra scoffed and shook her head. “If you want to constantly have to reassure her of her vanity and how beautiful she is all night, then sure.”

Angus shook his head. “And what about her?” he pointed out an obese but pretty maiden at the buffet.

Zahra huffed in amusement and shook her head. “The only cock she’s willing to get her hands on is one of the ones that have been plucked and cooked for tonight’s dinner.”
Angus grinned mercurially at his lady companion. He’d gotten more acquainted with Zahra’s unusually blunt and carefree way of speaking, but it still occasionally took him by surprise that a woman would speak so. The man turned to continue his perusal of the crowd, and was about to point out another unlikely candidate, when Zahra spotted the perfect one. “Her,” she said as she indicated a very docile looking raven haired beauty standing with, and yet apart from the crowd, sipping on a glass of sherry.

“Auch, why her?” Not that Angus was really complaining, but she looked so uptight.

Little did Angus know that, what he was seeing as uptight, Zahra very easily recognized as a woman who liked control which was exactly what Angus needed in a woman. Someone who was docile and withdrawn in public, but behind closed doors was all about taking charge. “Trust me, Angus. She is exactly what you want tonight.”

Angus grinned and rubbed his hands together before reaching for a nearby goblet of wine and Downing it in a few swallows. He managed to catch the woman’s eye after that and she gave him a once over that was definitely full of interest, but then she turned her face away as if she didn’t care. “Oh, I think ye may be right,” Angus said before he started making his way in her direction.

That left Zahra in Auld Alec’s presence. “Is your wife here, Alec? I’d love to meet her,” Zahra asked. Alec’s smile fell into a soft frown and Zahra saw him fiddle with his ring finger. Her brow furrowed and she reached out to touch his arm gently. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

Alec huffed and shook his head. “Tis all right, lass. Ye weren’t to know. Besides it was ages ago.”

“Yeah but, when it’s great love, it stays with you your whole life. She must have been quite the woman... I’m sorry for your loss,” Zahra said genuinely and removed her hand from his arm.

Alec looked at Zahra seriously for a moment. She was a rare woman indeed. A little strange, and far too outspoken for your average man. Jamie definitely had his hands full but, then again, Jamie was a rare specimen himself. Alec cleared his throat after a moment. “That old girl I showed you? Well, she wouldnae let me check her hooves after ye left. I think ye’ve already ruined her for any other rider. Ye may, uh—” He cleared his throat again. “That is, if ye get the chance ye may want to give her a check in the stables... tonight... before the hunt tomorrow. I can escort ya if ye’d like?”

Zahra realized what Alec was saying without actually saying anything. Was it about the horse, or maybe could this possibly be about Jamie? Was that too much to hope for? Her heart was beating a tattoo against her ribcage. “Thank you, Master Alec. I would appreciate that, but--only if it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all, lass,” he assured her.

“Let me grab my coat,” she said as she made her way down to her clinic to grab her cloak. After she fetched it, and as she reached the top landing of the stairs, Laoghaire was there waiting for her. “Laoghaire, hello. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Laoghaire worried on her bottom lip and wrung her hands together. “I’m sorry, Mistress. I dinnae mean to disturb you.”

“Is someone else hurt or ill?” Zahra probed further when the girl seemed to not be more forthcoming. Laoghaire shook her head again but did not seem to be in any sort of hurry to tell Zahra what she
needed. “What’s this about, sweetheart?” Zahra tried to give her an opening.

“How--do ye know--when ye’re in love?”

Zahra gave the girl a gentle, understanding smile. “Well, I can’t say. It’s--different for every person.”

“When did you know you were in love?”

“With Mr. MacTavish?” Zahra asked. Laoghaire nodded. “Well… I think my soul recognized him for what he was the moment we met, but--I don’t think I actually knew, or understood, or fully realized that I was in love with him until--the night I took punishment for you.”

Laoghaire worried her bottom lip harder and lowered her gaze. “How did you know?”

Zahra inhaled and shrugged. “I wish I knew how to describe it to you, Laoghaire. It’s just something you feel. Like… I knew that Jamie made me feel safe and protected and wanted along with a dozen other emotions I don’t have the vocabulary to describe… I just--I knew I wanted to be with him and no one else, ever.”

“And ye’re sure he returns your love?”

Zahra’s brows pinched together. What was she trying to get at? Was she still thinking she could woo Jamie her way? “Yes, I’m sure,” Zahra said matter of factly.

“But how do ye know?” Laoghaire persisted annoyingly and Zahra’s patience was growing thin.

“Because he told me, multiple times, in many different ways, and even in a couple different languages.”

“What did he say?”

Zahra was done with this conversation. “What Jamie and I say to each other, especially in regards to our feelings and our relationship, is our business. It’s private, between him and me; do you understand?”

“I’m sorry, Mistress. I meant no offense. I just--”

“Laoghaire, look,” Zahra began, leaning forward to place her hand comfortingly on the girl’s shoulder. “I do not blame you for the way you feel about Jamie. He is a wonderful man, and incredibly easy on the eyes... but you only belittle and embarrass yourself by pining after someone who has never and will never return your affections.” Laoghaire had tears forming in her eyes. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, sweetheart. I just want to help you see that--you’re a sweet, beguiling, beautiful, young girl with her whole life ahead of her. You have far greater worth than a few meaningless snogging sessions in the pantry, you know what I mean?” Laoghaire sniffled and wiped at her face, but nodded. “If the only reason a man is paying attention to you is because of the way you look, or because of how well you can kiss, and has no care for your heart or your honor, well then that man doesn’t deserve even a smidgen of your attention or affections. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Laoghaire sniffled again and wiped her eyes. “I--think so.”

“Just remember… No one is going to want to buy the cow if you’re giving the milk away for free.” Zahra hated that analogy, and every feminist instinct she possessed was screaming at her for saying that, but this wasn’t her time. Laoghaire had no practical skills. She would not make it on her own without a husband or someone to take care of her.
“I’m sorry for bothering you, Mistress,” the girl said.

Zahra shook her head and pulled the girl into a gentle hug. “Us ladies gotta stick together and look out for each other, ya know? Lord knows most men won’t bother. If you ever need to talk, or vent, or get away from your overbearing father, or anything. I’ll be here. You can come talk to me anytime, my door is open.”

“Thank you, Zahra,” Laoghaire said with a smile, the tears all but gone.

Zahra nodded and gave the girl a couple pats on the shoulders before they both walked back out to the main hall.

Zahra found Alec who had been waiting for her. “Sorry. Had to help talk some sense into a distressed young girl. Thank you for waiting.”

Alec nodded in understanding. He had grabbed a lantern while she was gone and together they exited Leoch and made their way by lantern light across the grounds to the stables. A short while later, they were stopping outside the stable door. “Think ye can find ye’re own way back?” He asked as he opened the door for her. The inside was already lit by lantern and candlelight.

“I’m sure I can manage,” she said with a smile. “Thank you.” The man nodded and turned to leave. Zahra lifted her petticoats as she made her way further into the stables towards Brimstone’s pen. She ended up tripping over something, and gasped when a moment later she found herself pinned to her back with a knife pointed dangerously at her.

The moment Jamie recognized her, he immediately relaxed, going from ready to kill an intruder, to regretful and apologetic in record time. “Leeloo?” his face fell into a slight frown as he put the knife back in the scabbard on his belt. “What the devil are ye doin’ here?”

“Alec said Brimstone wouldn’t let him check her hooves,” she said as he helped her to her feet, and picked the bits of straw from her hair, and off her cloak. “I kind of figured it was some sort of code.”

Jamie’s hands moved to hold her face. He was leaning in the next moment to press a kiss to her lips that was full of hunger and longing, and successfully stole Zahra’s breath away. Zahra wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled herself against him as his own arms moved to wrap around her waist as the kiss deepened. “I’ve missed you,” Jamie spoke between peppering kisses all over her face. “So much… But ye shouldnae be here.”

Zahra gripped the material of his shirt in both hands as he kissed her all over. “I know. I know I can’t stay but--I needed to see you. Even if it’s just for a little while.”

Jamie held her face gently. “Oh, a gràidh.” He pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. “I’m so happy you’re here. I’ve thought about ye all day, but--ye cannae stay.”

“Will you just--hold me, just for a little bit?” she begged.

Jamie gave her another lingering kiss before pulling her into his arms and holding her close, resting his cheek against the top of her hair. “I could never deny you, my love.” Zahra wrapped her arms around his back, rested her head against his shoulder, and closed her eyes just listening to his heart and his breathing; focused on his hand that was gently rubbing her back. They stayed this way for a while, before Jamie gently tapped her waist. “Come on. I’ll take you back.”

Zahra leaned away but shook her head. “It’s too risky. I can find my own way back.” She stood to grab a lantern off one of the posts.
Jamie stopped her by gently taking her arm. “It’s no’ safe to go alone.”

Zahra rolled her eyes playfully. “I know, but I’ll be fine. I can handle the short walk back to the castle, I promise.”

Jamie inhaled deeply before he leaned in for a final kiss. “Be careful,” he urged with concern clear in his eyes and on his face.

Zahra touched his face and smiled. “Always,” she said before she grabbed the lantern and moved to leave. Jamie watched her from the stable doorway for a moment until her lantern light disappeared from view.

It was a short walk back to Leoch, she should be fine. What Zahra hadn’t counted on, however, was that several of the men had already left the castle and were out celebrating and drinking in the dark. When she rounded the hill they were setting on, she accidentally tripped over one, and was then caught by another.

“Woah, hoh, hoh, boys, what have we here?” The man tried to grip her waist and Zahra struggled to free herself with a firm elbow to the gut which made the man release her. She ran several steps, only to be seized about the waist by another man.

“Easy now, lassie,” he said. “Stay an’ ‘ave a drink wi’ us!”

“No, thank you,” she declared as she wrestled herself out of his grasp as well.

“A spirited faery, ye are,” a third man said as he approached from her left.

“Ye’re that healer, wench, aren’t you?” A fourth one chimed in, and two more were on their way, making it six against one. They were all disgustingly drunk and closing their distance around her, circling her in. “That’s good, because I think I’m in need of ye’re special touch.”

One of them reached for her chest, and he got a palm to his nose while another reached for her waist, and he got a knee to the groin, but there were still three more. Zahra managed to punch one in the jaw, and kick another one in the shin, but where one fell, one or two more took his place, like a hydra, only meaner and angrier, and more aggressive with each strike. Maybe if they weren’t all of them twice her size, and maybe if they weren’t all of them strong, drunken Scottish soldiers, she might have stood a chance. It didn’t matter how much training in combat she had when faced with those odds. It didn’t matter how much she tried to fight and struggle, she soon had her arms and legs immobilized as they lifted her off the ground.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” She cried. Even if she still managed to get a few good kicks and punches in, they still overpowered her. Unable to help herself as panic began to set in, she screamed, and struggled harder. “No! Let me the fuck go!” Panic rose like bile in her throat as she felt them pushing her to the ground. “No!” She screamed. “Don’t! Please! HEL--” She started to scream before one of them had their hand over her mouth, muting her cries.

No sooner had she been pinned to the ground than she heard a furious battle cry and Jamie was suddenly tackling one man to the ground and pummeling his face in. Zahra recognized Rupert’s thick Gaelic shouting and yelling as he tried to pull Jamie off, only the gang of would-be-rapists thought he was with Jamie and so Rupert was pulled into the brawl. The ones holding her, released Zahra to engage the two newcomers. Normally, Zahra would have joined in the fight herself, but, looking back on it later, she would realize that she was in shock. The panic, fear, and anxiety were still gripping hard, not letting her move.
Jamie and Rupert were a couple of natural fighters and brawlers, holding their own remarkably, but the odds were still not in their favor, especially with how drunk Rupert was. In the end, Jamie had ended up restrained on his knees between two men, glaring murder at them all.

“Are ye all right?” Jamie asked Zahra once he met her eyes.

“I’m fine. They didn’t--” She began to say, then gripped at his sash to hold against her chest.

“Wait…” One of the ones holding Jamie said. “I know you! Ye’re Colum’s nephew!” The drunks had all already sworn their oaths but had not seen Jamie in the hall to do the same. “Come late to the oath-taking are ye not? Ye dinnae want to miss your turn in front of Himself.”

They pulled Jamie to his feet and the man struggled briefly until he saw them let Rupert go and watched the man help a shocked Zahra to her feet. Her eyes locked with Jamie’s and she swallowed hard. “I’m fine!” She called out to him so he’d stop. Jamie turned to look at her as her and Rupert followed so Jamie let them escort him calmly the rest of the way into the castle. Murtagh and Angus had managed to see them enter and watched curiously. Zahra found Murtagh’s eyes in the crowd and gave him a warning look as the group led Jamie to a room down the hallway where he could dress.

Jamie had been eerily calm the whole way down. The moment they released him, however, the man suddenly sprang into action and had the ‘leader’ of the group pinned to the wall with a dagger at his throat. The other men reacted as if to draw their own blades, but Zahra had jumped up between them along with Rupert, and Murtagh and Angus, who had come from seemingly out of nowhere. Zahra turned and stepped up behind Jamie to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. She could understand Jamie’s anger, hell, she wanted to hurt them all herself, but the last thing she wanted was to be responsible for a rift between him and his clansmen, nor the two of them running for their lives.

“Jamie, please. When I said I was willing to join you on the run as an outlaw, I hadn’t meant that seriously.”

Jamie’s nostrils flared and he took several breaths in and out. He wanted nothing more than to slaughter this man who had been mere moments away from raping the love of his life. The Highlander may still be sporting the brunt of Jamie’s anger, but it wasn’t enough. When Jamie spoke, his words were calm, and quiet, but full of venom and intent, and spoken through clenched teeth. “If any of you so much as bloody look at my betrothed again… Kin or no, I will end you where you stand. Ye ken?” The woman they had tried to assault was Jamie’s fiancee? Lord, if he’d attacked them with more than his fists, it was likely they would all be dead right now. They were all aware at that point that they were lucky to be alive. Jamie was serious, and they knew it.

“Aye,” the man said as he swallowed hard.

It wasn’t until Murtagh’s hand joined Zahra’s on Jamie’s opposite shoulder, and a few calming words were spoken into his ear, that Jamie finally withdrew his dagger. He shoved the man’s head harder against the wall for emphasis before he moved away and sheathed his weapon.

He turned to Zahra and held her face firmly in his hands and spoke to her in Gaelic. She didn’t understand but she knew she needed to calm him down. “I’m fine, Jamie. Honest.” She pressed her forehead to his, touching and stroking his face. “They really didn’t hurt me, I promise. I was just--in shock. I was scared, that’s all. I’m fine… I’m fine.”

Jamie pressed a kiss to her forehead, held her close, and whispered several phrases to her in his native tongue. Zahra inhaled deeply and exhaled a sigh. Just like that the last vestiges of her anxiety faded, as did much of his own. They stayed that way for a time before Murtagh squeezed Jamie’s shoulder again. “C’mon, lad. Let’s get ye cleaned up.”
“Go. I’ll be fine,” she assured him with a squeeze of his hand. Angus and Rupert were suddenly there on either side of her, each holding one of her shoulders. “See?” she said, teary eyed. Jamie gave both men a serious look before letting Murtagh escort him away, with the ‘gang’ of highlanders on his heels.

In those knowing glances from each of her companions, a silent vow had been exchanged; that they would watch and protect her while Jamie was gone. A vow they both took very seriously, as neither of them wanted anything to happen to Zahra anymore than Jamie did. Against all odds, and probably against Dougal’s wishes, the woman had become important to them. A comrade. A friend. A sister. Normally, Zahra would have railed against needing or wanting their ‘protection’, insisting she didn’t need it and could take care of herself, but in that moment, in light of her almost rape, she was grateful to have it, because despite all outward appearances, she was shaken to her very core.

She slowly made her way to the hall, with Angus and Rupert lingering close by. Each man grabbed a fresh drink. Rupert grabbed one to offer to Zahra as well, figuring she’d need it, but the woman just shook her head and declined. Geillis found her eventually and tried to inquire after what happened when she noticed how slightly disheveled her friend looked. Geillis pulled Zahra into a washing room and helped her fix her hair, and right her bodice and the sash around her shoulders. Zahra told her about going to see Jamie and what had happened on the way back, and how Jamie was now being prepared to take his own oath and it was all Zahra’s fault. Geillis had been at a loss for words, and so had just hugged her friend firmly. Once Zahra had calmed, they walked, arm in arm, back out to the main hall together to wait.

After a brief spell, Murtagh eventually took up space at Zahra’s side again, making her take in a deep, sharp breath as tears filled her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered to Murtagh regretfully.

Murtagh turned her, taking her firmly by the shoulders. “Nae, Mistress. That wasnae yer fault, ye ken?”

Zahra shook her head, a single tear slipping down her cheek. “But, if I hadn’t gone to see him--”

Murtagh grabbed her chin, squishing her mouth closed and making her look at him. Jamie had told him everything that had happened while they were dressing and cleaning him up. “That--was nae--yer fault.” Murtagh insisted firmly, staring into her eyes seriously, holding her gaze intently until he was sure his words had sunk in.

Zahra’s eyes overflowed, a couple tears spilling down her cheeks, but they were more tears of relief than of sadness in that moment. She couldn’t help it when she wrapped the older man up in a hug. Murtagh tensed up at first, surprised at the embrace. He relaxed a moment later, though, and wrapped his arms around her in a fatherly sort of embrace. He then gave her an awkward pat or two on the shoulder, indicating he was done. Zahra sniffled and pulled away from him, freeing him from the awkwardness. Geillis pulled a handkerchief from her dress pocket and handed it to Zahra, who thanked her before she used it wipe her nose and eyes. Zahra gripped the cloth in her fist as she turned to continue watching the oaths and Geillis took her arm comfortingly.

When Jamie made his appearance, Zahra gripped Murtagh’s hand tightly out of nerves, and an eerie hush befell the crowd as everyone stared at his approach. Zahra’s focus was zeroed in on Jamie, but still taking in their surroundings. There was no way she would let anyone hurt him. She would go down fighting if she had to. She already knew there were at least a dozen swords or daggers within easy reach that she was confident she would be able to get to before their owners, should the worst thing happen. In fact, she was entirely prepared to do just that and her fingers itched to reach for the blade on the belt of the drunken MacKenzie man standing next to her. Murtagh was suddenly taking her hand and squeezing it. When Zahra met his gaze, he shook his head. How had he known or
sensed what she was thinking?

Zahra worried on her bottom lip nervously, and instead of gripping onto Geillis, she took Murtagh’s arm in both of hers. Jamie approached Colum and took a knee. Zahra inhaled sharply and held it there, baiting her breath as she watched anxiously. She had a deathgrip on Murtagh’s hand as Jamie suddenly stood. Dougal had started to draw his dagger, which made Zahra reach for the dagger on the belt of the man next to her, but Murtagh grabbed both of her hands by the wrist and pinned them to her sides forcefully. “Nae!” he whispered harshly against her ear just before Jamie began to speak.

“Colum MacKenzie,” Jamie began seriously. Confidently. “I come to you as Kinsman and as an ally… But I give ye no vow... For my oath is pledged to the name that I bear.” Several men seemed to take that personally as they started to draw their blades. Zahra struggled against Murtagh, desiring greatly to take up arms to defend her love, but Murtagh had wrapped his arms fully around her now, pinning her in as he whispered firmly in her ear to calm herself and wait. Zahra was near hysterics. She couldn’t just stand by and watch them kill him. “Please!” she quietly begged.

“Wait!” Murtagh whispered back.

“I give you my obedience, as kinsman,” Jamie continued. “And, as Laird, and I hold myself bound to yer word so long as my feet rest on the lands of the clan MacKenzie.” Zahra was breathing hard, tears filling her eyes once more as she waited in Murtagh’s grasp.

When Colum turned to grab the ceremonial bowl, Zahra let out the breath she had been holding and her body immediately relaxing in Murtagh’s arms. Colum handed the bowl to Jamie to drink. It wasn’t a vow of fealty, but Colum still accepted it and so then would everyone have to accept it. Zahra turned and gave Murtagh a relieved hug which the man gladly reciprocated this time, both of them feeling a heavy, overwhelming sense of relief. When Jamie finished drinking, the gathered clan erupted in applause.

Colum shouted something in Gaelic and immediately the band began to play a very lively tune. Murtagh let Zahra go, and the woman pushed and shoved her way through the crowd before she practically threw herself into Jamie’s arms. The man was smiling and laughing as he easily took her weight and spun her about a few times before setting her back on her feet. The two then shared a fierce, desperate kiss before Murtagh was slapping Jamie on the shoulder, pulling his attention for a moment. Murtagh gave the young man a stern look. “Ye’re too old for this,” he said, before they exchanged a brief, familial hug equipped with manly pats on the back. When it was over, Murtagh stepped back to let them continue their canoodling.

Jamie reached for his fiancee, and Zahra lifted her arms around his neck, carding her fingers through his hair as she pressed her forehead to his. “Please, let’s not do anything like that ever again.”

Jamie smirked and lifted his hands to hold her face as he pressed his lips to hers in a soft kiss. “Agreed,” he said with a playful smirk. Their private moment was short lived; everyone was breaking out in dance and Zahra and Jamie were eagerly pulled into it. Zahra laughed happily as they joined the dance. The oath-taking was over. Jamie no longer had any risk of being murdered by his kin and therefore no longer had any reason or excuse to hide from them. Which meant he and Zahra were free to be seen together once more. The night might have had a few scary moments, but it had ended on a high note. Zahra would definitely call it a win.

She danced with all of her friends. She pushed Angus into the arms of the raven-haired queen from earlier in the evening and the man managed to impress the woman with how surprisingly agile he was on his feet. Jamie even offered to take Laoghaire for a whirl without Zahra having to ask, but she was happy to say that the girl definitely did not seem as starstruck and moon-eyed at the man as she had been previously. Maybe Zahra’s little speech had gotten to her after all?
"Look who's become the life of the party," Dougal spoke next to her, as Zahra had taken a step back for a breather and to get a new glass of wine.

"Yes, well, having fun is what one is supposed to do at parties is it not?" Zahra met Jamie's eyes briefly across the floor, and she noticed how eager the man seemed to be when he saw her with Dougal. Zahra shook her head, and smiled. She was fine. He was fine.

"Have I mentioned how bonny ya look tonight?" Dougal said, with a definite touch of lechery in his voice and she could practically feel his eyes on her chest.

Zahra smirked and let out a dry huff of amusement as she subconsciously moved Jamie’s sash to cover her cleavage. "Thank you. All Mrs. Fitz’s doing, I assure you. And may I say you’re looking positively dapper there, as well, Mr. MacKenzie."

Dapper? He didn’t know what it meant, whether it was an insult or a compliment so he ignored it. "Heard ye had a run in with some clansmen?" Dougal probed cautiously.

Zahra took in a deep breath and exhaled in a puff of air. “Yes, but—no harm done… Except maybe to that guy’s face,” she said as she pointed out the man whom Jamie had pummeled. He had been cleaned up but one of his eyes was swollen shut, and he had a fat lip and a bruised jaw.

“Does insulting my clansmen amuse you, Mistress?” Dougal accused.

Zahra was really not in the mood for this. She’d had a really fucking awful night that had actually turned out pretty awesome in the end, but now Dougal had to come along to fuck it all up with his fuckery. She was not in the mood for this shit. “I don’t know, my laird. Does knowing six of your clansmen attempted to gangrape me amuse you?”

Dougal looked as if he’d been stricken at her words. Zahra downed the rest of her wine then handed him her empty glass, which he took without thinking. “Excuse me, my laird. I promised someone a dance.” With that she was off, blending her way smoothly into the crowd. She found Jamie and Laoghaire and, surprisingly, instead of cutting in to dance with Jamie, Zahra instead cut in to dance with Laoghaire. Both Laoghaire and Jamie laughed at her antics as Zahra led the girl through a few steps. Soon enough, however, Zahra was passing Laoghaire off to a nice looking young gentleman who had been staring at the girl all not but not staring at the girl’s chest. He was polite and friendly, and was happy to strike up a conversation with her as they danced.

Dougal could admit he was a hard man, mean, gruff, a complete asshole by nature, but he’d never forced himself on a woman in his life. Sure, he’d seduced and shagged his fair share, but they’d always been willing participants, hadn’t they? Had they, though? Zahra’s accusation had seemed to strike a heavy chord with Dougal and he was deep in thought as he watched her flitter about like a butterfly. The man kept trying to tell himself that Zahra was dangerous, that he needed to be careful, that they all needed to be careful, but maybe it was Dougal himself who was the danger to Zahra here and not the other way around? She had seemed to earn loyalties and friendships wherever she went. Even Dougal’s own brother, and a handful of his soldiers seemed taken with her. Which either meant she was the best bloody assassin/spy he had ever known, or maybe, just maybe she was genuinely a good person and he was too blinded by his own bigotry, paranoia, and trust issues to see it. Dougal ended up retiring early with his thoughts for the night, and Zahra was honestly glad to see him go.
Zahra ended up treating her fair share of headaches the following morning, but for the most part everyone seemed to be in mighty fine spirits. She’d dressed as comfortably as she could in a comfortable cotton frock, and she’d decided to wear her leggings underneath her petticoats. If she was going to be roughing it today outdoors with the boys, she definitely wanted to be comfortable and prepared. So, yes, she’d pulled her leggings on before donning the rest of her petticoats and such.

She’d grabbed an apron from the surgery, and pinned Jamie’s sash around her neck like a scarf to finish her ensemble. She picked up her hiking satchel which her and Geillis had loaded and prepared the day before with all the supplies they thought she’d need. Once she was ready, Zahra made her way out to the castle courtyard, where she found Rupert sharpening a spear.

“Tis a braw day for a boar tynchal, is it no?” he asked her with a playful grin. Zahra was very well aware of the dangers of a boar hunt. Boars were wild and dangerous and their tusks could easily gut a man in an instant.

Rupert was sporting quite the shiner from the brawl from yesterday and Zahra tilted her head at him. “Aye,” she said, apparently having spent enough time around these people that she was starting to pick up a little of their speech. “Reminds me of the legend of the golden stag, only less Herculean, and more--backwoodsman.” She smirked a little before stepping forward and gently pressing her thumb to the bruise around Rupert’s eye. Rupert flinched slightly and tilted his head away. “Does it hurt?” Zahra asked.

Rupert huffed a dry laugh and shook his head. “Not ‘til ye went pokin’ at it.”

“Can you see alright?” Zahra asked, concerned. Rupert would need all his wits and senses about him today. They all would.

Rupert nodded. “Aye, lass, stop fashin’ yerself. We’ve a boar to hunt.”

A boar hunt was nothing to balk at. The beasts were wild, and frenzied, and could easily gut a man with a simple turn of the head. Boar tusks were vicious and dangerous. Zahra was under no illusions of how treacherous this hunt could be today. “You know, I would feel much better about my
personal safety if I could get some sort of weapon to protect myself,” she commented as she made her way toward the horses.

Jamie was suddenly there, having been on his way to her already, and so he’d overheard her words. “Aye. I’d probably feel the same.”

Zahra looked over at him. “Good morning,” she greeted him with a kiss which he returned.

“Now, what exactly would ye do with a blade, lass? Other than hurt yerself?” Rupert knew Zahra was a strong woman who’d been through a lot, but he still doubted she had any sort of training other than the healing stuff, and womanly, household things.

“Why don’t you lend me one and find out?” she dared, which only made Rupert roll his eyes and laugh as he headed to the horses. Dougal would have his hide if he did such a thing, and when she really did hurt herself, then where would they be?

Jamie, however, knew more than Rupert and so he lagged back a bit then stopped her with a gentle pull on her hand. Zahra turned to him then, questioningly. “Everything alright?” she asked. He himself had a bruise on his jaw from the night before, but seemed otherwise unscathed.

Jamie nodded, then after checking to make sure no one was watching, he reached down to pull the sgian-dubh knife out of his boot. It was a small knife, with a custom grip and matching sheath that bore the crest and insignia of the Fraser clan. Jamie showed it to Zahra briefly, before unpinning her sash so he could tuck it firmly down her bodice, against her sternum, between her breasts. He then helped her repin her sash. Zahra’s heart was fluttering in her chest as she reached up to touch his cheek. If anyone caught her with it they would know without a doubt who’d given it to her. It was another risk Jamie was taking, but for her safety and peace of mind, it was a risk he willingly took.

“Thank you,” she said softly. Jamie just nodded. After last night, he never wanted her to be without a way to protect herself ever again. If she’d had more than her fists to defend herself, Jamie very much doubted those men would have gotten as far as they had.

Jamie held her face for a long moment, gazing into her eyes longingly, then he was suddenly leaning in to press their mouths together in a tender, but passionate, and sensual kiss. “Auch! You two!” Rupert called back to them loudly, annoyed. “Ye can pash all ya want after the hunt!”

“Aye, numpty. We’re coming,” Jamie called as they broke apart from each other. Jamie took her hand in his as they headed to the horses.

At the horses, Zahra greeted Brimstone with a smile and softly spoken words of adoration, then gave the beast an affectionate pet on the muzzle, and neck. She took hold of the reigns and hoisted her skirts a ways before she mounted. Her skirts had ridden high up her calf, showing off the fact that she was wearing her own military boots from the first night they’d met, and her leggings underneath her dress. Rupert had seen, and Zahra addressed his questioning gaze. “What? You really expect me to rough it out here with you fucks in just my petticoats and slippers?” Rupert glanced at Jamie, who just shrugged his shoulders. The woman had a point. This was not an event for the dainty and tender footed.

Once everyone was ready, they all headed off into the woods. It was a short journey to the boars known nesting grounds and would mostly needed to be taken on foot. Most of the hunters dismounted their horses. Jamie sidled up along side Zahra and the woman reached over to touch his arm. “Please, be careful,” she cautioned before he leaned in to give her a kiss.
“Always,” the man confirmed as he dismounted his own horse and with spear and shield retrieved from his saddle, he followed Rupert into the trees.

Zahra dismounted as well, and led Brimstone by the reigns along behind the majority of the group; watching, listening. The steady beat of weapons banged against shields was like a marching rhythm, trying to lure the animal from its den. Zahra was nervous, but also anxious and excited. She enjoyed a good hunting party. What she wouldn’t do for a nice bow and arrow right about now. There were plenty of good opportunities for trees to climb around here, and vines and branches to move from. Stealth was her name de plume, especially when hunting was involved. She hated being so vulnerable out in the open, even if her job was only supposed to be emergency healer for the day.

The banging of the shields got louder, and faster, which could only mean the men were closing in on their quarry and Zahra was tense as she focused her hearing, preparing for the worst. She secured the strap of her hiking pack turned emergency medical satchel more firmly about her shoulder and brushed Brimstone’s muzzle which was more to calm herself than the beast. Brimstone was a picture of calm.

Zahra heard a horse’s painfilled whinny followed by a man’s scream, and she hoisted her skirts and took off in a run in the direction they came from. “Mistress Zahra!” Rupert called out to her as he approached the downed man.

Zahra quickly came upon the scene and moved to assess the damage. The man was moaning and groaning, and nursing a bleeding leg. Zahra quickly pulled her bag around and poured some strong moonshine type alcohol from a bottle onto her hands. “What, did you forget a boar’s tusks are lethal?” she chastised him as she worked to clean and bandage the man’s leg. She managed to slow the bleeding and made a field tourniquet to prevent more blood loss, but otherwise there was nothing else she could do for him out here. “He’ll need to be brought back to the castle. Tell Mrs. Fitz to give him some hot broth and some blankets. His leg will require stitches but I don’t have any sterile tools here.”

“So, he’ll be alright, then?” Rupert asked, concerned.

“Yes,” Zahra assured the young man. “You’ll be fine. You may have a limp for a while, but you’ll be fine.” She finished securing the bandages and cleaned her hands again with another sprinkling of the alcohol from that bottle. She dried her hands on her apron, then helped Rupert get the lad to his feet. “Looks like wild boar, one. MacKenzie men, zero. Next time why don’t you try fishing, instead?”

Zahra’s head shot up when she heard another blood curdling cry. “Go!” Rupert declared. “I’ve got him, go!”

“Take him back, now!” Zahra gathered her bag and took off through the trees like a bat out of hell. Her heart was pounding in her chest because she’d lost sight of Jamie and the fact that that scream could have come from him had fear and anxiety gripping at her chest. She ended up tearing her skirt on a sharp root but paid it no heed as she tried to find where the scream had come from.

She heard a snuffling sound, followed by another scream. “Where are you?” she called out to the trees. It was like that night with the baby all over again. She jogged over roots and trees, and suddenly a loud snorting roar sounded from her left and she cried out in surprise and alarm as a huge boar began to bear down on her. Zahra immediately ran for the closest tree, putting her parkour skills to the test when she ran up the trunk of it and jumped for the lowest hanging branch to pull herself up onto it. The boar huffed and roared and bashed at the trunk of the tree until a deafening musket shot had her covering her ears, and the boar collapsed motionless to the ground.
Zahra turned to see Dougal standing looking very stoic and regal as his form was silhouetted by the fog of the morning. The two met gazes for a moment before Dougal lowered his musket.

“Zahra!” Jamie cried, who was suddenly there beneath her. He’d gotten instructions of where she’d headed from Rupert. The sight of the fallen pig had him pausing but then there was another scream and as he looked up he saw his uncle take off in its direction. “Come!” Jamie extended his arms, urging Zahra down from the tree. He would have the chance later to marvel at how in the blazes she’d even managed to get up there in the first place, as the branch was easily twelve feet high. Zahra quickly sat on the branching, hanging her feet before she jumped down into Jamie’s strong waiting arms.

Jamie caught her easily, and set her on her feet. “Come!” he said again as he gripped her hand and the two took off in a run after Dougal.

They came upon a devastating scene a few minutes later. Dougal had a man’s head in his lap. “Now then. Now then, Geordie, now then. Ye’re gonna be alright.” Dougal stroked his head, holding him close. “I’ve got ye man, ok?” Zahra released Jamie’s hand and quickly raced to the injured man’s side, sliding to her knees. “Ye’ll be alright, now,” Dougal assured him with a smile.

Zahra quickly assessed the damage she could see. She pulled back the fabric of the man’s leggings and saw the wound flowing blood down his leg. “Dougal,” the man breathed out weakly. “Is it bad?”

Dougal met Zahra’s eyes and she nodded her head. It wasn’t just bad, it was awful, but she would do everything she could. Dougal gazed back into Geordie’s eyes. “You’ll be fine,” he said with a teary smile.

His leg wasn’t gushing or spirting which meant the femoral artery had not been cut. That was the only positive. Zahra grabbed a long strip of bandage and tightly bound a tourniquet around his thigh, to stop the bleeding... It was then she noticed the blood staining the man’s shirt and the tear in the fabric. She lifted the man’s shirt, where she saw more blood, and what she saw underneath had her heart drop.

“Will I lose my leg?” Geordie asked.

“No!” Zahra assured him as she grabbed more bandages. “No, you won’t.” Saving his leg would only allow him to linger in increasing agony until he succumbed to the wound in his gut. Even if she managed to save his leg, the wound to his abdomen was fatal. The boar had speared him messily, sliced open his stomach six ways to Sunday. She had no such tools or equipment available anywhere in this century that could save him from such a wound.

She met Dougal’s questioning gaze, and shook her head. She silently indicated the wound in his gut with a nod of her head. Dougal looked where she indicated, then back at the woman with sadness etched into his brow. She gave Dougal a sorrowful look and shook her head again. They held each other’s gaze for a long moment, before Dougal turned and gripped Geordie tighter in his arms. The older man said something in their native tongue, before he reached down to untie the tourniquet around Geordie’s leg, mercifully giving the man a better death. To die quickly under the sky, than wallowing in pain in Zahra’s surgery.

“Dougal, man?” Geordie asked weakly.

“Aye. I’m here,” he responded.

“I need to know, after we--naid the clan--clan MacDonald--and stole the twenty kine from under
their noses…”

Dougal smiled and rubbed Geordie’s head. “Aye, I remember,” he reminisced fondly. “We held up at Florrach for days… But we ate well, no?”

“Aye,” Geordie answered. “Aye we did for sure.”

Zahra sat back on her heels, and Jamie’s hand was there resting on her shoulder comfortingly a moment later. Almost the entire hunting party had gathered around now.

“Tell me here, now, man,” Geordie continued firmly, despite his condition. “Did you bed my sister, Doreen?”

Dougal actually managed a smirk and he tilted his head. “Aye,” he answered softly, apologetically. “I did bed her… But, you know, she was a bonny lass.”

“I ken it,” Geordie responded weakly. “You always could charm the lassies.”

Dougal’s head subtly raised to look at Zahra, where Jamie had his hand resting on the woman’s shoulder, but just as quickly as he looked, he was gazing back down at his friend. “Aye,” he whispered softly.

Georgie moaned and whimpered and cried out in pain. “It will be better soon,” Zahra spoke softly as she leaned forward to meet the man’s eyes. “The pan will be gone soon.”

“It feels better, even now,” Geordie said. With a soft whimper and gripped Dougal’s hand harder. “I cannæ feel my leg anymore, Dougal.” the man’s blood was oaked into the ground around them, staining the leaves and the mud a dark crimson. Zahra couldn’t smell it, but she assumed it couldn’t smell pleasant. Battle injuries never did. “My hands neither,” Georgie continued.

Zahra took his hand, holding it in hers and resting it close to his chest as she hushed him tenderly. “Dougal, are ye there, man.” His sight had gone now as well.


The man was terrified and Zahra’s heart was breaking a little for him. Death was terrifying. She was very well aware of that fact. She’d been tortured to death herself once. Unshod tears gave her eyes a glassy appearance and she spoke in a quiet, calming voice. “Georide,” she drew his attention. “Tell me about your home, please?” Dougal glanced at her, and she met his gaze.

Geordie sighed and miraculously, something that looked like a smile lifted weakly on his lips. “It’s near a wide glen… not far from Loch Fannich.”

“I’ve never been. What is it like there? I imagine it’s absolutely beautiful.”

He inhaled and exhaled on a pleased sigh. “Aye, tis… In the spring--”

“Yes?” Zahra encouraged him calmly.

“The heather’s so thick--you can walk across the tops without touching the ground.”

His description reminded Zahra of her dream from several nights past, and when she spoke next her voice was filled with genuine emotion. “It sounds lovely.”

“Wish I could be there now,” Geordie lamented.
“Ye’ll be there soon, lad,” Dougal spoke, voice thick with emotion. Zahra remembered she had some oil of heather in her bag, it was a good soothing agent for headaches. She quickly shuffled in her bag for it and brought it out.

“Aye,” Geordie said then gripped Dougal’s hand tighter. “Will ye stay with me?”

“Aye,” Dougal responded rubbing his thumb across Geordie’s forehead.

“Yes,” Zahra repeated, as she uncorked the lid of the bottle then waved the opening gently beneath Geordie’s nose. Dougal watched Zahra with a brand new outlook and perspective as he realized the scent of heather, and not the scent of blood and death would be what sent his friend off this plane of existence. Dougal was thoroughly grateful to the woman next to him for possibly even thinking of such a thing. For giving his friend some real peace in his last moments.

The dying man may no longer be able to see, but when he suddenly inhaled as deeply as he possibly could, a genuine smile broke out on his pale face. “There ye are, eh?” Dougal whispered. “There.” The man watched, whimpering something in Gaelic as his friend’s eyes closed for the last time.

It was with sad and heavy hearts the hunting party made their way back to Leoch. Even having prized themselves two wild boars from their hunt, it couldn’t make up for the loss of one of their own. Especially one as beloved as Geordie had been. One boar was taken to the encampment, while the other would be brought to Leoch for their feast that night. Many of the men parted from the main group at the encampment while the rest of them who were staying at the castle continued on. Jamie walked next to Zahra, both of them leading their horses by the reigns, and their free hands were twined together tightly between them.

When the small group exited the treeline, and came across the field outside the castle, there was excitement going on. It seemed a lively game of Shinty was going on. Dougal was the first to come upon the game, and after staring for a moment, he began to remove his rifle, followed by his coat. They’d all of them wore pants on the hunt, some of them under a kilt.

Zahra and Jamie handed their horses reigns off to Auld Alec and a stable hand, and moved to observe the game himself. “What is this?” Zahra asked. She could liken it to field hockey which she was herself familiar with but she was sure it had a Scottish name.

“It’s Shinty,” Jamie responded with a soft smile.

They heard a loud battle cry and Zahra watched as Dougal picked up a stray stick and ran into the fray.

Jamie wagged his brows at Zahra before he too tore off his coat, picked up a stick, and dove into the game with gusto. Zahra had taken his coat and slowly approached the field with Rupert at her side. She flinched and cringed as she watched Dougal swipe out the leg of one of the players and shoulder charge another with unnecessary force. Ok, so it was like Field Hockey and Rugby combined into one. “Is it always like this?” She whispered to Rupert, who just chortled and nodded. The man had no apparent desire to play, but Zahra… Zahra was itching to join in the game. It looked challenging, physical, but fun. Looked so fun.

Jamie and Dougal eventually hit shoulders and stared each other down for a moment, before Jamie grinned and charged his uncle to lock shoulders. Zahra cringed, and stopped herself from calling out for him to stop. At least he was using his good shoulder and not the recently injured one. They locked sticks, and went at each other as if they were crossing blades, fighting for the ball.
“I taught you this game, lad,” Dougal taunted.

“Aye, ye did,” Jamie responded before he struck his stick at the ball on the ground. He would have gotten it too, if Dougal hadn't managed to kick Jamie’s stick from his hand. Dougal then used his own stick to jab Jamie in the gut several times.

That was it. Zahra couldn’t abide to just watch, not if they played dirty like that. She glanced at Rupert, who knew that look all too well. “Oh, no.” He said as he took Jamie’s jacket that she handed him. “Oh no!” Then the strap to her satchel went around his neck. “No, no, no, no. Dinnae even think about it!” Rupert was helpless to watch as Zahra tore her already ruined petticoats the rest of the way off. “Damn ye, daft lass!” Zahra was already racing for the field, grabbing up a stick as she went.

She shoulder checked a man to her right, and leapt deftly over another as she headed for the ball. Jamie had the same intention and their sticks crossed. When Jamie looked up, to his utter shock and surprise, it was his own Fiancée gazing back at him. Zahra laid him with a shit-eating grin, then wagged her eyebrows at him similar to what he’d done when he’d left her with his coat. Her smile fell suddenly as she saw Dougal closing in aiming a strike for Jamie’s back. She let Jamie take the ball as she dodged around him to meet Dougal’s stick in the air with her own. She used Dougal’s own surprise to maneuver her stick around and swipe out his foot, before she leapt over him back into the game.

Maybe it was the pants, and the short hair, or maybe it was the speed and ferocity she seemed to go at it, but none of the players seemed to realize there was a woman on the field. To them she was just another player. She was a speedy quick little devil, but when someone hit the ball her way intending it for an opposing teammate, she managed to tip it into the air and barely caught it on the end of her stick. She bounced it almost expertly on the tip as she began to move, multi-tasking to the max as she also searched or an opening.

She found Murtagh was free so she tossed the ball in the air with her stick, then thwapped it in his direction. Though she’d been quick, it was not quick enough to avoid someone bearing down on her. Her eyes widened, and with a move that could only come from years of hardcore parkour training, she used the man’s own momentum to flip over his back in some acrobatic feat that made it look as if it were some choreographed dance. She came down on her feet with a huge grin, then raced back into the game.

Murtagh had struggled with Angus a bit, but had ended up hitting the ball in Jamie’s direction once more. Just as Jamie was about to get away with it though, Duugal was back and this time Zahra wasn’t there to watch his back so his uncle got the better of him, striking him hard in the back and shoving him to the ground.

Jamie got to his feet a moment later. “That’s twice ye caught me nappin’,” he declared before charging back into the game. Zahra was racing after the ball, while Jamie was racing after Dougal. The younger man managed to tackle his uncle to the ground, where they began to wrestle.

“Yield!” Dougal cried as they struggled.

“What would ye think of me if I did?” Jamie shot back as the two struggled.

“Not much,” Dougal responded.

Zahra had knocked the ball back into the field just as she noticed Angus sneaking up, ready to strike the downed Jamie. Murtagh was suddenly there, and Angus had a stick between his legs before Murtagh flipped him a moment later. “Play fair, now,” Murtagh warned.
Zahra raced by, shouting back at the man now gripping at his wounded privates. “Serves you right, Angus!” She called out to him before jogging backwards back to the playing field.

Dougal and Jamie seemed to be at it again, and Zahra charged taking the ball from either of them in their distraction. She only got a few paces before she stopped, everyone stopped, staring at the spectacle of the two men who no longer seemed to just be playing a game. Zahra cringed, gripping her stick tight as she watched each blow hit. She wanted to intervene, but a look and a well-placed stance rom Murtagh had her reconsidering. Apparently, this was something the two men needed to do? Seeing how viciously they were going at it, maybe that was true. After a few violent strikes, Jamie eventually managed to flip his uncle to his back with a fierce cry. Jamie was breathing hard and laughing as he held his knees and watched his uncle.

Jamie extended his hand in friendship. “You taught me well,” the younger man said.

“Aye… Too well,” Dougal responded before he reached for Jamie’s hand and let the lad help pull him to his feet with a grunt from Jamie.

The two men stared each other down in another tense moment, before they threw their hands off each other. Jamie approached Zahra and Murtagh, the older man wrapping his arm around Jamie’s shoulders, and Jamie wrapped his own arm around Zahra’s as they walked off the field. “So, did we win?” Zahra asked, which made both Jamie and Murtagh laugh.

“Where the bloody hell did you learn to play Shinty?” Rupert asked as he met up with the trio. He had a limping Angus at his side, and eagerly handed Jamie back his jacket and Zahra took back her satchel.

As she was lifting the strap over her head she realized she had four pairs of eyes staring at her, all wanting to know the answer to Rupert’s question. “I’ve, uhm, I’ve never played Shinty before, but we have a similar game where I’m from we call field hockey. It’s not nearly as physical as Shinty, but honestly I found that to be the funnest part.. Can I join the next game?” She still had four pairs of eyes staring at her, gobsmacked.

“None of the women ever play Shinty,” Murtagh said matter-of-factly.

“Oh,” Zahra realized her future was showing and she wanted to stick her head in a hole.

“But then, no lass I’ve ever met is as fast, and vicious a hellcat as you, holy shite,” Murtagh said nudging her elbow with his own. For the usually stoic man to be so animated about it, it made a huge grin spread on Zahra’s face, though she was still blushing something fierce.

“Right?” Rupert said as he slapped Murtagh on the arm and they entered the castle hall, heading for the dining room for lunch. “Did you see the way she just bloody flipped over Seamus’s back like ‘at?”

“Or when she hit the ball directly to Murtagh?” Angus chimed in as the men walked further down the hall.

Jamie still had his arm behind her shoulders and encouraged her to lag behind a little with him as the other three continued on, talking animatedly about the game. Zahra worried on her bottom lip nervously as their friends got ahead of them. She cried out softly in surprise when Jamie suddenly pulled her down a corridor, opened a random door, and shoved her inside of it. From the smell of it, she thought it was a linen room, scarcely lit from a tiny sliver of a window up high on the wall.

Zahra backed up against a shelf, worried Jamie was angry at her for what she’d done. “Jamie, I can-
She was cut off as Jamie’s mouth was suddenly on hers, hot, hungry, and demanding. Zahra tensed at first, but then physically melted against him as she lost herself in his kiss. It wasn’t tender or soft, but hard, with more teeth and tongues, than lips. He growled against her mouth as his hands curved over her bottom and lifted her to sit on the lowest shelf. This brought their pelvises within perfect alignment and Jamie used the opportunity to grind his hips against her.

Their mouths broke apart as Jamie nipped and kissed a trail down her jaw, then her throat. He cursed in Gaelic, and Zahra fisted her hands in his hair, which only made him groan and curse again. Zahra could feel her core throbbing and pulsing to the rapid beat of her heart, she was desperate and aching to have him inside of her. “Jamie!” She whined.

The man snarled softly, and had his own hands in her hair a moment later, pulling firmly to make her look at him. “How--do you do this to me?”

Zahra was breathing heavily, the hairs over her entire body raising in gooseflesh. “Do what?” she asked.

“This--this--uncontrollable need--like I just--I just want to take you. Right here and right now,” Jamie breathed out harshly. “Seeing you out there… that gleam in yer eyes… that same lusty gleam I saw that time ye were fighting that redcoat…” He cursed in Gaelic again and pressed his forehead to hers, breathing hard, his pulse racing like thunder in his ears.

Zahra grinned crookedly, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You want to fuck me,” she said matter-of-factly.

Jamie’s head shot up and he gazed intently into her eyes. He had heard her use that word, several times, but he had assumed it was just some sort of foreign curse. He didn’t actually know what it meant. “I want to what?”

“Fuck. Me.” She repeated slowly. “Fucking is--” God how did she explain this? “--basically everything you just said. It’s this primal, carnal need to just take, take, take, as hard and as fast as you possibly can. It’s this wild, passionate, frenzied need. Sometimes, it can be a little dangerous, but if you trust the other person, really trust the other person--it’s probably the greatest form of release you could possibly imagine.”

“Aye… I want that… I want to fuck you,” Jamie repeated the word with a hot expulsion of air as he grinded his hips against her once more, gripping at her hips and mentally cursing the layers that separated them.

“Still, want to wait til our wedding night?” Zahra teased with a gentle tug on his hair and a deliberate roll of her hips.

Jamie growled through his teeth and pressed his face against her neck to gently bite her skin, which made her hiss and groan in pleasure. His mouth was at her ear a moment later, whispering hoarsely. “Aye, I do… Because as much as I want to fuck you right now…” A thought he emphasized by pressing his hand between her legs, pressing firmly against her moung, finding her leggings positively soaked through at the moment. “I know that you want me to fuck you even more.”

Goddamnit, he wasn’t supposed to have figured that out. “Don’t you?” he asked as his hand began to rub against her firmly. Zahra stifled a moan by biting down on her bottom lip. “Don’t you?” he demanded more firmly as he pressed strong fingers against her core through her jeans.

“Yes!” Zahra cried out softly, then gripped the back of his neck. “God, yes, Jamie, I want you to fuck me so hard.”
They were both of them breathing impossibly hard and heavy as the passion and lust spiked hard between them. Jamie’s mouth lifted in a crooked, arrogant sort of smirk, and he pressed and rubbed his fingers firmly against the hard nub between her legs that he could feel through her leggings. He teased her for only a moment before he slowly moved his hand away to grip her hips. Zahra whimpered in protest and dropped her face to meet his eyes with a questioning gaze. “We should wash up for dinner,” he said by way of explanation.

“Seriously?” Zahra asked, sounding incredulous. She hadn’t had an orgasm in days. Not since the last time Jamie had touched her that morning before she’d gone with Geillis to the gardens. “Jamie, please, I--”

“Leeloo,” Jamie silenced her gently with a kiss to her lips, then pressed his forehead to hers. “We should wash for supper,” he repeated as he took her hands by the wrists and held them in his own and lifted them into the light so she could see. Her hands were still covered in dried blood in some places where she hadn’t been able to full clean them since tending to Geordie, and Jamie’s were covered in dirt and mud. Their faces were filthy, their clothes as well. Suddenly, things did not seem as sexy as they had moments ago. That was carnal lust for you, though. It seemed Jamie had better control of his than Zahra had of hers, but in her defense she actually had intimate carnal knowledge of how amazing a good fuck could feel, whereas Jamie was blissfully ignorant.

“You’re right,” Zahra said before she slipped off the shelf and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, while he wrapped his own around her waist and they pulled each other in for a firm, intimate embrace. Jamie pressed a kiss to her hair.

They stayed that way for a short while, until Jamie pulled back and took her hand as he led her out of the linen closet and up the stairs to her room. “I’ll ask one of the maids to bring you some hot water,” he promised as he gave her a lingering, farewell kiss. Once more, their hands held, touching even to their fingertips until they were too far away to touch any longer. Every time they parted it became harder and harder to say goodbye. At least this time she knew it wasn’t going to be another two days before she saw him again. She’d see him at dinner, then again at breakfast, but the hours between she would be alone. She hated it. She hated that they had to wait. It wasn’t even about sex. Sure she had no doubt that when they finally did get to that point it would be mind-blowing, earth-shattering, but that wasn’t the endgame. She just wanted to be able to fall asleep next to him, to wake up with his arms around her. It was frustrating beyond all belief and she was feeling all out of sorts because of it.

Zahra did take another warm bath, washed her body, her hair, dried and dressed herself afterward. They were undoubtedly going to be feasting on their prize boar for supper tonight, but that was a few hours away yet. So, she’d grabbed an apple to tide her over, then went down to her surgery to pass the time preparing more herbs, remedies, and bandages to replenish the ones she’d used today.

It was in her task, that she heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Dougal enter the surgery. Zahra sighed, but continued her task. She waited, mentally preparing herself to face the backlash for her actions today. No doubts, she’d wounded his pride by engaging him on the field during the game.

“Ye’ve seen men die before,” Dougal eventually said, voice calm and might she say even gentle. Ok. Not what she was expecting but she could go with it. “And by violence.”

Zahra took in a deep breath through her nose, and exhaled slowly out her mouth. “I was a slave for eighteen years of my life, Dougal.” She had no doubts Colum, or Rupert, or Geillis, or Jamie, or someone had told him that fact by now. His lack of surprise at her words proved that he already knew. “I’ve seen men die in ways you can’t even possibly imagine.” She exhaled harshly as her eyes
closed and she gripped the edge of the table in front of her. “Not just men. Women too, and children.”

“And how many of them were at ye’re own hand?”

Zahra’s jaw muscles worked as she clenched and unclenched her teeth, fighting back a fresh wave of hot tears. Anxiety roiled in her gut, but she was honestly exhausted and tired of his distrust. Dougal wasn’t stupid, he was cunning and clever, and after her antics today she only had herself to blame for his suspicions. For figuring it out. Lying about it or hiding it was only going to make it worse for her. Jamie already knew everything so it wasn’t like Dougal could ruin that for her. If he tried to have her imprisoned Zahra would just have to escape and make a run for it; try her luck in the highlands and leave this life behind. It wasn’t supposed to even be her life in the first place. If this was how it ended, she would rather it end quickly.

Zahra took in a deep breath and lifted her face towards the ceiling, trying to fight the tears that were threatening. “I was never the hand, only the blade.”

Dougal moved further into the clinic, walking behind her slowly, then moving to one of her tables to inspect the bottles there. “So ye were an assassin?”

She took great notice and interest in his very particular use of the word, were. Did he not believe she was an assassin now? “I was whatever he needed me to be,” she said with a sniffle, then continued to grind the herbs in her pestle.

“Did he ever need you to be a healer?” Dougal asked.

She paused and shook her head. “No. His only desire was obedience and pain... Since I always seemed to have a problem with the obedience part...” She didn’t need to finish that sentence. Dougal had seen the scars on her back. She trusted he could fill in the blanks. Her eyes were stinging with tears again, but she refused to let them fall. “I knew some basic things to take care of myself, but the actual healer training didn’t really start until I was freed. It--gave me something useful to do with my skills, allowed me to help people instead of hurt them. Botany, herbology, homeopathy. They were very--therapeutic.”

“Does Jamie know?”

Zahra turned to look at him with a tilt of her head, then she nodded. “He’s known since that night I took Laoghaire’s punishment.”

They looked at each other seriously for a long moment before Dougal turned away to continue his casual inspection of her shelves. “Well, ye’ve done a fine job here as a healer,” he admitted, the first ever real, genuine compliment Zahra had ever heard out of his mouth.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, afraid to say anything else.

“Mrs. Fitz would have ye sit for a portrait if it was up to her,” the man continued. He was either trying to deliberately lower her guard, or he was genuinely trying to steer the conversation to a better place, which Zahra didn’t know which thought was more terrifying; that Dougal wasn’t going to have her drawn and quartered, or that they were actually finding a common ground.

“I’m sure, had she had it her way,” Zahra responded. “I’d be wearing some regal looking silk frock that covered every inch of my body. My hair would be all done up in some fancy wig with more curls and bows than a dozen Christmas presents, and I’d be holding a fluffy white cat in my lap while I sipped on a glass of sherry.”
Dougal actually let out a dry laugh at Zahra’s detailed description, then he moved on to another shelf. “I, uh… I wanted to thank you, personally…” The genuine honesty Zahra could hear in his voice almost stopped her heart. Either he was the greatest pretender of all time, or maybe he was actually trying to make amends with her. “For what you did for poor Geordie up there on the hunt...”

She shook her head. If they’d been on Enterprise, Bones would have been able to help, no doubt about that. This wasn’t the Enterprise though. She wasn’t Bones. “I wish--I could have actually helped him,” she admitted, her voice wavering with emotion.

Dougal turned to her and Zahra just now realized how close he was. “Ye did, Zahra. Ye did.” He swallowed hard, and gently reached for her arm. “Ye took him to a peaceful place… and that’s all any of us can ask when we pass, so… Thank you.”

Zahra took in a deep breath and swallowed hard, nodding her head in understanding. “I was just--doing what I could to help.” It wasn’t in her to tell someone they were welcome for something she didn’t feel she deserved gratitude for, something that anyone in her place with her skills and knowledge would have done, wouldn’t they? “Was there anything else?” She asked after a moment, waiting for the boot to drop and for Dougal to summon his guards to clap her in irons and lead her to the Guillotine.

“There was, actually,” Dougal said as he backed up and took up a spot half sitting, half leaning on the table behind him. “I’ve come to set ye free from this dank prison.”

Zahra’s brow furrowed. “To have me led to the stocks?”

Dougal huffed a dry laugh and shook his head. “Nae, lassie. Ye’re coming on the road.”

“To be taken to a bigger prison in a distant land?”

Dougal actually laughed at that. The woman was witty and humorous just like the others said. He was almost sad it had taken him this long to see it. “Ye’re past doesnae concern me naemore, Zahra. Only yer future.”

She placed her hand on her hip, and scratched at her collar. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow, and I’m taking you with me.”

Her eyes widened. Oh god. Was he planning on forcing her to be his servant wife? “So, is it blackmail then? I go with you as your willing, humble slave, or you have me imprisoned or killed?” Panic was actually starting to grip her chest, because he really could actually do that.

Dougal stood, shaking his head firmly, but when he approached her to try to calm her, she backed away from him quickly. He didn’t blame her for thinking the worst of him. He had not been kind to her by any means. “On what grounds do ye possibly think I could have ye imprisoned or killed? Without any evidence or proof?”

“I don’t know. You’re a Scottish lord. I’m sure you could think of something.”

Dougal huffed out his nose and gave her a stern look, he wanted to rip his non-existent hair out. “Holy God, woman, ye’re just as stubborn as Jamie says. I am trying to make peace with ye.”

Zahra huffed out her nose stubbornly and crossed her arms over her chest, most of the combativeness leaving her at his honest admission. “I’m listening,” she said as she leaned back against her table.
Dougal also relaxed back against the table opposite her. “We’ll be traveling through MacKenzie lands, collecting rents.” He looked up to meet her eyes. “Colum doesnae travel, so visiting the tenants and tacksmen that cannae come to the gathering, that falls to me.” He paused. “And attending to a wee bit o’ business here and there.”

Zahra listened carefully to what he was saying. From the sound of it, it would be quite the journey, and definitely not one he could undertake alone. Did that mean he would have his men with him? Rupert? Angus? Murtagh? Jamie? “That all sounds well and good, but--where exactly do I fit in?”

“I think it would be wise to have a healer along,” he said meaningfully. “Especially one what does well under strain, and there’s a lot o’ that on the road.” Plus, he now had knowledge that Zahra was capable of handling herself in a fight… He also now knew that Zahra had intimate working knowledge of the darker parts of life and everything that entailed, so maybe, just maybe, Dougal might be thinking her particular set of skills may come in handy should he deem it so.

Zahra was not privy to Dougal’s inner monologue, but his request, while genuine, did not mean she full trusted the man. She still got a bad vibe from him. It might be less now that they had reached a sort of accord, but she still could not fully believe that his intentions towards her were pure. “Alright,” she agreed after a short while.

“So, that’s the business settled.” He walked around the table to stand next to her. “Mrs. Fitz will have her feast ready by now, and ye don’t want to incur her wrath by coming late.” They looked at each other seriously for a moment, each trying to assess the other, before Dougal turned to leave. “We leave at first light.”

Zahra turned to gaze out her window, and brought her arms up to rub her shoulders. So much for her and Jamie’s nuptials. Seemed they’d have even longer to wait, now. “Bollocks!” Zahra declared as she punched the table. She hoisted her skirts then and ran for the stairs, she needed to find Jamie.

She had not far to go as when she dashed up to the stair landing, Jamie was suddenly there and she actually slammed into him. He managed to catch her, to steady her and prevent her from falling on her ass, which she was grateful for. “Woah, woah, hey now. Easy. What’s the hurry, love?”

“He knows,” she spat out between breaths.

“Who knows what?” Jamie asked.

“Dougal. He knows about me. My past.”

Jamie blinked then held her hand as he walked with her back down to her surgery. “How? When?”

Zahra took a deep breath and gripped onto Jamie’s coat. “He managed to put it all together today after Geordie, and that stupid game where I was showing off.”

“What did he say, exactly?” Jamie asked her calmly.

She took a deep calming breath, then started speaking quickly, managing to get everything out with that one breath. “He called me out, literally, he point blank asked me how many men I’ve killed and dropped the word assassin. Then he thanked me for what I did for Geordie, then he said he was trying to make peace with me, then told me I had to come with him on the road while he collects taxes.”

Jamie blinked a couple times, making sure he heard and understand all of that. “So Dougal knows you were a former slave and all that that entailed.” Jamie counted on one finger, and Zahra nodded. “He actually thanked you for helping Geordie.” Two fingers. Zahra nodded again. “He actually said
the words he was trying to make peace with you, those were his actual words?” A third finger to which Zahra nodded again. “And then he asked you to come along with us as we collect taxes and attend to other business?” A fourth finger.

Zahra kind of half nodded, half shook her head at the same time at that last part. “More like he just told me I was coming and didn’t really give me a choice in the matter, but yeah. Wait did you say ‘come along with us’?” Zahra asked.

Jamie grinned brightly and lifted Zahra into his arms after wrapping them around her waist. He lifted and spun her about in a couple circles before placing her back on her feet, taking her face in his hands, and kissing her fiercely on the lips.

When they broke apart, Zahra sighed wistfully and blinked a few times. “Not that I’m complaining but what was that for?”

Jamie’s grin widened boyishly, and he laughed a very chesty, happy laugh. “You don’t know Dougal like I do, but that was basically him giving you, giving us his blessing, Leeloo. That is wonderful news.”

“Oh!” Zahra said, brow furrowing slightly, before her entire face lit up with a smile. “Oh!”

Jamie’s grin fell to a crooked smirk, and he lifted his hand to touch her cheek. “Such an extensive vocabulary, Mistress Quigley. Ye shoulda been a poet.” Jamie had a Cheshire grin as he teased Zahra with her own quip from several nights past.

Zahra clicked her teeth with her tongue, then jabbed him in the shoulder. Jamie laughed and took her hand. “Come on, then. Fitz has undoubtedly done wonders with that boar and I cannae wait to feast.”

It was with a light, floaty feeling, and a full heart that Zahra let Jamie pull her along to the dining hall. Perhaps, the events of today didn’t end so shitty after all.
The feast had been amazing, and Zahra had dined and chatted with Jamie and their friends while they ate like kings. She’d thought throughout dinner about Dougal’s orders and in the end there had been a few stipulations, or addendums, if you will, that Zahra had brought to his attention after the feast. A) She wanted suitable traveling garments that would not make her feel so confined and restricted as the constrictive dresses and corsets she normally wore, especially as she would have no attendant on the road to help her dress. She realized letting her traipse about in naught but shirt and slacks would be pushing it, so she would happily wear her normal bodices, dresses, skirts or petticoats, but she asked for several pairs of leggings she could wear under said petticoats for ease of traveling and added *protection* on the road. B) She wanted a blade. Just a humble knife or a dagger. Nothing excessive, just something she could use to defend herself if necessary. C) A firm, verbal agreement that she would be given the respect a healer in her position would normally receive, meaning none of the men in their company would attempt to molest her at any time, including his lordship, without her consent.

That was it. Three simple, what she believed to be reasonable requests, to earn her full, unhindered, unabated compliance, agreement, and support. Dougal had sent her off to her chambers to pack with a promise he would think about it.

She’d been allotted the space of one small traveling trunk for which to carry her personal items for the road, including her undergarments, clothes, hygienic care products, and anything else she deemed necessary for travel. Zahra was an expert travel packer, though, so she’d been able to fit a surprising amount into her small trunk. She was assessing her options, when Mrs. Fitz had knocked on her door to drop off three pairs of boys leggings, and a couple tunics. Based on Zahra’s size Glenna had to borrow the items from her own nephew Tammas. They were sizes a little too big for him, made for
him to grow into, so Glenna hoped they would serve well for Zahra’s purpose. Tammas, apparently, had been more than happy to lend them to the ‘wonderful Mistress Zahra’. Zahra had asked Fitz to make sure Tammas had her thanks and Glenna left the woman with assurance she would tell him. They exchanged a very warm, very long goodbye hug before Mrs. Fitz left her for the night.

After packing her own items, she’d left her trunk in the designated area to be loaded onto the wagon come morning, then made her way down to her clinic where a separate, much, much larger trunk had been reserved for her down in her surgery. It apparently had belonged to Davie Beaton, and was specially designed to accommodate the traveling needs of a healer. She ended up spending the majority of the night packing and preparing her medical trunk. Rupert and Angus had long since passed out at the top of the stairs, drunkenly leaning on each other. Zahra was thoroughly grateful when Jamie had shown up to help her into the wee hours. He didn’t know much about the medicines but he was great at following instructions.

By the time they were finished, Jamie had roused Rupert to help him carry the trunk up to the courtyard, then he and Zahra had parted ways with barely enough time to take a short nap before they were due on the road.

Zahra had managed to get in about an hour long power nap before she was being roused by Mrs. Fitz to dress for a quick breakfast. Zahra wore a pair of her new leggings under her petticoats, along with her own boots, but the rest of her attire was normal. She’d worn her shift, under a corset, and a petticoat and bodice over that. She didn’t fuss with her hair much, other than to comb her fingers through it a few times, so it was mostly hanging over her face. She had a thick, fur-lined coat that had been given to her for the journey by Mrs. Fitz. It was insanely warm, and had a thick hood, and fell down to her knees. It was soft, and warm and Zahra was very grateful.

Breakfast for the early rousers was hot porridge and fruit that they all hoovered down in silence before meandering out of the castle into the courtyard. The sky was barely a shade lighter than navy. First light indeed. She’d only gotten one of her three requests but that was honestly more than Zahra had been expecting so she would call it a win.

“Zahra,” Dougal got her attention from where she was walking and talking with Jamie.

“Morning Dougal. Thank you for the new garments by the way. It is very much appreciated.”

Dougal nodded then cleared his throat before holding up a thin leather belt, to which was attached a small, sheathed dagger. It was about the size of her favorite combat knife back in the 23rd. She looked at the belt then up at Dougal with a surprised expression. He extended it to her further, silently informing her it was ok, it was intended for her. She reached out gingerly and took the belt, then immediately slipped it around her waist until she had the dagger in a position that would be comfortable and easy for her to grab. “Thank you,” she said with a genuine smile, and a grateful touch to his arm. Dougal just nodded in response then moved to mount his own horse.

She turned to Jamie and her smile widened. With this dagger, and Jamie’s sgian-dubh she still had down her bodice against her sternum, she was definitely feeling much, much better about her safety. The redhead reached for her chin, then leaned in to give her a brief, tender kiss on the lips. When he pulled back, he brushed his thumb against her cheek and gave her a wink. This morning had definitely not gone how she had expected. It was better.

“Listen up.”Dougal said after he mounted his horse, and faced the gathered group. “This be the first time since young Davie we’ve a healer on the road wi’ us. Mistress Zahra is under the protection and employ of clan MacKenzie, and every man in this company will afford her proper respect. Ye ken?” There was a chorus of Aye’s from each member of the small company. Dougal just nodded his head again, then turned his horse for the road, and one by one, they all followed behind him.
Zahra seemed dumbstruck as she just sat there astride Brimstone, blinking at the back of Dougal’s head. Jamie eventually came up beside her on his own horse. “He’s a hard man, as I’ve said, but at his heart… Dougal’s also a good man.”

Zahra turned to look at her fiance, and a soft smile lifted her lips. “Yeah. So it seems.”

Jamie shared her smile, then reached over to take her hand which he brought to his lips to lay a kiss upon her knuckles, then he leaned in to steal a kiss from her lips. “Come,” he urged right after and together they headed out on the road.

Zahra didn’t know these lands, or where they’d take her, or the dangers that may lie in store, but for the first time since her arrival here, she did not feel the least bit afraid of the journey ahead. If anything, she was excited. Away missions had always been her favorite part about serving on a Starship. Exploring new lands. New worlds. New dangers. It was thrilling and provocative and she felt more free and spirited than she had in weeks. Her drowsiness from lack of sleep the night before seemed to quickly fade and sure enough she’d started singing to herself to pass the time. “Oh, what we gonna do with a drunken sailor? What we gonna do with a drunken sailor? What we gonna do with a drunken sailor, earl-eye in the mornin’?”

“What the devil ye blatherin’ about?” Rupert cut her off grumpily.

“It’s Monty’s favorite sea shanty,” Zahra said with a laugh.

“Well, Monty’s no’ here and we’re no’ at sea,” the man continued to gripe, obviously not a morning person.

Zahra just shrugged, and continued unhindered. “Way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises, earl-eye in the mornin’!” Jamie was grinning ear to ear next to her, which Zahra definitely could see, and his enjoyment might be partially what was spurring her on. “Put ‘im on a longboat ‘til he’s sober, put ‘im on a longboat ‘til he’s sober, put ‘im on a longboat ‘til he’s sober, earl-eye in the mornin’!”

“Way, hey, and up she rises.” Suddenly Jamie had caught on to the chorus here at least and so he joined in with her by second repetition. “Way, hey, and up she rises. Way, hey, and up she rises, earl-eye in the mornin’!”

“Dinnae encourage her, lad!” Rupert whined.

Zahra’s grin seemed to widen if possible and she gazed at Jamie for a moment, making Rupert think she may have ceased, but then she started again. “Shave his belly with a rusty razor, shave his belly with a rusty razor.” Jamie and now even Angus tried to join in. “Shave his belly with a rusty razor, earl-eye in the mornin’!”

“Auch, nae you too?” Rupert lamented at his best friend. Angus just shrugged. It was catchy.

“Way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises earl-eye in the mornin’!”

“That’s what we do with a drunken sailor, that’s what we do with a drunken sailor, that’s what we do with a drunken sailor, earl-eye in the mornin’!”

“Auch, I’m not drunk enough for this shite,” Rupert continued to complain.
“Way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises, earl-eye in the mornin’! Everybody!” Zahra called with a clap, and sure enough, near everyone in the company, except Rupert and Dougal, and Murtagh (though Murtagh was actually grinning) joined in on the last chorus. “Way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises, way, hey, and up she rises--” Zahra deliberately began to slow down the last phrase. “Earl-eye in the mornin’!” She clapped again when it was over and started laughing at herself.

“A’right, a’right, tha’s enough!” Dougal called back over his shoulder. “Rupert’s right. Tis too early for your foolishness, lass.”

“Auch, nonsense! Tis never too early for shanties, Mr. MacKenzie,” Zahra quipped back mimicking an almost perfect Scottish accent. “Nor is it ever too late. Shanties arrive precisely when they mean to!” Maybe she could get a little hyper and loopy when she hadn’t slept enough, ok? It was a lame reference to a really old movie, well old for her. None of them were expected to understand and so when Dougal had stopped to turn back and look at her, and Zahra also caught Rupert, Angus, Murtagh, and even Jamie’s questioning looks, she worried on her bottom lip nervously. “Uh, sorry, I, uh--” Rupert was the first to start laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of it, and the rest followed suit.

“Is that really how ye think we sound, lass?” Murtagh asked with a grin.

Zahra shrugged, and worried on her bottom lip some more, but she was soon breaking out in a grin. “Maybe, but I wasn’t making fun! I honestly love your accents, although--I’m aware that to you it’s not an accent and I’m the one who talks funny.”

“Damn right abou’ that,” Angus agreed.

“What kind o’ accent is that anyway, lass?” Rupert asked. “I thought all them colonials still spoke proper English?” He mocked the British with a snooty accent when he said the words ‘proper English’.

Zahra shrugged. “I dunno. I guess, you could say my accent is--universal? I’ve lived in so many different places I suppose all the various dialects have all kind of--mushed together to form what you now here coming out of my mouth.” She swallowed hard, hoping that was a feasible explanation. “When I was a kid it was a helluva lot different.”

“What did it sound like when you were a bairn?” Angus asked. He was curious. They all were, it seemed, as she could tell they were listening in. Even Jamie, who apparently wasn’t planning on coming to her rescue anytime soon, seemed just as curious.

“Umm,” Zahra cleared her throat. Her native accent she’d learned to speak with as a small child was Australian. Combining that with the Orion language and dialect she’d been forced to learn as a slave, she’d had a really fucked up accent for much of the earlier part of her life. “I’m not sure if I can recreate it, it’s been a really long time.”

“Auch, come on!” Angus taunted.

Zahra huffed a dry laugh, shook her head, then rolled her eyes. God, she couldn’t believe she was doing this. She cleared her throat, then rested her elbow on her knee, really getting into character. “Well, fark today looks like a right scorcher. Think I’ll whack on some trakky-daks this arvo and shuff off to me mate’s out in Woop-Woop.” It was literally the most Australian thing she could possibly think of to say, Aussie accent and all.

Every rider just turned and looked at her, blinking... and then they all burst out laughing.
“What the shite did you just say?” “What kind of accent is tha’?” “I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life!” “That cannae be real.”

“Yeah, yeah!” She responded in her normal, non-accented voice that had taken her many long years of training to get rid of. “Now you all know how I feel when you start in with all your Scotch Gaelic slang, bullshit.”

“Where the bloody hell were you raised, lass?” Angus asked, after wiping some mirthful tears from his eyes.

Zahra worried on her bottom lip, and wrung her hands in the reigns. This was now getting to a point that she wasn’t the most comfortable talking about. Jamie seemed able to sense her discomfort as he moved closer to reach out to take her hand in his. “Alright, lads. I think that’s enough questions. Leave the lass alone.” He remembered how much Zahra said she didn’t like being the center of attention, and he could only imagine that was doubly so when her past was involved.

Zahra turned her hand up so their palms were touching and she gave his a squeeze. ”Thank you,” she mouthed to him silently. Jamie squeezed her hand back, then raised it to place a kiss on the back of it.

They all dropped their probing questions and fell into a companionable silence as they rode on. Zahra was feeling sleepy and trying not to doze off. Rupert to her right suddenly began humming to himself, an eerily familiar tune and Zahra looked over at him with a smirk forming on her lips. Eventually his humming broke out into actual song, though he was mostly singing to himself. “What can we do wi’ a drunken sailor, what can we do wi’ a drunken sailor, what can we do--Auch! Shite!” He realized, too late, that he was singing Zahra’s shanty.

Zahra suddenly erupted in uninhibited laughter that came fully from her gut, and made her have to wrap her arms around her stomach to keep her sides from splitting.

Rupert turned an annoyed glare on the woman. “God--damnit, Zahra!”

He then cursed in Gaelic which only seemed to make her laugh harder. So hard that she actually started sliding off her horse, but she seemed to catch herself at the last minute reaching out to grip onto Jamie next to her, just as the man himself was also reaching to steady her. Her laughter stopped for a shocked moment, until she realized she’d almost laughed herself off her horse, which only made her laugh harder. Her laughter made Jamie laugh. Then Rupert started laughing, and so on and so forth, and it seemed Zahra’s particular brand of laughter was highly contagious because the entire company was soon all laughing along with her. Even Murtagh was chuckling at her uninhibited giddiness, and Dougal was smirking and shaking his head at the front of the line. Zahra was already proving to be making this a very interesting journey.

The quiet it seemed, to never sit well with Zahra for too long. She was like this perpetual ball of energy that constantly needed to be doing something, or saying something, or singing, or telling stories, or jokes, or listening to others tell stories or jokes. She couldn’t help it. The time between stops was a long time to be idle, and without a radio or streaming service to pass the time, she’d needed to find something to fill the void as it were.

She even thought up travel games they could play, like twenty questions, I spy, but the company favorite seemed to be Would you Rather. That one seemed to be the game that her companions found the most entertainment in. It had taken a while for her to explain the rules, but they’d eventually caught on. Zahra’s personal favorite had been when she’d asked Rupert if he would rather have dicks for fingers, or a finger for a dick. Opposable and everything, and his reaction almost had her dying laughing again.
Much of their day had gone that way, with Zahra trying to keep herself from going stir crazy, and entertaining the rest of them while she was at it. Their first stop for lunch could not have come soon enough, for Zahra was eager to get off her horse and stretch her legs, not to mention get in a little catnap. She was exhausted from the sleepless night before, on top of normal road weariness.

Camp had been set up, and after she’d taken a short nap, she decided to go exploring a little while the men entertained themselves. They were glad to be off the horses and to rest, and eat, and drink. Zahra had so much pent up energy, though. She wanted to go for a run, but a walk by the loch was going to have to do. It was chillier here, but she wasn’t really complaining. The view over the loch and the hills was positively beautiful. There was a reason they called it God’s country.

She hadn’t wandered too far, still within sight of the camp, when she stopped and took in a deep breath. This really was a beautiful place, probably even more so now that it hadn’t been touched by time and civilization. She wondered what this part of the world would have looked like 500 years from now. Would there be houses and cities? A port perhaps for fishermen and sailors? She took in a very deep breath of air and closed her eyes against the chilly wind.

She didn’t want to think about the future, at least not the one she came from that was now in the past. The only future she wanted to be concerned about was the one she could make here. Now. “Though we share this humble path, alone, how fragile is the heart?” She began to whisper the lyrics of a song that had come to mind, unbidden. She was still watching the loch, and Jamie moved so quietly that she didn’t know he had parted from the group to join her. When he’d heard her begin to sing softly to herself, he found her words beautiful, but bittersweet, almost a little sad. Very emotional. He didn’t want to interrupt.

“Oh give these clay feet wings to fly, to touch the face of the stars… Breathe life into this feeble heart, lift this mortal veil of fear. Take these crumbled hopes, etched with tears, we’ll rise above these earthly cares…” She took in another deep breath and opened her eyes to gaze out over the Loch. “Cast your eyes on the ocean, cast your soul to the sea. When the dark night seems endless, please remember me…” She gasped in audible surprise when a pair of strong arms suddenly circled her waist. Jamie’s husky baritone was whispering something in Gaelic in her ear a moment later, calming her nerves and causing her to shiver as the hairs raised all over her body from the sensation.

“That was beautiful,” he said in English as he placed a kiss to her neck.

“You weren’t supposed to hear that,” she admitted softly, voice slightly strained with arousal.

Jamie pressed another kiss to the side of her head. “If I could give you the stars, I would. You know that right?”

Zahra took in a deep breath, smiling, and let her own arms rest over his as she leaned back against him, then rested her head back against his shoulder. “I know. That’s kind of what Dante’s Prayer is about.”

“How do ye mean?” Jamie asked.

“Well, that was only part of it. The whole song talks of a soul that’s hurt and lost, and believing they’re broken and despairing.” She turned in his embrace and lifted her hands to wrap around his neck, smiling affectionately at him. “But then another soul comes to free them from darkness, and vows to love, and protect them even when the road is treacherous and things get bad. Their love stands as strong as mountains, as endless as the stars, and the sea.” She worried on her bottom lip then leaned up to press a soft sensual kiss to his. “I guess that’s why it came to mind.” Dante’s prayer
was basically an Ode to Jamie and Zahra.

Jamie pressed his forehead to hers and gently rubbed her back as he just held her and gazed into her eyes. He eventually pressed a kiss to her forehead, and tucked her head against his chest as he rested his chin atop her hair. “Tha gaol agam ort,” he whispered softly, a phrase Zahra

“He gill ackum orsht?” she tried to repeat back, butchering the pronunciation a little, but it was the thought that counted right?

Jamie smirked, chuckling low in the back of his throat. “Close. Tha gaol agam ort,” he repeated perfectly.

“You’ve said that before,” she said with a tilt of her head. “What does it mean?”

Jamie smiled tenderly and brushed his palm across her face to hold her jaw in his hand, while his thumb brushed across the apple of her cheek. “It loses a little in translation but--basically it means I love you.”

“Oh,” she smiled fondly and placed a sensual kiss on his lips. “Tha gaol agam ort,” she whispered softly against his lips, much closer to the actual pronunciation after she’d heard him clearly say it a couple times. Jamie let out a very low, growly sort of moan low in his throat as his hand held the back of her neck and he deepened the kiss. Hearing her speaking his language, or attempting to anyway, was sexy as hell.

Their tender moment wasn’t meant to last, however, when they were rudely interrupted by the cursing and heckling suddenly coming from the group behind them. Jamie groaned as he broke their kiss to turn and shout something back at Rupert in angry Gaelic. Zahra smirked and huffed a dry laugh. “What’s he saying?”

Jamie rolled his eyes, but looked at her with a crooked grin. “Nothing worth repeating.” Rupert shouted something again. “I’ll be right back, a graidh.” Jamie placed a quick peck on her lips before he was suddenly running off in Rupert’s direction and he shoulder charged the man in his middle, taking him to the ground where they wrestled a bit, cursing at each other in rapid Gaelic.

Zahra was grinning as she made her way closer, but stood apart from the rowdy group to watch. “It loses a bit in translation I’m afraid,” the man she knew as Ned Gowan said as he moved to stand with her. “But I believe Rupert’s request was that if you and young master Jamie planned to--engage--in relations.” Ned coughed into a handkerchief. “May he watch.” Zahra laughed dryly and shook her head. Of course he’d said that. She wished she had understood cause she had the perfect quip she could have shot back with. Ned was chuckling as well, and he waved his hand in the air vaguely. “There were some other indecent quips thrown in there I dare not repeat out loud, but--”

“Don’t worry,” Zahra moved her palm out in a gesture that meant Ned did not need to proceed. “I’m sure most of it would be lost in translation anyway.”

Jamie and Rupert’s wrestling seemed to have riled the others, and Zahra flinched a little as she saw someone tackle young Willie. When the younger man found his feet again, he cursed them all in Gaelic, to which Rupert shouted back just as crudely. “Oh my,” Ned said.

“What are they saying now?” Zahra asked.


“I’m sorry, Ned, I don’t know much Gaelic... yet,” Zahra clarified with a smile. Ned was nice. She didn’t know him before that morning, but he was a very pleasant old man and she was happy he was
with them on the road. He was, as the saying goes, a true gentleman.

“Eh, well my lady,” he began to explain, and Zahra preened a little inside at being called my lady all proper like. “They’re teasing young Willie. It’s his first time on the road with us, y’see, and–” The young Willie was now wrestling with Murtagh, while Jamie and Rupert egged him on. Zahra was grinning at their antics. “--they’re encouraging him to have--hmmmmhm--biblical relations--” The man coughed lightly into his hanky again before finishing. “--with his sister.”

Zahra laughed at that, and turned to watch their play. It was kind of adorable. All of these gruff backwoodsman acting the big brother to their youngest recruit. Zahra cringed again when Murtagh managed to flip Willie roughly to his back. The boy looked genuinely winded and hurt, but it was obviously intended as just good sport. Dougal eventually helped the young man to his feet and handed him a bottle of rum, or whatever they were drinking. The boy earned several claps on the back and more pleasant sounding words in Gaelic from his comrades.

Jamie was grinning as he returned to Zahra’s side. “I don’t believe you two’ve been properly introduced,” Jamie said as he wrapped his arm behind Zahra’s lower back. “Leeloo, meet Mr. Ned Gowan. The MacKenzie’s lawyer.”

Zahra grinned and extended her hand for Ned to shake. “I’ve seen you in the hall a few times. I’m sorry I never properly introduced myself. I’m Leeloo Zahra, but I usually go by Zahra.”

“I’m very pleased to formally meet you Mistress Zahra,” Ned said genuinely.

“Likewise,” Zahra responded, then looked thoughtful for a moment. “So, I can understand the need for a healer, but is a lawyer really needed on an expedition such as this?”

Ned kind of shook his head back and forth in a weird nod and shake at the same time. “I’ve mostly just come along to help Dougal with the records and receipts, you know. I’m--I’m--” he coughed again, wheezing harshly.. “--the only one--he’ll trust with the money. I am responsible for securing the Laird’s rents.” He started coughing into his Handkerchief again, and Zahra’s brow furrowed a little. “It comes in turners and bawbees, small coins.” Zahra nodded in understanding “But we also get bags of grain, cabbages… Fowl, suitably trussed, I’ve got no argument with... Even goats, although one of them--ate my handkerchief last year.” He chuckled at the story, and Zahra grinned. Ned reminded her of a grandfather she never had. “But I have given explicit instruction this year--that--” More wheezecoughing. “--that we will not accept live pigs.” He laughed again, and Zahra laughed politely along with him, until he started to hack some more, and it really did sound awful.

Zahra’s brow furrowed even more deeply and she looked at Jamie, who seemed equally concerned. “Ned, that cough sounds awful. Are you alright?”

“Yes, well, I get fair puckled this stretch of the road. It happens every year,” he assured her. “The same season. Something in the wind sets my lungs afire.”

Allergies then. Some sort of hayfever or Asthma. Zahra had a remedy for that, something that could act like an inhaler. “I might be able to help you, but I’d need a pipe if you’ve got one?” She removed herself from Jamie’s side and he let her go with a nod.

“Aye, a pipe?” Ned confirmed as he walked with Zahra towards their horses. Jamie had gone back to join the others. “Ye’d have me smoke a pipe for a cough, eh?”

“I know. Sounds like some sort of weird paradox, right?” She said as they reached the horses.

“Indeed it is, I was just about to say.” Ned remarked with a chortle, then went searching for his pipe
in his horse’s saddlebag.

Zahra ducked under Ned’s horse to get to her own where she opened one of the medical satchels on Brimstone to find what she was looking for. After a short search, she found the herb pouch she was looking for and pulled it out of the bag, then returned to Ned’s side.

“There ye are,” he said as he handed the pipe to her.

Zahra accepted it as she opened the leather pouch to dip the bowl of the pipe into the crushed herbs. “It’s called thorn apple,” she explained.

“Thorn apple, okay.” Ned repeated as he followed along next to her as she maid her way to the campfire.

Zahra packed the leaves into the bowl, then handed his pipe back to him. “Hold that,” she instructed as she bent to retrieve a twig from the ground and dipped it into the fire.


Zahra smirked. “It’s also known as Jimsonweed,” she explained, though she doubted Ned really cared about the specifics. After the twig caught a flame, she stood and used it to help Ned light the herbs in his pipe while he inhaled. “One of my friends has a similar condition to yours, and we’ve found that direct inhalation of a special blend of herbs and medicines has always helped relieve his symptoms.” She was pretty much just babbling at this point, unaware that Dougal was watching them.

Zahra dowsed the flame once the pipe was properly lit, and she watched Ned puff on the pipe a few times. He coughed and wheezed a little at first. After a few drags, however, after he exhaled a slow puff of smoke, he stopped to take several deep breaths in and out, testingly. Breathing was definitely coming much easier, and his lungs didn’t burn nearly as much. A very pleased smile spread across his face. “Better?” Zahra asked with a grin of her own.

“Well, that’s just remarkable,” Ned said, grin widening.

Zahra patted his shoulder, and closed up the pouch of herbs, just as she heard Dougal call out. “Oi! Pack up! We’re leavin’.”

“Already?” She called back, to which Dougal just nodded. Zahra suddenly wished she’d taken a longer nap. She nodded at Dougal, and moved to pack the herbs back in her satchel, then went to help break down camp and get everything packed back up in the wagon.

They were on the road again, soon enough, trudging right along. Now that they all had some food, and some ale and rest, they all seemed to be in much better spirits. So much so that, completely unbidden by her, the group had started to sing a playful Scottish cadence. It was fun and lively, and told a tale of about a beautiful farming girl. Zahra liked it. It reminded her of the rhythmic marching cadences they’d sing back at the Academy.

“The maid gaed tae the mill ae nicht,” Dougal sang the first line.

“Hey, sae wanton she,” the company answered him.

“She swore by moon and stars sae bricht,” Dougal sang again.
“She would get her corn grun’!” The others answered him.

“She would get the corn grun’,” Dougal repeated.

Jamie looked directly at Zahra, grinning as he sang out merrily. “Mill and multure free.”

“Oot then come the miller’s man,” Dougal sang once more.

Zahra actually remembered the next part and so was able to join in this time. “Hey, hey, sae wanton.” It was just one line but it made her grin.

“For gettin’ all her corn grun’,” another line from Dougal.

“Mill and multure free!” They all finished.

When it was over, Zahra clapped. “Ok, I loved that one.” She then reached over to squeeze Jamie’s arm. “Sing me another?” She asked him brightly.

He definitely loved seeing her so spirited and free like this. Her mood was contagious, and it was definitely helping the men’s morale to find their lady companion wasn’t a complete wet blanket. Jamie couldn’t remember any previous years of Rent Collecting ever being this fun. “A’right, lass.” He tapped his chin in thought for a moment. “What about the Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow?” Jamie asked the others for confirmation. His question was greeted by a chorus of “Aye”s and Jamie led them in. They all sang in mostly unison this time instead of back and forth.

“There lived a lady in the North,
Ye could scarcely find her marrow;
She was courted by nine noblemen
And her ploughman boy o’ Yarrow.

These nine sat drinking at the wine,
Sat drinking wine in Yarrow;
They made a vow among themselves
To ficht for her in Yarrow.”

Zahra was grinning so hard it was making her face hurt. She was so completely, and ridiculously in love with the man sitting on the horse next to her, singing her a Scottish durge.

“As he came o’er yon high, high hill
And doon yon path sae narrow.
There he spied nine armoured men
Come to ficht with him on yarrow

There’s nine o’ you, there’s one o’ me,
It’s an unequal marrow;
But I’ll ficht you all, one by one,
On the dowie dens o’ Yarrow”

She leaned over and stole a kiss between the verses, which only made Jamie’s grin widen and he sang even more confidently, even if it was a slower song.

“There were three he slew, and three withdrew,
And three lay deadly wounded,
Till her brother John stepped in behind
And pierced his body thorough.”
Zahra’s brow furrowed as the song took a turn for the sad.

“‘Go home, go home, you false young man,
   And tell your sister sorrow,
   That her true-love John lies dead and gone
   In the dowie dens o’ Yarrow.’

As he gazed o’er yon high, high hills
   And doon yon path sae narrow,
   There he spied his sister dear
   She was coming fast for Yarrow.

‘Oh, brother dear, I dreamed a dream,
   A dream o’ duel and sorrow;
I dreamed that you were spilling blood,
   On the dowie dens o’ Yarrow.’

‘Oh, sister dear, I’ll read yer dream,
   An’ I hope it won’t prove sorrow.
   Yer true love John lies dead and gone,
   Now a bloody corpse on Yarrow.’

This fair maid’s hair was three-quarters long
   And the colour of twas yellow.
   She tied it roond his middle small,
   As she carried him hame tae Yarrow.

‘Oh, dauchter dear, dry up your tears
   And dwell no more in sorrow,
   For I’ll wed ye to far higher degree
   Than your ploughman boy o’ Yarrow.’

‘Oh, father dear, ye’ve seven sons,
   Ye can wed them all tomorrow.
   But a fairer floo’er there never bloomed
   Than my ploughman boy o’ Yarrow.’

The woman sighed a bit wistfully as they finished, resting her elbow on her knee and placing her chin in her hand. “Hmm, that’s so sad,” she commented softly with a pout. “I mean I loved it, you guys could definitely start a choir, but not gonna lie--that was kind of a downer.”

“Aye,” Jamie said with a dry laugh. “Stories of star-crossed lovers usually are.”

Zahra sat up and adjusted the reins in her grasp. “I never did like Romeo and Juliet. I was always more of a Midsummer Night’s Dream kind of girl, myself.” Jamie grinned and chuckled softly.

“‘Oh, when she’s angry, she is keen and shrewd!’” Suddenly Ned joined the conversation, managing to nail Zahra’s favorite line right on the head. “‘Aye, she was a vixen when she went to school, and though she be but little, she is fierce.’”

Zahra turned to look at the older man with a chuckle. “See. It was practically written for me,” she said playfully. “How’d you know my favorite line, Mr. Gowan?”

“I made an educated guess, Mistress,” he said with a pleased chortle.
“So, if ye’re Helenar,” Jamie started to say. “Does that make me Demetrius, then?” he asked with a wink and a smirk.

Jamie knew Shakespeare, too? Lords help her. “Oh, sweet baby Jesus I hope not. Demetrius was an asshole to Helena.” Zahra heard Ned laugh next to her, along with a few of the men who had overheard, and were not used to Zahra’s particular vocabulary.

“Are ye a patron of the arts, Mistress Zahra?” Ned asked.

Zahra tilted her head thoughtfully for a moment. “I mean–I guess I enjoy a good show just as much as the next person, but probably of all types of performance arts, dance would be my favorite.”

“Do ye prefer to spectate, or d’ye perform as well?” They all already knew how much she loved to sing, and she definitely had the spirit and personality for stage performance, even if her selected profession seemed to be in healing.

“Well, I’ve never done anything professionally, or anything like that.” That was a lie. She used to be an exotic dancer back in her early, early academy days, but that was neither here nor there. “But I enjoy acrobatics.” Parkour and most of her physical and martial arts training could fall under that umbrella.

“Ah, yes. Have ye ever spent time in the Orient?” Ned asked curiously.

This conversation was going down another road that Zahra would much rather avoid. “Briefly, yes.”

“When I was a wee bairn, I saw a Chinese acrobatic troupe perform some of the most spectacular feats I’ve ever seen. They were marvelous.” Ned smiled pleasantly at the memory. “I was convinced that I wanted to run away to China to join them, but my parents managed to talk me out of it, knowing I was not a lad with the fortitude for such things. Nae, they wisely encouraged me to focus on my mental studies, instead.” Zahra sighed in relief as it seemed Ned wasn’t going to press her for more of her personal history. “Still, I must admit the thirst for adventure was eventually a need too strong for me to ignore.”

“Is that how you ended up out here, in the highlands?” Zahra asked.

“Oh, aye. I had a small practice, once. Lace curtains in the windows,” he began to describe it as he reminisced. “Shiny brass plate with my name on the door.”

“Demanding clients traipsing in and out, never giving you a moment’s peace?”

Ned chuckled. “Oh, aye. As ye can imagine, I grew restless, ye ken?” Zahra smiled, nodding. “I eventually determined the best course was to head off northwards, up here into the highlands, and I thought that I might induce some clan chief to allow me to serve him.”

“Laird Colum?”

“Oh, no, no, no. His father, Jacob. No, I’m–I’m much older than I appear, lassie.” Ned said with a playful, sly sort of smirk, and he even gave her a wink.

“Mr. Gowan, are you flirting with me?” Zahra asked with a playful grin, acting as if she may be scandalized.

“Oi, Ned. Ye’re not tryin’ to steal my woman right from under my nose, are ye?” Jamie accused, playfully. Ned actually managed to blush, sort of stuttering and fumbling a little in his nervousness.
“Relax, old man. I’m just having ye on,” Jamie admitted with a boyish grin, then he reached for Zahra’s hand, raising it to his lips once again to place a kiss on her knuckles. Zahra squeezed his hand and they locked gazes for a moment.

“As I was saying,” Ned cleared his throat and managed to compose himself a moment later. Zahra took her hand back to hold the reins of her horse, listening. “When I started with Laird Jacob, things were much less civilized. Back when men were men and the pernicious weed of civilization was less rampant upon the wild, bonny face of this land.”

Zahra’s smile was a bit wistful as she looked ahead at the country around them. “You may be a lawyer now, Mr. Gowan, but in another life you must have been a poet.” Ned looked at her for a moment before chortling at the idea.

They fell into a silent revelry after that, small side conversations going on all around. The road was long, and tiring, and Zahra had definitely caught herself dozing off a few times. At one point she even ended up leaning into Jamie who was riding very close next to her. He hadn’t minded though. He was a skilled enough horseman he could guide his horse Donas with his legs alone, so he kept one hand on the reins, while the other he lifted to wrap his arm around Zahra’s shoulders, to give her a little more stability so she could rest. He’d even hummed softly to her in her sleep at one point.

A few hours later they were stopped again for supper, which needed to be caught first. It was nothing spectacular, just a small brace of rabbits their archer had managed to hunt. There was very little meat on them so they had all resigned themselves to their fate that stale biscuits and dried fruit would be the majority of their dinner. Zahra, however, had insisted there was enough meat and vegetables to make a decent stew. So, she’d helped the cook debone the wee beasties, then together they prepared the meal.

When it was finished, Zahra brought them each a bowl, before grabbing one for herself and joining them by the fire where Jamie had saved a spot for her.

“Don’t be surprised when it tastes like shite,” Angus said as he stirred his bowl with his spoon. It actually didn’t look that bad, but with a woman who had no sense of taste, he was still skeptical.

“Why ye say that?” Willie asked as he brought his bowl up to his nose to take a whiff.

“What Mr. Mhor is trying to imply, Willie,” Zahra began to explain. “Is that he thinks because I have little sense of smell or taste, that must mean my cooking is shit.”

Jamie was already several bites in, and did not hesitate to defend his woman’s cooking skills. “Which couldnae be further from the truth,” Jamie said with his mouth half full.

“Thank you,” she said, and the two lovebirds disgustingly leaned in to share a brief kiss.

“She said Fitz’s porridge was good!” Angus cautioned them further, which actually made those who hadn’t eaten yet stare at the contents of their bowls in concern.

Zahra rolled her eyes. “Again, Angus, if you don’t want yours I’ll happily--” she started to stand up leaning over to dunk her spoon in his bowl.

“I dinnae say I dinnae want it,” the man turned, defending his food from her.

“Then shut yer gob and eat already? It’s no’ bad,” Rupert tried to assure his best friend. Both he and Murtagh were also already digging into theirs, and happily. When they were on the road like this,
mostly the men took whatever warm meals they could get, and not throw a fit, but this wasn’t just a warm meal. The stew was hearty and actually tasted pretty good all things considered. Zahra was a wiz with spices.

Angus gazed at his friend. Rupert would eat pretty much anything so his vote wasn’t the most winning. And Jamie was obviously just saying that so he stayed in Zahra’s good graces because they were engaged. Happy wife, happy life and all that, so Angus couldn’t trust his opinion either. Still, even if the stew tasted bad, he’d suffered through plenty of mornings with Fitz’s gruel. One measly rabbit stew wasn’t going to kill him. He hoped. With a heavy, resigned sigh, Angus brought his first spoonful up to his mouth, gave it a sniff, then took a tentative bite. His eyebrows shot to his hairline as he chewed, gazing down at his bowl in wonder. He eagerly took another bite. Then another.

The impressionable young Willie had apparently taken the hint and soon dug into his own stew just as heartily. Zahra took it as a good sign, then, that most of the jaw-jacking and chatter died off as the men were focused on actually eating and enjoying their food for once. It wasn’t some royal, five-star quality stew, but it was tasty and a great deal better than their usual road fare.

“How’d ye lose your sense of smell, Zahra?” Willie asked after a while, dunking a piece of dry bannoch into his stew before he ate it.

Zahra wiped her mouth on the cuff of her sleeve and met Jamie’s eyes briefly, then Dougal’s. She finished chewing and swallowing her food before answering. “Nasal trauma,” she said simply, but the questioning furrow of Willie’s brow indicated he didn’t know what she meant. “One too many broken noses,” she explained casually as if it weren’t a big deal, then tapped the side of her nose with her finger. “Damaged my sniffer beyond repair.”

Jamie’s free hand reached over to hold and squeeze her wrist. Zahra turned to look at him with a soft smile and she reached her free hand over to cover the back of his. There was a lot of things not being said in that moment. Several realizations and contextual knowledge that most of the men there could piece together, but were too polite or dignified to dare bring up or think about. Zahra was no ordinary woman by a long shot.

“How many times have ye broken yer nose?” Willie seemed oblivious, though, and Zahra actually found it kind of refreshing.

“Honestly, I’ve lost count,” she said with a chuckle.

Willie’s brow furrowed and he looked even more confused now than ever, maybe even a little scandalized at the thought that a woman would ever be in a situation to have her nose broken so often.

“How’d ye break yer nose so much?”

Dougal slapped his hand on Willie’s shoulder, making the younger man jump slightly. Their leader then leaned over and said something calmly in Gaelic, close to the young man’s ear, to which the boy nodded looking properly chastised. Willie met Zahra’s gaze briefly, nervously. Zahra offered him a wide smile, and the boy managed to smile back, before he focused on his food.

It was sometime after most of them had gotten up for seconds, because the stew definitely would not keep on the road, that someone had broken out the ale. With warm, full bellies and now with good drink, the real stories and jokes would soon begin to flow, no doubts.
Most of their conversations were in Gaelic, so Zahra didn’t understand a lot of it, but she didn’t feel left out. She simply enjoyed their camaraderie. Plus, she had to admit that watching Jamie laugh and have fun, well it was nice seeing him like this; unguarded, carefree. He caught her gazing at him at one point and he gave her a wink before offering her a grape which she happily parted her lips so he could pop it into her mouth. As she began to chew on it, he took the opportunity to pinch her chin to hold her in place before leaning in to steal a grape flavored kiss. She couldn’t lie, it thrilled her to no end that Jamie seemed so comfortable and free about showing her such affection in front of his friends like this. She had never been big on PDA, but for tiny shows such as this when they’d had little to no privacy for the past week… well, she was happy to shut up and make an exception. The urge was there to deepen the kiss, but they thankfully kept it G rated when Jamie broke away after but a moment, smiling.

One of the men handed Jamie a mug of drink over his shoulder, tapping the redhead with the cup a couple times to draw his attention to it. Jamie turned and saw the cup, then looked further to see Seamus handing it to him. He spoke his thanks in Gaelic before taking a small sip. While Jamie and the others were happy to partake of alcoholic libations during their downtime, he had definitely noticed that Zahra hadn’t had a drink except water since they’d been on the road. With a gentle smile, Jamie offered her the cup. Zahra smirked, then exhaled softly and gazed at the cup a long moment. She was debating if she should or not. She wanted to, but...

“It’s alright,” Jamie whispered softly and nudged his forehead gently against hers. He knew how much she didn’t like being without her wits in foreign company. He was also pretty sure many of her hyper antics on the road today had been done out of nerves and anxiety. “I’ve got ye,” he assured her. A wee nip was sure to take the edge off.

She met his eyes for a while, then reached for the offered cup to take it with a smile. “Thank you,” she said before she took a long drink. Jamie eased the cup away a little before she could drain it in one go. “Easy, love. That’s uisge-beatha.” Jamie turned and asked Seamus for another cup in Gaelic.

“What’s oosh-keh-bah?” She asked, unsure if she was pronouncing that right, but she went ahead and took another sip anyway.

Jamie smirked at her pronunciation and sipped from his own cup. “Water of Life,” he explained as he took a sip from his own cup. “Very strong, potent spirits. Can knock a man clean on his arse with one cup.” Jamie nodded at the man who’d handed him the cup. “Seamus makes it himself.”

“Water of life, huh?” She took another sip. It had a very nice bite that burned a little as it went down, but at the same time it went down smooth. Had an almost smokey smell and flavor. “Hmm. That’s nice.” She took another sip, years of scotch drinking had already prepared her gut for the potency of it.

“Aye,” Jamie said with a grin. “Warms the belly.”

Zahra smirked and leaned in to whisper against his ear. “Among other things.”

The man felt the hairs rise all over the back of his neck and down his arms and he cleared his throat. Zahra grinned and took another sip of her cup. “I’m gonna find the loo,” she said as she began to stand.

Jamie took her hand and pulled her back down. “Ai, no, ye’re not,” he argued as he held her firmly against his side. “Dougal was just telling us a grand joke, weren’t ye Dougal?” Jamie nodded up at his uncle, and the man nodded back.

“Right, so old granny, Mary,” he’s already laughing at the joke can barely get through it, and that
alone made Zahra smile and she didn’t even know the joke. “So old granny Mary’s getting ready for bed, and she says to her husband, ‘When ye first saw me naked-’” Zahra’s grin widened even more when Dougal took on a high-pitched lassies voice. “-what were ye thinkin’?’” Zahra laughed out loud. “And he says, ‘I wanted to suck yer paps dry.’” Poor Willie was soon pulled into Dougal’s telling as he used the boy to thrust at crudely. “I wanted to swive ye until ye were a worn-out husk.” Zahra was snickering so hard, her eyes shut and she nudged her head against Jamie’s shoulder. This was a side of Dougal she hadn’t been privy to. The man was funny. “And she says to him, ‘And what are ye thinking now?’” Again with that voice, it was killing her. “And he looks at her and says, ‘Looks like I’ve done a fine job.’” They were all in hysterics, Dougal’s joke had them all in stitches.

When the laughter died down a bit, Zahra finished taking a drink from her mug, then chimed in, “Ok, I got one!” She said. “So a man is sitting at a bar, his head in his hands, just completely devastated, right? The bartender comes over and asks him, ‘Eh, what’s the matter, buddy?’” She wasn’t as good at the voices as Dougal but it was the thought that counted right? “The man groans and cries, ‘Oh, it’s the worst thing ever. I caught my wife in bed with my best friend!’... The bartender says ‘Oi! That sucks, mate! What did you do?’” She was trying to keep a straight face but she chuckled a little at the upcoming punchline. “The man responds angrily, ‘I told her to pack her shit and get out!’... The tender cheers him for his actions and asks ‘What about the best friend?’ To which the man says.” And for this part she got very Clint Eastwood squinty eyes and serious as she said. “I looked him straight in the eyes and said, ‘Bad Dog!’”

It took the briefest of moments for the punchline to catch on, but when it did every man gathered around suddenly burst out laughing. Zahra broke character, grinning and giggling along with them as she took another sip from her drink. “Ooh! You know what we should do?” She started to suggest. “We should play Never Have I Ever.”

“What the shite is tha?” Angus asked, wiping a mirthful tear from his eye.

“It’s a drinking game. It’s fun.” She had them all at ‘drinking game’.

“How d’ye play?” Rupert asked interestedly.

“Well, ok so it’s kind of based on an honour system. You go around taking turns, and the person who’s turn it is tells us something they’ve never done before, and anyone in the circle who has done that thing then takes a drink. The trick is to try to think of things that you’ve personally never done, but you think most of the other people around you have.” They were looking at her, interested, but still a little confused. “Ok... So... for example, I’ll go first with an easy one... Never have I ever grown a beard...” She paused for effect. “So, clearly--” she pointed at the men gathered in the circle whom were all sporting various lengths of facial hair. “--every single one of you should take a drink... except maybe Willie.” She teased the young man with a cheeky grin. They all had a good laugh as Angus reached over to pinch at Willie’s bare chin, muttering a tease in Gaelic, and Willie slapped his hand away, which made them all laugh harder.

She had managed to get the point across, though, giving them a better idea. So they each took a drink from their cups... Except Willie. Normally, the men just drank to drink, so to have a fun game to play along with their drinking was definitely a step up. “Alright so... Jamie it’s your turn.” She nudged him gently with her elbow

“Alright, let me see... Never have I ever--” he looked at her to make sure he was doing this right and Zahra nodded at him with a widening grin. He managed to glance down at her wrist while he was thinking and his answer came to mind “Never have I ever gotten a tattoo.”

Zahra rolled her eyes playfully, but took a drink. So did Dougal, and Murtagh.
It was Murtagh’s turn next. “Ai, I cannae believe I’m humouring this but…” He took in a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. “Never have I ever--worn a corset,” the older gentleman said. Once again Zahra rolled her eyes but still she took another sip.

After Murtagh it came Seamus’s turn. “Never have I ever--kissed a man.”

Zahra took another sip, then scoffed when they all chortled at her expense. “Ok, ok. Very amusing, but this game isn’t called Let’s all get Zahra drunk off her ass!”

“A very decent point, Mistress,” Ned said as he thought of his own answer. “My turn, then?” He cleared his throat. “Never have I ever--killed a man.” That was a good one. Everyone, except Willie and Ned, took a drink, even Zahra. Ned had been trying to say something that would prevent Zahra from having to drink, so when she ended up drinking anyway, he looked in her direction with wide, but sad eyes. “Oh, dear,” he whispered under his breath. “I’m sorry.”

Zahra winked at him, grinning. “Don’t be. That’s the name of the game, oldtimer.”

It was Dougal’s turn now and he looked deep in thought, perched on his hollow tree stump with one arm crossed over his chest. “Never have I ever… killed a woman,” he finally said, very pointedly gazing at Jamie, but he wasn’t the only one who’d taken a drink. Zahra did too. They both almost simultaneously, albeit reluctantly, began to raise their glasses to their lips to drink.

The couple looked at each other then, something unspoken passing between them. “It was--” Jamie had begun to try to explain that it had been an accident, but Zahra pressed her fingers to his lips, silencing him with a subtle shake of her head.

“You don’t have anything to explain to me.” Regardless if it had been justified, or an accident, or even revenge, Zahra didn’t care. It wouldn’t change how she felt about him. Wouldn’t change how much she was in love with him anymore than her own dark past had seemed to matter to him.

Dougal huffed out his nose. That had backfired. He nodded at Willie and the young man worried on his bottom lip, thinking. “Hmm… Never have I ever… bed a lassie.” He realized probably too late that he’d basically just outing himself as a virgin, but he got a good-natured punch to the arm. They ribbed him about his sister in Gaelic some more as every man except Jamie took a drink… And when they all saw Zahra lift her own cup to her mouth to take a sip as well, almost simultaneously there were six men coughing and spitting out their drinks in shock.

“Wha’?” Rupert declared first. “Ye’ve bed another woman?”

“Well, I guess that depends on what your definition of ‘bed a woman’ is…” She teased.

“Ye know…” Rupert gestured helplessly, stroking his hand a bit crudely in the air, unable to bring himself to actually say the words to the woman sitting in their circle. “You know!” he accused.

Zahra had a shit-eating grin on her face. “You mean Willie wasn’t just asking if I’ve shared a bed with another woman?”

“Auch, no!” Rupert said. “You know bloody well what he meant.”

“Do I though?” Zahra asked, teasingly. Rupert harrumphed, exhaling hotly out his nose. She obviously wasn’t going to openly admit anything unless Rupert actually accused her of something specific, and since the man couldn’t bring himself to ask if Zahra had ever had carnal relations with a woman, he dropped it. Zahra was sure she’d just broken Rupert’s brain. “It’s your turn anyway, numpty.” She used the silly nickname she had heard Jamie use, which made the man next to her laugh softly, while Rupert glowered.
Rupert crossed his arms, pausing to think of something. When he thought he had the best retort, he turned a very smug expression to his friends. “Never have I ever--been flogged.” Definitely very pleased with himself at that one. As expected, both Zahra and Jamie had to take a drink.

“Alright, this was supposed to be fun, not hurt your friends feelings. So… Let’s not play this anymore.” She waved her hand in the air. “Forget, I brought it up.” She took a decent sip from her cup, not trying to ration it for the game anymore. “Anybody bring a deck of cards?” They looked around at each other but everyone shook their heads. Zahra snapped and clicked her tongue against her teeth, then downed the rest of her cup. “Alright, well. I’m gonna find the loo.”

“Ye alright?” Jamie asked in mild concern, though a smile was still playing on his lips.

“Me? Oh yeah, I’m good. Five by five,” she said with a wispy sort of smile before she slapped one of her hands on Jamie's knee and the other on her own before she moved to stand, which took two tries for her to actually get up on her feet. She wobbled a little bit, and Jamie reached out to steady her if needs be, but for the most part she was able to maintain her balance. “Which way’s the--oh right.” She glanced around her. “Anywhere. Umm… yeah…” She pointed off in one direction and started walking that way, miraculously without stumbling.

“I’d better go--make sure she doesnae get lost.” He hopped up and quickly followed after Zahra. No one really believed he was just going to make sure she didn’t get lost.

“What the bloody hell does five by five mean?” Jamie heard Angus ask the group out loud as he departed.

Jamie caught up with Zahra quickly, placing his hand on the small of her back, and holding her arm to help steady her. “I can--take a leak on my own, ya know?” she said with a smirk.

“I know ye can.” He said as he pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “I just wanted an excuse to whisk ye off somewhere private.” It wasn’t a total lie. Why hurt her pride?

“Oh… Well alright then,” she smiled and let him lead her on.

They went down the hill and Jamie lead Zahra around a large boulder where he left her to do her business. Somehow, in her unexpectedly inebriated state, Zahra managed to hoist her skirts, and down her trousers to pee without incident. She even managed to get herself dressed back up again just as well, though she’d unknowingly caught the back of her skirt in the waist of her pants. As she came around the outside of the boulder to join Jamie again, she was using her hand braced against the rock’s surface to help her balance. “I think--no, I know--I’m drunk.” She smiled when she saw him. “What does Seamus put in that drink?”

Jamie laughed as he held onto her, practically holding her up as he helped her walk back to camp. “No one really knows, but the fact that ye’re still managing any form of speech and coherency, and aren’t flat on yer face at this point is incredibly impressive. Grown men twice yer size’ve been knocked on their arse wi’ less.”

“Yeah well, none of the men you know have ever gone shot for shot with a Klingon before.”

“Auch--linon?” Jamie asked with a furrowed brow, trying to sound out the name he thought he’d heard.

Whoopsies! Yet another reason why, since being here, Zahra had desperately refrained from getting drunk. She couldn’t afford slips like that. “Sorry, what?”
“You just said you went shot for shot with someone called--Auchlinon or something?” He didn’t think he was pronouncing that right. “Am I--s’posed to know who tha’ is?”

Zahra shook her head. “Nope.” She popped the P audibly, and giggled as she lost her footing over a tree root.

Jamie managed to catch her from falling. God she was an adorable drunk. Silly, but adorable. “Come on... ye drunken idjit,” he teased with a grin as he held her steady and helped her walk back to camp.

“I’m not as think as drunkle peep I am,” Zahra said, laughing merrily at her joke. No that had not been an accident she had messed it up on purpose. About halfway back, she stopped and took in a deep breath, and rested her head against his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“An’ what particular sin ‘ave ye committed lately?”

“We were having so much fun with your friends.” Her words, while still coherent, were heavily slurred. “I didn’t--mean to--bring it down.”

“Ye did nothin’ wrong, a gràidh. Rupert was just’ bein’ an arse.” Jamie pressed a kiss to the side of her head when he realized she’d called them his friends, not theirs. “Ye know they’re yer friends too, right?”

“Are they though?” She slurred a little. “I’m just--the weird, crazy medicine woman. I half expect to be led off by a religious mob at any moment.”

“Leeloo.” He stopped them, taking her by the shoulders as he made her look at him. “Almost everra man in that camp would lay down their life for ye. In fact, if not for you, this entire adventure so far would be piss and shite. I’ve never seen Murtagh or Dougal, or many o’ the others laugh and generally enjoy themselves as much before.”

She took in a deep breath and exhaled, then raised her hands to scrub her face. “I just--I know I act strange to them, to you even. I’m sure my antics are bizarre.”

“Aye. Ye may not be like any other lass I’ve ever met,” he tipped her chin to make her look at him. “Almost everra man in that camp would lay down their life for ye. In fact, if not for you, this entire adventure so far would be piss and shite. I’ve never seen Murtagh or Dougal, or many o’ the others laugh and generally enjoy themselves as much before.”

Zahra smirked and exhaled softly again. “I just want them, I want you to know that I’m not just excess baggage here. I want to contribute. Maybe I’m trying too hard.”

“You are contributing, Leeloo. In the best ways. They’re just not used to having a woman on the road, least of all one who’s as clever, sassy, strong, and mysterious as you.” Jamie’s smile was teasing, playful.

“Gotta keep you all on your toes somehow, I guess,” she bantered back with a smirk of her own. Jamie was reaching for her to steal a kiss a moment later.

“Hmm,” Jamie mumbled against her mouth, slowly breaking the kiss. “Have ye really made love with a woman before?”

Zahra dropped her gaze and worried on her bottom lip. “What do you think?”

Jamie cupped her jaw in his hand and brushed his thumb across the apple of her cheek. “I think it may explain the way I’ve seen ye gaze at Mistress Duncan on occasion.”

Her head lifted, eyes widening. “Jamie, I would never--”
He silenced her with a kiss. “I know, lass. I trust you. I just mean to say it explains some things, is all. She is bonny.”

“She is. And I’ll admit I might--admire the view a little, so to speak, but my feelings for her are like--more along the line of like the love and affection one has for a sister, you know what I mean?” Jamie nodded, thinking of his own sister. “When I first arrived, apart from you, Geillis was the only other person to show me kindness and kinship without conditions. I don’t want anything other than her friendship, though.”

Jamie nodded in understanding. “I’m glad ye have that with her. Everyone needs a friend like that.”

For Jamie, he had Murtagh. Zahra nodded and Jamie lifted his other hand to cup the other side of her face as he pulled her in for another lingering kiss. He then broke the kiss just so he could wrap his arms around her and pull her in for a warm embrace, resting his chin atop her head.

“They’re gonna think I deflowered you out here,” Zahra muttered with a chuckle against his chest then she heard and felt him chuckle along with her.

“Aye, maybe.” He rubbed her shoulders and broke apart to take her hand. “I guess, it’s good that ye were just so drunk that ye almost hurt yerself, and I had a hard time getting ye to come back with me with all yer drunken flailing.”

“What?” Zahra asked with a furrowed brow, then suddenly Jamie had her hoisted over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry and Zahra erupted in giggles, before smacking him hard on his plaid covered ass. “Hey now!” he complained, then returned the gesture, smacking her firmly on her bottom... which he just noticed was half showing as her skirt had been tucked into the waist of her trousers. He helped fix that before they headed back. “Ye’re drunk remember.”

Zahra rolled her eyes, which she knew Jamie couldn’t see. “Fine. But you owe me big time.”

As they made their way back to camp, when the others saw their approach, Dougal made his way over, concern etched into his features. “What happened?”

“I,” Zahra started to say, then hiccuped obnoxiously. “Twisted my ankle.” Another exaggerated hiccup. “But I’m better now.”

“Is she alright?” Dougal asked Jamie, obviously concerned. Couldn’t have their only medic injuring herself.

“Aye, she’s fine,” Jamie said. “Just put a wick in ‘er an’ she’d burn for a fortnight.”

“Hey!” She said, pushing at Jamie’s shoulder, until he took the hint and gently set her on her feet. “I resemble that remark!” She noticed they had already started cleaning up from supper.

“Ye alright?” Dougal asked her.

“Who me? Pfft. A little twisted ankle is nothing a little rest won’t cure.” Zahra nodded and clapped him on the shoulder a few times. “We are camping here for the night, are we not?”

Dougal nodded. “Aye.”

“Right, well.” Zahra yawned a bit exaggeratedly. “Been a long day. Think I’ll turn in if that’s ok with you? Put my ankle up to rest.” Dougal nodded again. “Goodnight.” She wished goodnight to the others as well, who all responded back with their own well wishes.
Dougal had noticed that as she made her way to her tent, Zahra seemed to be surprisingly limp free. “Twisted her ankle did she?” Dougal said, side-eyed his nephew as they walked together.

Jamie just shrugged and gave his uncle a similar clap on the shoulder. “Aye. She could barely walk on the way back.” Which Jamie suddenly realized could mean something else entirely.

“Jamie,” Dougal said the young man’s name in a reprimanding, cautionary tone.

“We didnae do anything, I swear it.” Jamie said quietly for only his uncle to hear. “Ye really think I’d still declare myself a virgin if I wasnae?” He had a point.

Dougal was hardly a stranger to engaging in relations outside of wedlock, so he was hardly one to scold the boy, but it wasn’t so much that as Dougal was not entirely comfortable or accepting of the fact that he may have brought Zahra along on this expedition just to give Jamie a play thing. They were certainly not afraid of showing their affection, and Zahra proudly boasted Jamie’s plaid around her neck and shoulders every waking minute. They were all of them aware of the couple’s connection, and intentions. If it were him, Dougal would have taken Zahra every which way he knew of by now. Jamie was a stronger man then, and maybe a part of Dougal knew that and envied him for it, but the woman had made her choice very clear, and no amount of seductive arts on Dougal’s part had seemed to be able to sway her mind. Maybe he also hated her a little for that, for seeing through him, for making him aware of his own faults.

When Jamie was about to duck into his own tent, Dougal suddenly had his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Ye’ll take first watch,” the war chief ordered, to which Jamie just nodded and moved away to take up a vigilance by the fire, his plaid wrapped tightly around his shoulders.

Zahra had managed to doze a little, but the chill was so great that it had her teeth chattering. Even with her long cloak about her, it wasn’t enough. It was already dark, crickets chirping the night away. She also knew Jamie was on watch, alone. Seeing as she couldn’t sleep anyway, and honestly the idea of being able to be alone with him for the first time in days had its very own appeal, so she’d made up her mind and crawled out of her tent.

Jamie was sat on the ground by the fire, his back perched against the hollow log they’d been sitting on earlier. When he noticed movement out the corner of his eye, he had his hand ready on the hilt of his dagger as he looked up. When he saw it was Zahra, he relaxed as his hand fell away and he smiled up at her. He whispered something sweet in Gaelic, calling her an angel of the night or something like that, then he took her hand to help her climb over the log. “You should be sleeping,” he spoke quietly as to not wake anyone.

“I tried,” she whispered back. Jamie noticed her teeth rattling a little so when she moved to snuggle up against him, he invited her openly into his arms, under his Tartan, where it was literally like a wave of warmth washed over her. The thick tartan plaid really did help keep the body heat in and Zahra was grateful for it. “Too cold.”

“Aye,” he said as he rested his cheek atop her hair. His plaid easily covered them both in its cocoon of warmth and Zahra sighed wistfully. “I’m sure Rupert’s and Angus’s snoring isnae helping.”

Zahra chuckled softly as she pillowed her head on Jamie’s shoulder and watched the fire dance. “I’ve slept through worse,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Worse than the bunch o’ those sawed logs?” They could hear the snoring soldiers, even now.
Zahra chuckled and nodded. They were nothing next to Kai’s chainsaw snoring. “It’s honestly mostly the chill. Hard to sleep when I’m laying there shivering myself awake.” Jamie held her tighter and placed a kiss on her forehead. “This is much better though,” she said as she leaned up to look him in the eyes. “Nice and warm and cozy.” She gave him a smile before leaning in for a kiss.

It did not seem to be lost on either of them in that moment that they were the only two awake, and cocooned in their little privacy blanket of warmth and body heat it was easy to let intimacy take hold. Soon, what had started as a simple kiss, gave way to a deeper passion, hunger, and need as their kiss deepened. Lips parted to permit tongues and teeth to join in the fray. Heat exploded between them and Zahra tore her mouth away to gasp for breath, but Jamie just used that opportunity to trail his mouth down the newly exposed length of her neck.

Zahra wanted more than anything in that moment to just climb onto his lap but she didn’t. “Jamie?” She whispered his name to the night.

Jamie groaned against her neck before he pulled back, breathing heavily as he held her face and pressed their foreheads together. “I know. I want you, too.” He moved his hand down to her hip and started pulling on her skirts. “Can you be quiet?” he asked hoarsely.

Her hand gripped his bicep and she worried hard on her bottom lip. “I don’t know,” she whispered breathlessly.

Jamie’s hands were actually clean, he’d washed them after helping break down their dinner fire, and his need to touch her was overwhelming. “Shall we find out?” He said with a sultry smirk.

Every hair on Zahra’s body was standing on end, just by the thought of Jamie touching her. They were mere feet from the rest of their sleeping group, though, but it was Jamie who was primarily instigating this entire thing. “Have you always been--an exhibitionist, James?” Zahra asked breathlessly.

His lips curved up on one side in that insanely sexy, arrogant smirk of his. “Only since I met you,” he responded. Then his free hand gripped the back of her neck and he sealed their mouths together, just as his other hand slipped inside her leggings and strong fingers sought out her clit. Zahra gripped harder onto his arm and he swallowed down her moan. “Jamie,” she shook her head, breathing impossibly hard. He’d barely touched her and she’d been unable to control her volume. “I don’t think--I can be quiet.”

“Yes, you can,” he whispered back, equally breathless. “You can be quiet for me.” He rubbed his fingers against her harder, more insistent and Zahra bit down hard on her bottom lip, her eyes shut tight, trying not to make a sound. “Aye. Good girl.” His hand moved further south and he slipped two fingers inside of her.

Zahra’s head fell back in pleasure, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to silence the grunt she’d been about to make. Her hips moved against him as Jamie moved his hand back and forth, his palm torturously rubbing against that sensitive nub as he rutted her with his fingers. He pressed open mouthed kisses to her jaw, her neck, her lips. “Good girl,” he said again and Zahra gasped once more form the praise. She shouldn’t respond so easily to that but a part of her, however buried it had been, delighted at the praise. Was thrilled that she was pleasing him by letting him please her, because as much as she was loving this, needed it, she couldn’t help but realize Jamie seemed to be enjoying it just as much.

His hand picked up speed, and Zahra’s breathing grew harder, heavier, and her grip on his arm was almost bruising, and she was probably going to bite through her bottom lip at this point, so she replaced her lip with her finger. “Ye’re close?” Jamie whispered and Zahra nodded her head, her
eyes shut impossibly tight until she could almost see stars.

She wrapped her arm so firmly around his neck and shoulders, and his free arm moved to wrap behind her back, the only thing keeping her upright. She was biting down hard on her knuckle it might bruise or at least leave a mark for a spell. She was desperately trying not to make a sound when all she wanted to do was scream. “Go on, then,” Jamie urged as he pressed his forehead against the side of hers. He mercilessly added a third finger as his hand picked up speed and force. “Come on!” He ordered… In the next moment Zahra’s thighs were clamped around his hand, her head was thrown back, and she let out a strangled noise that she immediately shoved her fist against her mouth to stifle from turning into anything louder. Her entire body began to tremble and convulse from the force of her orgasm, her inner walls gripping his fingers tight. Jamie pressed his head against her neck and exhaled heavily and hotly against her skin as he felt her squeeze his fingers, and her liquids flooded his hand with her pleasure.

The tension in her body that was making her tight as a bowstring eventually slackened and she relaxed with a relieved sigh. She removed her fist from her mouth and brought it to cup Jamie’s jaw as she brought her mouth to his in a needy kiss. “You made me gush,” she whispered against his mouth, but her words were slightly slurred almost as if she were drunk.

It was such a beautifully dirty word, it made Jamie’s body hairs stand on end all over again. “Is that--a good thing?”

Zahra nodded enthusiastically and pressed her forehead to his. “It’s a--very good thing. No one--” She bit down on her bottom lip to stifle another noise of pleasure as Jamie began to slip his hand free. “No one’s ever--made me gush before.”

Sure enough, when he pulled his hand free it was as if he’d just pulled it out of a washing basin, but it wasn’t water, it was Leeloo’s pleasure. ”Uisge-beatha,” he whispered, almost in awe. Zahra realized he was in essence calling her ejaculate Water of Life. With a soft moan she reached for his hand and a moment later she was sucking his two middle fingers into her mouth.

Jamie gasped in shock and surprise, his instinct was to pull his hand away but the sight of Zahra licking and suckling her own fluids off his hand… he shouldn’t be enjoying it, shouldn’t find it as arousing as he obviously did. Everything he’d ever been taught or told about sexual relations was telling him it wasn’t right, but his mind’s and his body’s own reactions were very clearly saying otherwise. He whispered several curses and praises in Gaelic as he watched Zahra slip his fingers from her mouth with that same sultry, wanton look she’d given him when she’d sucked his cock that one time. With a chesty sort of growl, Jamie was pulling her against him a moment later and kissing her fiercely.

And then someone quite literally dumped a bucket of freezing cold water over their heads. Literally. Ok, so maybe it was more of a full mug of cold water and not a bucket, but still. It made them both jump and break away from each other, gasping and sputtering in shock. The culprit, they soon found, was a frowning Murtagh who was moving around to take up his own seat by the fire. They both kind of just watched him in shock for a moment, trying to come to terms with what just happened.

“I’ve got next watch,” Murtagh said simply as he munched on an apple.

“Right,” Jamie finally said, shaking the remnants of chilled water from his hair and off his coat. Jamie stood and offered Zahra a hand help her up as well. “G’night, then,” he said kept Zahra strategically placed in front of him as he ushered her towards a vacant tent... with Murtagh smirking behind their backs as they went.

After a short, quiet debate, they did end up coming to the decision to share a tent. Zahra managed to
convince Jamie the additional body heat would help them both sleep, but her especially. She did opt to change her leggings before they retired, though. Going to sleep with a soaking wet crotch was not her idea of comfort. With fresh pants, she eventually crawled in next to him, but Jamie had insisted that sleep was all they did. Just sleep. Even when Zahra had offered to get him off in a way that wouldn’t leave any evidence, mainly with her mouth, Jamie had declined. He said he would be fine, and that they really needed some shut eye. So, Zahra may have finally been able to drift asleep with Jamie’s added warmth and the afterglow of a good orgasm surrounding her, but all of that combined with the prominent erection prodding against her backside most of the night, well it was the perfect recipe for fevered dreams that were sure to leave them both aching and aroused come morning.
Frayed

Chapter Summary

What exactly is going on back in the 23rd?

Chapter Notes

Just a tasty little snack between chapters.

For those curious, Laurie aka Fade, was also a slave on Meikieh station in Orion Syndicate space along with Zahra when they were kids. He was Zahra's only friend. Their mental/psychic bond was formed when they were kids. Laurie, obviously being a Betazoid, feels it more strongly than Zahra who is just a normal human. Laurie is scary powerful with the mind shit.

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*Stardate 2263:221 (aka Sunday August 9, 2263)*

*Location: Colony West, New Vulcan...
Starfleet Medical Wing...*

“Dr. Keelan?” An RA called as Laurie speed-walked down the corridor. He was reading patient logs and signing off charts as they were handed to him by one of the NP’s.

Dr. Keelan struck quite the figure and definitely stood out in a hospital on New Vulcan. Most of the doctors and nurses here were either Starfleet professionals, or Vulcan scientists and doctors, in other words everyone was so proper, and beautiful, and prim. Whereas Dr. Keelan almost always sported three-day stubble or longer, the brunette curls on his head carried a little more salt and pepper around the sideburns these days and always looked like they could use a comb, or some styling gel, and he tended to have dark circles under his eyes like he never got enough sleep. Despite his slightly haggard appearance, everyone in the New Vulcan Medical ward knew that Laurie was the go-to man for bizarre cases, which was exactly what Anaston Lothar had

“Dr. Keelan, please.” Anaston called again, racing to catch up with the man.

“Can’t stop now, Lothar. I’ve got a nine o clock I’m running late for.”

Anaston caught up to him and handed the man a cup of haisha, Dr. Keelan’s highly caffeinated beverage of choice. Laurie glanced at the steaming mug shoved in his face and he stopped to take it. “You just earned yourself two minutes, Lothar. Go.” Basically until he was finished drinking this cup.

“Thank you, sir!” Laurie nodded, urging him to get on with it as he lifted the lid, uncaring of the temperature of the beverage, and took a hearty sip. “So, I’ve got a patient this morning who’s been complaining of--” Laurie made a pained expression and a noise, and Anaston mistakenly thought he was reacting to the temperature of the java. “I’m sorry, sir. Did I make it too hot?”
Laurie gripped at his chest and crushed the cup in his hand, seemingly unfazed when the liquid drenched his flesh, and he reached for the nearest surface to stabilize himself. “Dr. Keelan are you alright?” Lothar asked concerned, gently prodding at the insanely strong mental shields Dr. Keelan erected around his mind. Betazoids were biologically predisposed to be nosey and have no regard for anyone’s privacy.

Laurie couldn’t describe the feeling. He had been fine, then suddenly it was like someone had just cut a major tendon or artery. When he performed his own mental probe for the source of the sensation he realized something devastating… The mental line that connected him and Zahra, the one that was always there in the background that he had only to tug on to feel her, was suddenly gone, frayed and messy at the end as if someone had taken a rusty pair of shears to it. “Yasmina. I need you to get Dr. Faolan to cover for me. I--suddenly am not feeling well.”

“But Dr. Keelan, my patient!” Anaston called after Laurie’s retreating form.

Dizzy, Laurie raced to his office probably knocking down some poor intern on the way. Once inside, he sat at his desk, rubbing at his temple as he started up his computer then opened a comm to Zahra’s frequency. It was ringing… and ringing… and ringing… “Come on, Leeloo. Pick up.” It went to voicemail. Laurie sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face before he tried again… Same result. “Damnit!” He shoved the rectangular inbox off his desk in anger, datapads scattering noisily to the ground. He propped his elbows on his desk, rubbing his fingers against both temples. He tried to pull on his mental line between Zahra again, but it was still disconnected, frayed, fuzzy. It wasn’t like she was dead. Laurie knew what it felt like when someone he was mentally connected to died. It was usually a clean cut. This wasn’t like that… It was like she was just…. Gone. It was worse than if she’d just suddenly died. At least then it would feel like a clean break. Like losing an arm. Plain and simple. Lots of pain, but then boom. Done. But this was mental agony… Unnatural… Like a festering, oozing wound.

Zahra had been back on the enterprise hadn’t she? He could call Jim or Kai. They would know where she is. He tried Kai first. The Orion answered after the second ring. “Well, this is an unexpected surprise. How’s life on--”

“Never mind that!” Laurie interrupted impatiently. “I need to know where Zahra is.”

“Well, it's nice to see you too, Laurie,” Jim’s voice sounded in the background and Kai turned the viewer so they were both in the image. Looked like they were playing cards and enjoying some synthehol. “You could have just called her you know?”

“I tried. Twice. She didn’t answer.” Laurie scrubbed his face.

“Well, she is on vacation,” Jim said. “So that doesn’t surprise me.”

“Yeah,” Kai supported that argument. “Maybe she’s actually having fun and letting loose for a change. You know how stressed and wound up she was.” Though, Kai was also aware of how much Zahra did not often enjoy vacation because it made her feel lazy and useless. Zahra was always a hands on, needs to be doing something productive at all times sort of person. She probably would have been dying for Laurie’s call.

Laurie did know how stressed out she was, but that wasn't much different than every day for her. For them. That was partially what was worrying him, though. If he remembered correctly, her vacation had been on counselor's orders. Apparently, things had gotten that bad? What if it had all finally become too much? What if she’d--done something… Something drastic or desperate. Laurie knew she was suffering from some pretty major PTSD and feeling disconnected…
“Was she alone?” Laurie asked trying to keep calm and not jump to conclusions.

Jim shook his head. “She went to Earth.”

“To spend some time with her dad and her step-family,” Kai finished for his friend.

“We expect her back at the end of the month,” Jim said. Laurie was obviously distressed about something, though. Jim and Kai both knew that Laurie and Zahra’s connection went beyond familial as they had an actual psychic connection to each other. “Laurie, you’re worrying me. What’s this really about?”

Laurie grit his teeth and rubbed at his temples harder. If it was any other people Laurie might just keep everything to himself, but Jim and Kai were as much family to Zahra as Laurie was. “I don’t know exactly. Our connection suddenly just--stopped.”

Kai and Jim both leaned into the camera with interest, equal looks of worry furrowing their brows. “Woah. Back up.” Jim said. “What do you mean? Like that psychic bond you two have? How could it just stop? You don’t mean like--she’s dead?” That was a devastating thought.

Laurie shook his head, exhaling hotly. “No. No. No. Not like she’s dead, it just… It’s… frayed, and… aching… like it’s not a clean break… I don’t know how to explain it. It’s not like--if she died, it would be different. I would know… This is--it’s not like that, but… something’s happened… I need to find her.”

“Her dad would know,” Kai said. “I’ll give you his frequency.”

“Thanks, Kai. Jim.” Laurie nodded

“Keep us posted,” Jim ordered. It wasn’t a request.

“I will. Thanks.” They all three nodded at each other before the vidcom cut out. Laurie's PADD pinged with a message a moment later, undoubtedly Kai sending Zahra’s father's frequency.

Laurie didn’t know what to do. He’d never personally met Governor Adam Quigley, Zahra's father. What was he gonna say? Hi, you don’t know me but your daughter and I share a mental bond, can you tell me where she is please? Oh, I just think something awful has happened to her. No big deal.

Yeah, no. This was probably something Laurie would feel better doing in person. On the bright side, hey! He’d always wanted to visit Australia! He called his husband, who answered on the third ring. “Look, it’s daddy calling, Elynn! Look!”

“Hey, buddy!” Laurie tried to smile as the small boy touched the screen.

“Wasn’t expecting to hear from you until you get home. Is everything alright?” Hale asked. He knew Laurie all too well.

“It’s Zahra, Hale.” Laurie responded easily. "Something’s--wrong."

“Is she hurt?” Hale asked, concerned. He’d been Zahra’s psychologist for a while because she trusted him, but even after she'd switched doctors for conflict of interest because of Hale's connection to Laurie, they'd stayed close. Zahra was like family.

“I don’t know.” Laurie sighed in frustration and rubbed his temples again, closing his eyes. “I can’t--feel her--but… Something’s wrong. I need to find her.” Because if the reverse were true, Laurie had every confidence that Zahra would do the same.
“Of course, darling. Whatever you need to do.” His husband assured Laurie confidently.

“She was visiting her father. I think—I need to go there.”

“Would you like us to come with you?” Hale offered.

Laurie gazed at his husband in the view screen for a while, and reached out to touch the image of their son. If this had been one year, two years ago, Laurie would have said no, insisted on doing this alone, but he knew he wasn’t alone anymore. Didn’t have to do everything by himself. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. I think I’d like that.”

“When are we leaving?” Hale asked.

“I gotta make some arrangements here, but Faolan and a few of the other senior staffers owe me some favors that I’m about to call in, so… As soon as I get home.” It was a couple days journey by shuttle back to Earth.

“I’ll take care of everything here.” Hale assured him. “We’ll be ready to go as soon as you get home.”

“I don’t deserve you,” Laurie said with a fond smile.

“Damn right, you don’t.” Hale responded with a wink. “Love you. See you soon, daddy.” Hale helped the little boy wave at the screen and Laurie waved back before the call ended.

Was he really doing this? Was he really racing off to Australia on some whim, with no solid evidence other than a feeling? Was he overreacting? Maybe, but… Best case scenario, it was all some weird misunderstanding and he could meet Zahra and try to fix whatever was wrong with their bond, then spend some quality vacay time with her and her newfound family, or… Worst case scenario, something had actually happened to her and he could start an official investigation into finding out what.

Before he could do any of that though, he had a lot of arrangements to make to cover his patients and duties while he was gone, which he needed to get on right away.
Rents

Chapter Summary

Life on the road is hard, but it doesn't have to be boring. Especially with a firecracker like Zahra in your midst.

Chapter Notes

Another doozy. Man, I really could use a beta, wink wink, nudge nude lololol anyway. Hope you like it! Love your comments, questions, love, kudos!

Zahra had never had a hangover really in her life. Her metabolism usually burned alcohol through her system too fast so any hangover symptoms were usually gone before they ever became a nuisance. Therefore, when she woke the following morning with a splitting headache, she had a hard time believing it was just from the alcohol, despite her male companions all stating and teasing her otherwise. Zahra woke up with her head splitting, and a weird tingling in the back of her brain. After she added a little pain relief powder to her morning tea, it faded fast so she thought nothing more of it.

They ate cold breakfast, packed quickly, and managed to break camp at first light. They were on the road again before the sun had even breached the horizon. It was a few hours ride until they reached the first village of their journey. They were welcomed by a few of the villagers who tended to their horses while the men set up a stall for Ned’s collections. By the time they were finished building the stall, there was already a decent queue lined up to pay their dues, and more people on their way.

While Jamie and the others loaded the cart as villagers dropped off bags of grain and vegetables and such, Zahra had her former hiking bag turned medical satchel hung around her shoulders as she mingled with the crowd. She found some children playing what looked almost like soccer, with a small ball, and she joined in to kick it around with them a few times, laughing merrily when one of the kids accidentally tripped her and they fell to the ground in a dog pile. She helped the little boy to his feet first, dusted him off a bit before standing on her own. In the fray, one of them had gotten a scraped knee and Zahra had tended to him with a mother’s care. She even kissed the boo boo before sending him off to play.

An older man with long, salt and pepper hair and a shaggy beard approached her. “Beggin’ ye’re pardon, Mistress. Ye’re the MacKenzie’s healer are ye no’?”

Zahra turned to him with a smile. “I am. Leeloo Zahra.” She extended her hand to him to shake.

“Alistair MacKenzie,” he responded and took her hand, pleasantly surprised when she gave it a real, firm shake, and not dainty and limp like a normal woman.

“What can I do for you, Mr. MacKenzie?” she asked curiously.
“It’s my wife ye see,” he began. “We’re expecting our eighth bairn.”

Zahra smiled. “That’s quite impressive, sir. How is she feeling?”

“Aye, that’s what I came to talk to ye about,” Alistair admitted as he rubbed the back of his head. “She’s been mighty weak.”

Zahra pursed her lips together. “How far along is she?”

”About seven months,” the man responded.

“Well, fatigue and malaise are not unheard of for one so heavy with child,” Zahra assured him. “What are her other symptoms?”

“She’s been complainin’ o’ lower belly pain, and--well--would you come see her miss?”

Zahra nodded. “Of course, Mr. MacKenzie. Let me tell the others.” Alistair nodded, and Zahra gripped her bag about her shoulders and made her way over to Dougal and the others.

“What did Alistair want, lass?” Dougal asked as he’d observed the two talking.

“His wife is having belly pains,” Zahra explained. “He’s asked me to come examine her.”

Dougal nodded, then looked at Rupert. “Go wi’ her.” Rupert nodded as well then the duo joined back up with Alistair as they made their way through the village.

“Does your village not have a midwife?” Zahra asked.

“Aye, we do. Mistress Hannah, but she doesnae know what’s causing the pain or the--” he didn’t finish his sentence.

“Or the what Mr. MacKenzie?” Zahra asked. Whatever the issue it was obviously something Alistair wasn’t the most comfortable talking about.

“She can tell ye,” he eventually said. “It’s just up here.”

They passed several buildings that looked like shops, and a tall tavern, then the narrow dirt road made way for a couple rows of straw and brick houses. They eventually stopped at the biggest one on the end.

“She’s right inside,” Alistair said as he showed them in and through the foyer to the bedroom where his wife was laid up in bed. Alistair knelt beside her, resting his hand on her head and placing a kiss there as he whispered something to her in Gaelic, then looked back at Zahra.

"This is my wife, Sariah," Alistair introduced them.

Zahra smiled and waved as she moved closer. “Hello. I’m Zahra.”

“Thank ye, Mistress.” The woman said, then made a pained expression and reached for her crotch.

Zahra looked up at both men. “Could you wait outside, please?” Neither man seemed all too eager to be there so they nodded and exited the bedroom. “Sariah I need to know your symptoms. Your husband was reluctant to tell me other than you are having lower stomach pain.”

“Aye, mistress. But it’s not my belly so much as it’s--”
“Your privates?” Zahra asked and the woman nodded. “Is there a washing basin with soap?” The woman nodded and pointed at the corner of the room. “Will you lift your skirt to your stomach for me?” Zahra pulled a clean linen from her bag which she hung over her shoulder, then got up to wash her hands. She dried them on the clean linen as she returned to Mrs. MacKenzie’s bedside. “I am going to apply some light pressure to your stomach, Sariah, if that’s alright with you?” The woman nodded. “And I need you to tell me if it hurts?” The woman nodded again and Zahra began to gently feel around the woman’s abdomen. “Does that hurt?”

“Nae, miss. Actually, kind of helps?”

“So the pressure is helping the pain?” Zahra asked and the woman nodded. “Are you having trouble urinating, or with your morning movements?” The woman bit her lip and nodded. "Can you describe the pain?"

“It burns and stings and hurts something’ awful, Mistress. I dinnae want to go.”

Zahra was pretty sure she knew what was wrong she just needed to know why. “When did it start?”

“About a week ago.”

“Had you and your husband recently made love?”

“Nae, Miss. Not since the wee one dropped and my belly’s swollen too large. He doesnae want to hurt the bairn.”

Zahra smiled. “Any changes to your diet or cleaning habits?”

The woman shook her head. “The midwife’s been massagin’ me to prepare for the bairn’s arrival, but even that hurts somethin’ fierce.”

Yeah Zahra was pretty sure she knew what this was. “You’re about seven months?” Zahra asked. “So these massages have been natal massages, here, to prepare you for childbirth?” Zahra asked, holding her hand above the woman’s privates. Sariah nodded. “Did the pain begin before or after she started the massages?”

"After," Sariah said after a little thought.

"Does this Mistress Hannah wash her hands before she massages you?"

Sariah looked thoughtful for a moment before she eventually shook her head. “I dinnae think so. Least I've never seen her do.”

Zahra sighed. “Alright. Sariah, I'm fairly confident your pain is being caused by something called a urinary tract infection. What that is, is that germs and dirt have gotten inside your urethra, that’s where your urine exits your body. These germs and bacteria have caused an inflammation, or infection. That is why it hurts to go to the bathroom.” Sariah looked frightened and Zahra shook her head. “It's ok. Usually these types of infections are minor and will go away on their own in a few days, however, because your midwife has continually touched you with unwashed, unclean hands, she has made it worse.” Zahra helped her adjust her skirt back down.

Once the woman was covered, Zahra poked her head out the door to let Alistair come back in so she could explain to him as well. “Your wife has a urinary tract infection, Alistair, which as I explained to her, has happened because her midwife has been massaging her with unclean hands. I have a special blend of herbs that I want you to steep in hot water and drink as a tea, twice a day until it runs out. It might be a little bitter, and because I am going to add a cranberry supplement, it may make
your urine smell more pungent, but that is normal.” Zahra made sure Alistair was listening as well. “Even if the symptoms clear, and the pain goes away, I want you to continue to drink the tea until it is gone, to make sure it fully cleanses the infection from your body, ok?” The woman nodded.

“I would also suggest you cleanse your privates with clean water and soap every day… Alistair you may have to help her with that.” Alistair wrapped his arm around his wife and nodded. "Do not let the midwife continue the natal massages until the infection has gone away, do you understand? And most importantly, even after the infection does clear, do not let her touch you until she has thoroughly cleansed her own hands with clean, warm water and soap. I don’t care if she insists this is how she’s been doing it for generations.” Because Zahra knew midwifery was a thing that was passed down from mother to mother and the midwife, depending on how old and ornery she was, would probably protest at being told how to do her job. “If she will not follow one simple request to prevent you from getting sick again, then she doesn’t deserve to be your midwife.” They both nodded. "I'm serious. An infection like this can be easily prevented with proper care, but it can also get much worse if not."

"I understand," Alistair said. He loved his wife more than anything, a fact Zahra could very plainly see on his face. "I won't let Sariah or our bairn be hurt."

Zahra nodded, and clapped Alistair on the shoulder. "Good man." She then reached to squeeze Sariah's hand. "You do what you have to to take care of yourself and your baby. I expect you to write me all about him or her when she arrives, ok?"

"Yes, mistress!" Sariah said with a smile.

"I will also give Alistair something safe for you to take for the pain until it clears," Zahra promised, and Sariah nodded again.

"Thank you, Mistress," they both said. Alistair gave his wife a kiss on the forehead and whispered something in Gaelic before he got up to escort Zahra and Rupert out.

"I have the medicine back in the square in my trunk," Zahra informed him.

"I'll come wi' yet," Alistair said as he walked them back down the hill to the center village square where Ned and Dougal and the rest of the villagers were still doing their rents.

Zahra hopped up into the back of their camp cart and opened the apothecary trunk to search for the herbs she needed. She grabbed an empty soft leather pouch and added several scoops of the immunity system blend she had made with Geillis, along with several scoops of a dried cranberry powder. Blended together it would hopefully be enough for the full three weeks. In a separate vial Zahra sprinkled some of the dried willow powder for pain. When she was finished, she closed the trunk and turned to take Rupert's offered hand to help her out of the wagon, with a thank you.

She walked over to where Ned was still signing receipts and she asked to borrow one of his quills and a small parchment of paper. On the paper she wrote instructions and doses for the remedies she was giving Alistair and his wife. When she was finished she folded the paper, then set the spare quill down and returned to Alistair. "This is the herbal blend for the infection," she said as she handed him the larger pouch. "You'll need to steep one to two teaspoons with a cup of boiling water for fifteen minutes, then she needs to drink the tea. This is probably best to be done with breakfast and dinner." She then handed him the small glass vial. "This is dry willow leaf. You may add no more than a teaspoon of this powder to dissolve in her tea to help with the pain." She then handed him the folded piece of paper. "If you can’t remember the doses, I have written directions for you as reference."

Alistair took all three items. "Thank you, Mistress." He took her hand to shake and kissed her
"Bless you, and thank you."

"You can thank me by taking care of that wife and those bairns of yours, yeah?" Zahra said, trying not to blush.

"Aye," he said. "I will. I will! Thank you." He placed his fist over his heart. When he turned away he and Dougal locked gazes. Alistair placed his fist over his heart once more and bowed his head in gratitude to his lord. Dougal nodded back and turned his attention back to the men in line as they dropped of their rents, which Zahra saw included a couple live pigs. Oh dear.

“What was that about?” She heard Jamie suddenly whisper in her ear.

Zahra startled a little but turned, smiling up at Jamie who was crouched by the side railing of the collection wagon. “What? With Alistair?” Zahra shrugged. “I try not to discuss patients problems for privacy reasons, but the quick and short of it was his wife was in pain. Hopefully, the herbs I’ve given them will help.”

Jamie was amazed at his fiancee. So strong, so fierce, but yet so caring and nurturing. She could not be a more perfect woman for him. “I’m such a lucky man,” he said softly and reached out to brush her hair behind her ear.

Zahra smiled, blushing softly. “And I’m a lucky woman,” she repeated with a widening grin. They were about to lean in for a kiss when Rupert kicked his foot against the side of the wagon and offered up two bags of grain for Jamie to take.

He placed a kiss on her forehead before standing and getting back to work. She moved to pet one of the pigs on the head, which was when she heard the steady beating and ladies voices singing boisterously. “What’s that?” Zahra asked to no one in particular.

“Tis the women folk. They're singin’ a waulking song,” the man with the pigs who’d said his name was Lachlan answered her.

“A walking song?”

“Aye,” he nodded.

Zahra looked at Rupert and nodded her head in the direction of the music that was drawing her. Rupert just rolled his eyes. “Dinnae go too far, now!” the man called after her.

“I won’t. I’ll be right back,” she assured him as she made her way around one of the houses and down a narrow alley towards the singing where she almost bumped into a lovely woman in a black and gray plaid frock, causing the contents of the bucket she was holding to slosh about a little. “I’m sorry.” Zahra stated. It was a pungent smell coming from the bucket that even with Zahra’s broken sniffer she could smell. It was a chamber pot.

“There somethin’ I can help ye with, Mistress?” the woman asked.

“No. I’m sorry. I was just curious about the ladies singing. It sounds rather joyous. I was told it’s a walking song, and I was curious of the meaning.”

“Aye. A waulking song, that’s right. We’re waulking wool.” The woman answered, giving Zahra a clear head to toe inspection.

Zahra cleared her throat and adjusted the pinned sash around her neck. “I’m Leeloo Zahra.”
The woman nodded. “I’m Donalda Gilchrest.”

“I’m the MacKenzie’s healer,” Zahra clarified.

“Aye. We’ve heard o’ you, even out here.” Donalda gave her another inspecting look. “Though, I will say ye’re not what I expected for a Caileag nam Miorbhail.”

Zahra huffed out her nose softly and crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes, well, I hate that term. I don’t work miracles, I assure you. Just a lowly healer.”

The woman smirked then moved passed Zahra. “D’ye have strong hands, lowly healer?” It was an invitation, and Zahra took it as she followed after the woman, to a small clearing between huts where a dozen ladies sat around a large wooden banquet table. They were singing a lively song and patting out a rhythm with their hands against a roll of dark fabric.

“Ladies,” Donalda stopped to introduce her. “This is Leeloo Zahra.” Suddenly twelve judgmental eyes were on her and Zahra wanted to pull a potato sack over her head. Has she ever mentioned she didn’t do well in social settings with strangers?

“How,” she greeted nervously.

“She’s gon to be helpin’ us today,” Donalda said without asking Zahra or even telling her what they were doing.

“Umm, well--” All twelve sets of eyes were still staring her down as they stretched out a large bundle of fabric and shared it around the table. Then the most unthinkable happened when Donalda began pouring the contents of the chamber pot onto the table, and Zahra felt her stomach turn a little. The unsanitary and uncleanliness of it threatened to turn her stomach. They didn’t have artificial dyes at this time and had to go by more natural means to color wool and Zahra imagined it was the ammonia they were after. “You use the urine to--set the dye?”

“Aye,” Donalda said as she took up a seat, then offered Zahra the chair next to her.

“Thank you, but--I can’t even begin to explain how unsani--” Zahra caught them stink-eyeing her again so she stopped and worried her bottom lip. “Please, don’t let me stop you.” She tried to offer them a smile, but just the thought of them working with piss was nauseating. Still, she watched, and listened as the ladies work, and sang. She imagined beating the wool on the table was a way to soften the fabric so it wasn’t so abrasive and stiff. The urine set the dye. It made sense, what they were doing, but that didn’t mean she had any desire to join in. Zahra wasn’t that eager to make friends with these ladies she may never see again after today.

She listened to their song, maybe even joined in a few lines, but she just couldn’t bring herself to get her hands and well everything covered in piss. Don’t get her wrong, she’d been covered in worse things. All kinds of foreign detritus, and refuse, animal innards, alien plant matter, but never by her own choosing or doing. If she had a choice, which here she did, she would very much rather choose to not be covered in other peoples urine, thank you very much.

When they were finished, all the ladies retired to a different hut and chatted merrily in their native tongue as drinks were passed around. It was weird, but Zahra couldn’t help but realize she fit in and felt more comfortable around the men in her company, than these women who she couldn’t help but feel had been doing nothing but judging her since the moment she arrived. That wasn’t different from how most men she met treated her, but most men didn't continue to stare at her as if she were the
greatest wonder of the world. It was making her anxious and jumpy.

Donalda poured a drink and handed it to Zahra. “Ye didn’t exactly earn it, lass, but would ye care to have a wee refreshment wi’ us?”

Zahra smiled and took the cup. “Thank you,” she said and gave the contents a sniff. It smelled like Seamus’s water of life from the night before. “Is this uisge-beatha?” Zahra asked and twelve eyes were once more focused on her.


Zahra nodded. “It’ll be our secret.” A baby’s cry broke the silence and Donalda moved to the other end of the hut where a baby carriage waited. “Did we wake the little one?” Zahra asked.

“He’s just hungry, that’s all,” Donalda said as she lifted the boy into her arms, hushing him tenderly. “Auch, he’s teething and won’t nurse. My, eh, husband had to give away our goat to the laird this mornin’ so we haven’t any milk.”

It was rent due. It was shameful that they had to give away their only goat, but that was life. Zahra knew firsthand the struggle of poverty and the toll it could take on a person. “May I hold him a moment?” Zahra asked as she stood. Donalda nodded and passed the wee bairn off to Zahra, who shushed him gently and rocked him in her arms. “What’s his name?”

“Wee Johnny’s his name.” Donalda answered.

“Hi, Johnny. Can I see?” she whispered as she gently squeezed the boys face to try to get a better picture of his teeth. “Oh you’ve definitely got some chompers growing in, haven’t you? I bet they hurt like the dickens, yeah? Poor sweet boy.” The boy looked at her like she was the weirdest thing he’d ever seen but at least he wasn’t crying anymore. “I may not be able to do anything about your goat, but I do know some things that might help you both make nursing time less of a pain.” Zahra sat down and dunked her pinkie finger into her glass of uisge-beatha, then ran her finger all along the boys gums. He fussed a little, but when Zahra did it again to the bottom, then dunked her finger a third time, only this time when she placed it in his mouth the boy began to suckle on it.

Donalda was looking at her like she’d grown two heads. “It’s not enough to hurt the baby,” Zahra began to explain. “Nor make him sick, but just a tiny coating of your strongest spirits before feeding will numb his gums and help him latch easier without the pain.” She smiled at Donalda and gently handed the baby back to her. “Why don’t you try to feed him, now?” Donalda quickly took the bairn back and undid her dress then helped guide little Johnny to her bosom and sure enough, the little boy happily latched on and began to nurse.

Donalda grinned, and let out a brief gasp of laughter that she covered with her hand. She whispered something softly in Gaelic as she stroked her boy’s cheek. Zahra leaned over and stroked the boy’s cheek as well. “See. No more fussin’.” The looks of judgement quickly faded to looks of awe. “How’s your milk production?” Zahra asked.

“Emm, I dunno. It’s been almost a week since I could nurse him. I’m afraid--”

Zahra shook her head. “Do you have any mead, or does anyone in town make mead?”

“Aye. My own husband has a supply and a recipe we make ourselves.”

“Good. The yeast and the hoppes in the mead will help you produce more milk, so if you drink at least one or two pints a day, like maybe one in the morning and one in the afternoon, before long you’re mammaries should be full near to bursting. Like, don’t be surprised if you just start gushing in
the middle of church.” The ladies all chuckled. “And if you have some udder butter, you know the stuff you rub on a goat or a cow’s udders to prevent chapping?” Donalda nodded. “If you mix some of that with a few drops of this uisge-beatha and apply a light layer around your nipples,” Zahra used her hands, motioning at her breast over her clothes. “That will hopefully decrease some of the pain and burn after nursing and won’t harm the baby or yourself.”

Donalda suddenly wrapped her arm around Zahra’s neck and placed a kiss on the side of her head. “Thank you, Mistress.”

Zahra grinned and politely removed Donalda’s urine soaked arm from around her shoulders. “Don’t thank me unless it works.”

But to Donalda it was already working. Johnny was nursing. That alone was a miracle. “Now I know why they call you Caileag nam Mìorbhail,” Donalda said with stars in her eyes.

Zahra felt so awkward in that moment. She smiled awkwardly and moved to stand. “Well, ladies. I better get back. Thank you for your delightful singing, and your company.” The ladies said a few farewells of their own as Zahra backed out of the little hut and made her way back towards the square, to a waiting Angus and Rupert.

Angus raced up the hill towards her looking as mad as a dog. When he reached for her, Zahra dodged out of his grasp. “Angus!”

“Disappearin’ from under my nose,” he accused angrily. “Dougal’s sure to beal about it.”

“I told ye she wouldnae go far,” Rupert said to his friend.

“Exactly.” She said. “And I told Rupert I would be right back, and so I am.”

“Aye. That was nigh almost an hour ago... Ye’ve been drinkin’,” he accused harshly.

“I have not. Why are you being like this?” He reached for her arm again and Zahra once more dodged away from him, giving him a warning gaze. “Don’t—grab at me like that,” she cautioned him.

“Angus let up, will ye. She’s back isn’t she?” Rupert tried to calm down his best friend, who had honestly probably been drinking himself. “And of her own volition, no less. Calm down,” Rupert continued, trying to calm the man down before either of them did something they may regret.

Angus, however, seemed to be in a mood, and didn’t like a woman telling him what to do, nor that his friend seemed to be on her side. “I should tie ye to the wagon next time,” he said and reached to grab her again, but with lightning reflexes, Zahra had Angus’s arm twisted and pinned painfully behind his back in the next instant. Her free hand was gripping his jugular, nails biting into his flesh.

“Auch, ye’re gon to break my arm,” Angus choked out, though it was slightly muffled as she was putting pressure on his windpipe.

“Oi!” Dougal came upon the scene, then shouted something in Gaelic.

“I am no such thing.” Zahra stated loud enough for her small group to hear, meeting Dougal’s gaze and no others. “I was helping Donalda Gilchrest who has a teething child who won’t nurse. Seeing as you’re taking the only goat her family has, they were about to lose their only supply of milk. So, I was showing her how to numb the baby’s teething pain so he would nurse again, and hopefully not
starve the winter.”

Jamie was carrying two large sacks of grain as he rounded the wagon and saw what was going on and it didn't look good. “Alright!” Dougal said trying to diffuse the situation as it was attracting unwanted attention. “Alright, Zahra. Ye made yer point. Le’ im go.”

Her mouth was suddenly close to Angus’s ear, and she spoke only loud enough for him to hear. “I’m going to forgive you for your aggression towards me Angus, because for some reason beyond my understanding, I care about you as a friend, and I know you were angry… but if you ever presume to manhandle me again I will not hesitate to break the offending hand. Y’ken?” She twisted his wrist a little harder for emphasis, then released him a moment later and stomped angrily towards her horse.

Angus was rubbing at his sore arm and his throat that still bore crescent impressions of her nails. “Where’d ye find her?” Dougal asked.

Angus’s voice was hoarse and sore so Rupert answered for him. “We didnae. She came back on her own.”

Jamie unloaded his two sacks, and followed after his fiancee who he found pacing angrily beside Brimstone. When he reached for her she shirked off his touch. “Don’t! Please don’t! I just--” She wanted to hurt something, and she didn’t want it to be Jamie.

“Madam?” A voice called from their left causing them both to stop and look at the young man with a blacksmith’s apron. “Is everything alright?” He definitely did not sound Scottish.

Jamie’s arm went protectively around her waist as Zahra crossed her arms over her chest. “Not that it’s your business, but I’m fine.”

“May I be of service?” the man persisted. Nosy Brit.

“Aye,” Angus suddenly said, coming upon the scene himself, his voice still harsh and a bit deeper than usual. “Ye can keep yer nose out of our business.”

“I was speaking to the lady,” the man persisted.

“The lady is right here and can speak for herself!” Zahra tried.


“Do you treat all your guests this way?” the Englishman asked further.

“Bugger off!” Angus said with a gesture of his hand and Zahra watched as her small company of men began to close in on this poor English bastard, Jamie among them as he stepped in front of Zahra in a protective stance. “Or maybe your lugs need cleanin’ out.”

“I assure you, sir, my lugs are perfectly fine.” This was about to end in bloodshed and Zahra would much rather avoid that if she could.

“I’m fine, really!” Zahra called above the tension, and stepped up behind Angus. “See this one?” She pointed at the brunette drunkard. “He’s like my brother, and this one,” she pointed at Dougal. “He’s like my dad. And that one over there,” she turned and pointed at Jamie. “Is soon to be my husband. So you see… they may be a little overbearing and overprotective, but they mean well. I assure you! We’re just like one big happy family. Drama, infighting, and all.”
The Englishman gazed at Zahra for a long time, reading way too much into what she’d just said. Zahra could almost see the cogs in his brain working and twisting her words into something bad. His eyes then sought out each member of the company of rent collectors where he realized he was severely outnumbered.

“Aye. Go home, laddie, and suckle on your ma’s tit. Eh?” Angus proceeded to click his tongue at the man. That was the last taunt before the man turned and walked off.

“Now, get to it,” Dougal declared, looking at Zahra pointedly. “We’re leavin’.”

Zahra crossed her arms over her chest and watched the English man retreat for a moment while the others got busy behind her. Jamie came up to gently take her hand, afraid she might shirk him off again. She didn’t. “You know he thinks you’ve all kidnapped me and are holding me against my will, right?” she said to him as she leaned into his touch.

Jamie smirked and nodded. “Aye. But we know the truth.” He lifted his hand to touch her cheek. “Tha’s all that matters.”

She took in a deep breath. “I’m sorry, about earlier. I wasn’t--mad at you--I just--really wanted to hit something and I didn’t want it to be you.”

Jamie chuckled softly and leaned in to place a soft kiss on her lips. “I know that, lass.” He placed a kiss on her knuckles before urging her on with him to get packed up.

They didn’t have far to travel before they came to a tavern near the village where they would apparently be settling down for the night. It was nice to enjoy a warm meal and good company. Zahra was seated next to Jamie as they ate the simple stew the tavern owner had in the kitchen. Angus eventually offered a mug of ale to Zahra, as he sat down on the bench across the table from her. They locked eyes for a moment, and Zahra reached for the cup he’d given her, and just like that the tension seemed to clear between them. It wasn’t a verbal apology, but Zahra knew the likelihood of her getting one of those was slim. This was honestly more than she had expected from the man, especially after she’d wounded his pride in such a way.

“How’s your throat, Mr. Mhor?” She asked with a teasing smirk as she took a sip from her glass.

He looked up and pointed at her as he spoke rapidly in gaelic, realizing she was teasing him. In that moment he knew he’d been forgiven. “The throat’s fine, lass. It’s the wrist ye should be askin’ after.”

“Why? Did you sprain it while fapping?” She asked and at his questioning look, she rolled her eyes and actually made a crude stroking gesture, which had Angus and everyone around her go wide-eyed before bursting out in laughter.

She took another sip from her mug, before she began to stand. “You finished, Jamie?” she asked. The man nodded and handed her his plate, which she took along with hers back to the kitchen, where she offered their cook, the Tavern/Innkeeper’s wife if she would like help washing. The woman declined her help, told her to stop fashing herself over it, then shooed her back out to the main room.

Zahra was wiping her hands on her dress when she entered the great room and saw that Dougal was already engaged with the gathered company, speaking very firmly in Gaelic. There was an almost reverent hush over the gathered company as they listened to their Laird speak and hand out drinks. It was such an awe-filled moment Zahra didn’t want to break the reverence so she stayed by the
kitchen door to listen.

Dougal was suddenly sneaking up behind Jamie and tearing the younger man’s shirt from his back. There were several stunned gasps and foreign words spoken as they saw the mural of anger on his back. Zahra wanted to slap them all, but mostly Dougal, for deliberately subjecting him to the humiliation like that. Zahra started to move around the outskirts of the group but a ‘stop’ gesture from Jamie had both her and Murtagh stilling where they were. Murtagh sat back down and Zahra moved to stand next to his shoulder, glaring at the back of Dougal’s head as he continued speaking as if he hadn’t just humiliated his nephew in front of veritable strangers. Zahra had her hand on Murtagh’s shoulder, gripping hard as the villagers got up one by one to drop coins into Ned’s bag.

Once everyone except the traveling party had left the tavern, Zahra moved to Jamie and crouched in front of him, taking his face in her hand. Jamie lifted his hand to her wrist. “Dinnae worry. It’s fine. I’m fine. Zahra, don’t–”

“What the fuck was that?” Zahra said as she stood to her unimpressive but still somehow intimidating 5’5”.

“It’s nae yer business, Mistress. Now, be a lass—” Dougal grabbed Jamie’s shirt and handed it to her. “—mend that.”

“Jamie’s pain is my pain,” Zahra stated flatly, and Dougal seemed to sit a little straighter at that and the cogs started working in his head. “I’m not stupid, Dougal. I know what this is. You’ve already collected your rents, this isn’t about that.”

“Zahra, don’t–” Jamie stood, taking her gently by the shoulders and trying to usher her outside with him.

“I know blood money when I see it,” she protested sticking her head around him to continue speaking to Dougal. “You’re flagrantly using Jamie’s torture for shock value to increase sympathy for your own gains”

“It’s nae my own gains!” Dougal shouted angrily as he stood up to get in her space and the two powerhouses stared each other down. She may be small, but fierce. “But perhaps I’ve been focusing on the wrong man’s torture…” Dougal said conspiritorially and Zahra immediately felt uncomfortable.

Jamie looked up at his uncle in shock, and hurt. “Nae!”

“Oh, aye.” Dougal nodded his head. “Since the little Mistress seems so fashed over her beloved’s pride... a man flogged by the English is one thing, but a woman, ah, a woman... Imagine the coin she’d bring.” Even Ned was gazing at Dougal as if he’d never seen the man before.

Zahra suddenly felt nauseous. “No. I refuse to subject myself to that.”

“Ye’re indebted to clan MacKenzie, lass.” Dougal reached for her arm, trying to pull her in close as his voice dropped low. “Dinnae forget… I know what ye are.”

Dougal suddenly found himself pinned to the wall by an enraged Jamie. It had happened so quick if you blinked you would have missed it. Jamie was quite literally spitting mad as he cursed his uncle in Gaelic. Dougal tried to shove him off, but that only incurred Jamie’s ire further and soon the two were engaged in an angry wrestling match. Murtagh, Rupert, Angus and the others were suddenly on their feet trying to break the two men apart before they could murder each other.

There was suddenly a loud gunshot that had their ears ringing from being fired in such an enclosed
space. The noise successfully caused the commotion of the bar to cease as every pair of eyes turned
to see Zahra who’d just fired a pistol at the floor. “Enough!” Rupert realized it was his pistol only
when Zahra let it hang useless by the firing pin guard, then handed it in his direction without looking
at him. He didn’t even know she’d taken it, but after he fished around his belt for a moment, he
reached out and forcefully took it back.

The two brawlers broke apart with an angry shove then moved to their feet. “I’ll do it,” Jamie said to
his uncle. “If it’s torture ye wish to show, show them mine.” With a stern look, Jamie dared his uncle
to speak otherwise, to try and bring Zahra back into it. Dougal nodded, and moved to sit back down
with his drink.

Jamie grabbed his shirt out of Zahra’s hands, and stormed off out the tavern door. Zahra watched
Dougal for a moment and had the sneaking suspicion that Jamie’s acquiescence was all Dougal had
really been after all along. The man just ignored her as if she wasn’t there, while he sipped from his
cup. Zahra turned and followed Jamie outside.

“Jamie?” She called out to the night as she passed around a couple of their horses, and walked
around the side of the building. Someone grabbed her and she yelped in surprise, ready to defend
herself until she realized it was Jamie.

“I dinnae need you to pick my battles for me, Zahra!” he spoke at her angrily as he pinned her to the
wall.

That was the first time he’d called her Zahra since they’d started their romantic relationship, and she
had to admit it felt similar to a slap in the face. “I know that,” she answered back calmly.

“Do you?” He questioned back. “Because that back there, that sure as hell felt like ye were picking a
battle for me.” He walked away from her, turning his back to her and Zahra’s heart broke a little bit.

“I’m sorry. I fucked up,” she admitted, trying to keep the emotions out of her voice, but failing. “I
deliberately poked the bull, and you got the horns.” He still had his back to her and in the shadow of
the moon she could see him scrubbing his face with his hands. “I don’t--know what I’m doing here,
Jamie.” She admitted quietly, and Jamie finally turned around to look at her. “I’m terrified all the time
that something I say, or something I do is gonna get me shot, or hanged, or burned alive, but--” In a
few great strides, Jamie was suddenly there, holding her close, pressing his forehead to her own. “--
but the most terrifying of all is the thought of losing you. I’ve been alone for so long--I don’t know
how to--”

“Do you trust me?” Jamie asked, voice quiet but serious. Zahra lifted her head and looked into his
eyes deeply before she nodded. Jamie took her face in his hands. “Then trust me, please. Ye’re not
the only one who’s been alone a long time, Leeloo. If I need ye’re help, I’m not too prideful to ask
for it. Ye ken?” Zahra sniffled and nodded. “I’ll even try to afford ye the same courtesy, because I
trust you, too.”

Zahra took in a deep breath and nodded her head. “Does this mean I’m forgiven, then?”

Jamie smirked and nodded, before wrapping his arms around her and pressing a kiss to her hair.
“Aye. Though, I was never really mad at you.”

“You called me Zahra,” she said and Jamie gave her a confused look like he didn’t understand the
significance. That was her name wasn’t it? “You haven’t called me Zahra since that first day by the
stables when I kissed you.” Jamie smiled fondly at the memory. “You’ve called me Leeloo ever
since, so when you just called me Zahra as a way to distance yourself, I thought--”
“Auch, no, Leeloo!” He held her face as he pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “It would take far more than stirring a little spat with my uncle to ever rid yerself of me. I promise.”

“Good. You had me worried there for a minute.” Zahra leaned up on her toes as she sought out another kiss, Jamie meeting her halfway to press their lips together. “Tha gaol agam ort,” she spoke softly against his lips which made Jamie groan as he pressed her more firmly against the back wall of the tavern.

She knew how much it affected him when she spoke his language. “Behave, woman,” he ordered before stealing another kiss.

“Make me, man,” she taunted back, and Jamie silenced her with another hard, demanding kiss that left her breathless and wanting, and then his body heat was suddenly gone along with his mouth. It happened so fast it was jarring. “Wha--”

“Goodnight, Leeloo,” he taunted playfully as he walked backwards in the direction of camp. “Sweet dreams.”

“You jerk!” she called after him with laughter in her voice, then stooped to pick up a rock, which he expertly dodged with a laugh as she threw it at him. “Good night!” she called after him. The man definitely knew how to press her buttons and leave her cold, but damn if it wasn’t a fun game.

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The next morning, she was giving herself a mock sponge bath by the loch. She was fully clothed, but using a clean linen to wash her face, neck, armpits, hands. It wasn’t a full bath, but she wasn’t sure the next time she would be getting one of those so it would have to do. She was just finishing when she saw Mr. Gowan approach. She pulled her plaid blanket around her shoulders and turned to greet him as he approached.

“Black pudding?” He asked as he stepped down into the bank to greet her. “It’s an acquired taste, I’ll admit but--”

Zahra book the wooden bowl and sat down on the bank. The two clumps of black cake looked like two clumps of turd and for a moment Zahra had to wonder if Angus or Rupert had put him up to this. “What’s in Black Pudding might I ask?”

“It’s also known as blood sausage. It’s mostly pork, pork blood, and a wee bit of oats.”

“It’s been cooked right?” Zahra asked.

“Oh, aye. Cookie made the batch just now. Thought I’d bring ye a taste.”

“Thank you,” Zahra said as she took her first bite. It honestly hadn’t sounded appetizing but once again, hooray for almost non-existent taste buds. It was protein. That was all that mattered.

“Listen Zahra, about last night--” Ned started to say.

“It’s none of my business, Ned,” she cut him off. “I don’t trust Dougal any further than I can throw him, but I do trust Jamie. So, while I don’t approve of you guys exploiting Jamie’s torture for your ill-gotten gains... I trust that if Dougal was using the money for something nefarious like trying to overthrow his own brother, Jamie would tell me, or more importantly he wouldn’t let it continue.”

“Well, then…” Ned said as he gazed out over the waters in front of them “God bless, Master Jamie, then.” Zahra took another bite of the sausage and Ned watched her for a moment. He was still trying
to decipher what Dougal had meant when he’d suggested the unthinkable of using Zahra in Jamie’s place. Had Zahra been subjected to torture at the hands of the Brits as well? That was a devastating thought. “Ye know, lassie. Ye’re quite cunning and brave. Got a good head on yer shoulders, a good tongue for argument as well. Ye’d make a fine advocate yerself... It’s a pity they dinnae allow women to practice law.”

Zahra smirked and shook her head. “Not yet, maybe.”

Ned smirked and got up to climb back up the embankment. “Aye, it’ll be a few centuries before that happens.”

Zahra watched him walk off, taking another bite of the sausage. “Only a couple,” she said, thinking he was too far away to hear her.

“A couple what?” Jamie asked as he took up Ned’s seat next to her, and reached for the second clump of sausage to take a bite.

“Oh, umm,” she peeled off another bit of her sausage and ate it. “Mr. Gowan was just saying it would be a few centuries before women might be able to practice law. I was simply agreeing with him.”

“Feeling better?” he asked, knowing she had come down to the lake to wash a bit.

Zahra smiled and nodded. “Much, though it was tempting to just dive right in.”

Jamie chuckled softly. “Aye, ye’d have to be daft. Water’s freezing this time.”

“Yeah, but can you imagine how refreshing and thrilling it would be?” She nudged his shoulder with her own. “Especially if it was just you and me… and we were naked.” Jamie looked over at Zahra, who was still gazing out over the loch as if she hadn’t just deliberately said something incredibly provocative.

More than anything Jamie desperately desired to see her with all her clothes off. Just the thought kept him up at night. He’d only gotten the briefest of glimpses of flesh here and there. Never the full ruddy picture and he was dying to piece the entire puzzle together and get a full, up close view of every inch. He let out the most quiet of groans, and Zahra turned to look at him, the picture of innocence. “You alright, Jamie?” Jamie leaned in for a kiss “We should get packed.” She said before standing, handing him the bowl with her half eaten chunk of pudding left, then climbed up the embankment.

“Ye’re a wicked lass.” He called after her as he got up to follow her. He supposed that was her payback for leaving her cold last night. Yep. They both loved this game.

Zahra was grinning and chuckling to herself until she looked up and saw Dougal watching them and her smile fell slightly. Every time she thought she had managed to take one step forward with Dougal MacKenzie, she couldn’t help but feel like she’d just turn around and shoot herself two steps back. It was exhausting, trying to figure out where she stood with him, which side of Dougal was she was, his good side or his bad side. Did he actually trust her, or was he only keeping her close until the opportune moments came where he could use her? Threatening her in the tavern had definitely earned Jamie’s compliance and Zahra still felt sick that she was a part of that. At least, her sort of love-hate relationship with ANgus had become somewhat smoother after that. He still bickered with her every chance he got, but it was all in good friendly fun.

They really were like one big, dysfunctional, but happy family. To everyone but Jamie, she really
had grown on them like their feisty, sometimes bratty little sister. The road would take its toll on them, of course. They’d spat and argue, but then make up the same night. It’s what families did. At the end of the day, they still had a great kinship for each other, and Zahra knew, without a doubt that she would die defending each of these men, just as she was sure they would do the same for her.

The days passed by, trudging on and on, one after the other. The days turned into weeks as they visited village after village after village, collecting rents by day, and soliciting off the books donations by night. Dougal stopped ruining Jamie’s shirts as the younger man had gotten accustomed to just removing it when Dougal got to that part of his speech. Zahra had grown more comfortable with her role on the team. She trusted Jamie to have her honor and interests at heart, and he did the same. She was still far too outspoken and impulsive for a woman, but as the days and weeks trudged on, they’d all sort of acclimated to each other better. She no longer felt like she was being forced to live among strangers.

With Jamie at her side, with his colors around her neck and the ease of his affections serving as constant reminders that she was never going to be alone… With their friends and kinsmen surrounding them at every turn… Zahra had never felt so free and open before in her life. She was not only in love with this beautiful Scottish man, but with his country as well. His people. It was like for the first time in forever, Zahra felt like she had found some place to call home. A real home, not just her personal effects packed into a 32" x 16 x 16" footlocker.

It had become so easily ingrained in her over the past few weeks that this was her home, that these were her new people, that when they came upon a settlement that was in flames, and being raided by scoundrels, her first instinct was to fight. “What’s happening?” She asked as they came to a stop. She was itching to jump in and help.

“It’s the watch,” she heard Murtagh declare directing his words at Jamie. Zahra turned and she reached for him as he was beginning to leave. He had to flee and she knew it. “Be careful!” she ordered.

“Always!” Jamie nodded and a few clicks of his tongue and swift strides of his horse later, he and Donas were gone out of sight.

Murtagh looked at Zahra. “These’re the men ye pay to protect yer cattle, otherwise they’ll steal ‘em themselves.”

“As if I needed more reasons to want to hurt them,” she said as she glared firmly in the direction of the brigands.

“Aye,” Murtagh shared the sentiment.

They watched as Dougal made his way down the hill, towards the village. The wind was blowing her hair over her face. It was getting longer and she wished to cut it again, but her particular style was not really accepted around these parts exactly. Plus, Jamie had seemed to be enjoying her longer locks so she couldn’t complain much. She wanted to know what was going on, but all she could do was watch.

“Why not just take the goods?” She asked, trying to stay put but itching to go to help. “Why did the bastards have to burn the house as well?”

“It’s a warning,” Murtagh replied. “I heard talk in the village. The husband’s a sympathizer working with the Redcoats.”
“So they’re terrorizing a family and ruining their lives because of a bloody rumour?” Zahra still wanted to hurt them.

“The watch may be criminals, lass, but they’re Scots first,” Ned started to say. “They cannae abide traitors who do the bidding of the British Army.”

“Yet, they’d hand in poor Jamie at the drop of a hat for a few pennies?” she asked, frustrated and annoyed.

“Their loyalty lies where the money lies,” Murtagh answered her.

“Patriots only when it serves their own whims,” she said, obviously disgusted.

Zahra took in a deep breath and watched Dougal return with spoils from the raid, from these Watchmen, from this family. It was despicable, deplorable even, but it was just business she suspected they would tell her. A messy business that Zahra should probably be ashamed to be a part of… There were better ways to resolve conflict than violence, says the woman who was moments ago, chomping at the bit to render her own violence on this raiding party. Granted that was before she’d found out the man was helping the redcoats terrorize the Scots. God this was such a fucked up country.

“Off we go,” Dougal said as he trotted to drop the bag of fowl off in their wagon, and soon the traveling party was putting the smoking plantation far behind them.

Their lunch when they stopped for a break, was roast chicken. Two beautiful birds, she had to admit, and they looked tasty.

“I was--I was slipping her the wee man,” Angus was attempting to regale them all with a story of one of his sexploits. “All night long and she was gantin’ for it, ganting.” He offered Rupert and the others some of the fresh chicken he’d sliced. “I gave the wee-lassie such a seeing-to. She’ll be walking bow-legged for months.”

“Was this the raven queen from the Gathering?” Zahra asked as he came to her to offer her a piece. She took a meager wing, with a thank you.

“Aye. That black-haired beauty was a right squealer, she was.” Angus assured her with a wink.

“Really? From what I heard tell, the one she had ganting for it, was you?” Zahra teased, meeting Angus’s eyes with a knowing smirk as she peeled off a piece of her chicken and ate it.

Angus sputtered a bit, then made a Pfft sound and waved his hand. “Auch, ye dinnae know, ye weren’t there.”

Zahra’s grin widened as she met Jamie’s gaze. The redhead got up and moved to sit next to her. “Are ye no’ hungry?” He asked, noticing she had taken the smallest piece. They had a whole other chicken left.

She took in a deep breath. The tragedy of that farmhouse and that they’d done nothing to help wasn’t exactly sitting well with her, nor was the fact that they were sitting here eating ill-gotten goods. “Just have a bit of an anxious stomach, is all. I’m fine.”

“Ye sure ye’re no’ with bairn, lass?” Angus teased her with a laugh.
She looked at Angus with a sad sort of smile, and shook her head. “Quite positive that would be impossible, Angus.” Her eyes glazed over with unshed tears. Jamie frowned as he reached for her. “Excuse me,” she said as she stood quickly and began to walk away.

Jamie turned to glare at Angus. “Auch, ye daft idjit!”

“What?” Angus said disbelieving. He watched as Jamie stood up and cursed him in Gaelic before turning to follow Zahra. “What’d I say?” he called after Jamie’s retreating form.

Zahra had found a fallen, moss-covered tree close enough to the camp where she was still within sight, but far enough away it gave her a modicum of privacy. She sighed heavily when she felt Jamie’s hands rub down over her shoulders, and she leaned back into him when his arms wrapped around her chest. “Ye cannae listen to Angus. He’s an idiot.”

Zahra huffed dryly in amusement. “I know that.”

Jamie pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “Tell me what’s wrong, then, mo ghaol, so I can make it better? Hmm?”

“We didn’t--do anything--to help them. We just--turned and walked away.’” She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes as she lifted her hands to hold his arms against her. “I guess--I’m used to helping people, regardless of what side they’re on, and it’s killing me that I just--” She exhaled slowly and pressed her head back against his shoulder.

“Oh my sweet, Leeloo,” Jamie said as he pressed another kiss to the side of her head. “What would ye have done?” He asked, sincerely.

Zahra inhaled and lifted her shoulders in a helpless shrug. “I--don’t know. I would have--I don’t know.”

“Well, hmm,” he wrapped her a little tighter and situated himself a little better on the log behind her. “Let’s say you managed to save the man and his family, but then he turns around and betrays us all to the Redcoats, what then? And that would have only happened after we fought off the watch and lost--how many of us in the process?” Zahra breathed in and out several times. He was making several very good points and it was actually helping ease her anxiousness and her guilt. She had to remember, this wasn’t her time. She couldn’t always think with a 23rd century mentality. “We have to choose our battles out here, Leeloo, and sadly that sometimes means we cannae save everyone.”

She twisted slightly in his embrace and wrapped her arms around his middle, laying her head on his chest. “Thank you. Sometimes I just need someone to help get me out of my head.”

“Aye, and I’ll be here to help ye do so every time.” He rubbed her back and her shoulders comfortingly. Zahra eventually raised her head, and Jamie brought his hand up to pinch her chin before leaning in to steal a kiss. “Have I told ye how bonny ye look today?” he brushed her hair off her forehead, behind her ear.

She huffed a dry laugh and rolled her eyes playfully. “Like five times.”

“Make it an even six,” he said in an intimate whisper before he muttered beautiful words in Gaelic, commenting on her beauty as he kissed each cheekbone, just below her eye.

“Tha gaol agam ort,” she said in a husky whisper.

Jamie groaned, deep and growly in his chest and his arms gripped her tighter as he pressed his nose against her throat. “Every time you say that I just wanna bend ye over and have my way with ye.”
And yet, here I sit, completely untaken,” she teased with a sultry look in her eyes.

“Soon, temptress,” he said as he placed a kiss on her neck. “We’ll be back at Leoch... I will take ye as my wife, before god and kin, and ye’ll be begging me for a respite by the end of the night.”

“Promises, promises,” Zahra breathed out, voice thick with lust and emotion.

There was a loud, shrill whistle suddenly from behind them, and when they both turned to look, Rupert was lowering his hand from where he’d put his fingers between his lips to whistle. He indicated his head for them to hurry. Apparently, lunch was over and they were breaking camp and heading onto the next village. The couple both sighed in defeat, giggling at each other because they’d done it at the same time. They shared one final kiss before breaking apart and getting up, though they held hands as they walked back to camp.

Later that afternoon, the turnout in the next village was insanely depressing. The villagers looked ragged and haggard, and their payments were dismal at best. You could hear it in both Dougal’s and Ned’s voices, and see it in their faces. It was like Robin Hood in reverse, robbing the poor to feed the wealthy. It wasn’t until after speaking to the last lowly villager, Torcall, that Dougal and Ned seemed to speak a thousand words without speaking. Apparently, the redcoats had ransacked the village and Mister Torcall had no rent to pay for the first time.

Zahra watched Dougal carefully, as he and Ned spoke without speaking, and a moment later Dougal was grabbing a bag off the wagon to give to Torcall. “Yer family will have supper tonight,” he said as he gave the man the bag of vegetables or grains or whatever it was. “And afterwards ye’ll join us for a drink.” Torcall nodded in gratitude. “All of you will eat,” Dougal declared to the gathered villagers. “Then join us tonight for a dram.” One by one, the villagers came and Jamie and the others handed out goods. Regardless of the possible hidden intentions behind his charity, Dougal was showing a great deal of mercy on these people in that moment, one Zahra had yet to witness any other time on the road. She helped hand out provisions too, smiling at Jamie as they did. This was exactly the sort of helping hand she needed after the crummy morning.

That night in the Inn was no different than any other night. Zahra sat across from Jamie and sipped on her ale as Dougal shouted his familiar speech. She’d heard it all before, understood almost none of it except an increasingly familiar word here and there. She watched carefully as Jamie stood and removed his shirt. It gave them both a spike of anxiety every time, knowing others were watching and judging, and exploiting his pain. She couldn’t tell you what it was about that night, but her ears picked up on something she’d heard many times before, but for some reason her brain had not made a connection until that night.

“Beorn Stuart!” Dougal had shouted, and every person in the tavern repeated it with just as much ferocity.

Stuart? Zahra’s brain was in hyperdrive as she combed through mental volumes of texts and facts about Earth’s history. Famous Stuart of Scotland… The one who was responsible for the Jacobite uprising of 1745? Bonnie Prince Charlie, that Stuart? Of fucking course! Dougal was a fucking Jacobite. They all were. That’s what this was about! They were raising money for Stuart’s war. But… that war ended horrifically for the Scottish… Oh no… She wanted to take it back. She wanted to take it all back. She didn’t want to know anymore. She didn’t want to know that the war her pseudo-family, that the man she was in love with, were trying to fight would most likely end in tragedy. No. Please take it all back. She didn’t want to know anymore.

Murtagh reached for her hand to touch her wrist gently. “Ye alright there, lass? Ye look like
someone’s walked on yer grave?”

Zahra swallowed hard and shook her head. “I’m fine. Think the innkeepers stew isn’t settling well with me. Excuse me!” She got up and quickly exited the Tavern and ran past their camp, stopping only when she heard Angus’s voice call out to her. She stopped and gazed out into the mist-filled night, gripping at her chest and trying to breathe.

“Oi! Lassie. Ye alright?” No. She was having a panic attack and she couldn’t breathe. “Oi, Zahra, I’m talkin’ to you.” Angus approached her just as Murtagh and Jamie were exiting the tavern and Angus whistled them over. “Zahra? Oi. What’s goin’ on lass?” He reached for her only then realizing her distress when he watched her collapse to her knees, struggling for air. “Breathe, lassie!” He gripped her shoulders. “Breathe, damn ye!” He shouted, then suddenly slapped her hard across the face, and Murtagh had to hold Jamie back. The slap had actually been smart thinking because it effectively shocked Zahra out of her panic attack. She gazed at him through the fall of her hair, stunned, but no longer hyperventilating and at risk of passing out.

She suddenly pulled him in for a hug. “Thank you.”

Angus stiffened at first, but then gave her a gentle, but awkward, pat on the back. “Ye’re alright, lassie. Ye’ll be alright.” Angus looked helplessly at Jamie as the man moved closer and Zahra was passed off to him, the woman latching onto the other man the moment she realized Jamie was there.

Jamie walked her back to camp and helped settle her down in his tent with his blanket. He’d stayed with her, holding her until she’d settled down and had drifted off to a fitful sleep. She wouldn’t tell him what was wrong but something had obviously spooked her, either something someone said, or did. Whatever it was had to be something awful in order to throw her into such a panic like that.

Once Jamie was sure she was resting, he got up to go talk to Dougal. He didn’t know how much longer either of them could keep this up.

Zahra awoke beside the campfire a short while later, searching for Jamie. She was wrapped in one of his blankets, and she took a moment to inhale his scent before she sat up, gazing around the sleeping campers. Jamie wasn’t among them. She heard quiet, but angry, and familiar voices outside of camp and so she got up, wrapping Jamie’s blanket around her as she followed the voices, listening.

“Devil take ye, Dougal MacKenzie. Kinsman or no’, I dinnae owe ye this.”

“I seem to recall a certain oath of obedience. ‘So long as my feet rest on the lands of clan MacKenzie.’”

“I gave my word to Colum, not to you.”

Zahra moved like the shadows, making nary a sound more than the wind as she approached the arguing Kinsmen, and watched with the night clinging around her like a cloak.

“It’s one in the same lad, ye ken it well. Outside o’ Leoch, I am Colum’s head, hands, as well as his legs.”

“I never saw a better case of the right hand not knowing what the left was up to.”

“The MacKenzies, the MacBeolains, the MacVinishes… None can force them to give against their will.” Dougal explained why he was collecting off book. “But we have somethin’ in common... We want our king back where he belongs… Don’t ye?” Jamie grit his teeth as his uncle spoke. “You have more to gain from a Stuart throne than I do. If ye dinnae want to save yer own silly neck--”
“My neck is my own concern,” Jamie spat angrily at his uncle. “And so is my back.”

“Not while ye travel with me, sweet lad,” Dougal said as he stared Jamie down a moment before moving away.

Once he had past and was out of sight, Zahra moved out of her hiding spot and made her way to Jamie in the dark. He was taking out his frustrations on a nearby tree, which would only cause him to bloody his knuckles, and would do very little in relieving actual stress or frustration. She reached out her hand to grip his arm, to stop him. Jamie jumped, startled, until he realized it was Leeloo and not someone else. He turned to look at her as she closely inspected his busted knuckles. “He won’t stop,” she said as she gently picked a few of the bigger splinters from his hand. “As long as he has leverage over you, he’ll never stop.” She swallowed hard.

“Aye. It gets him what he wants, ye see?”

“Why do you let him?” She asked.

“He’s my uncle,” Jamie answered quietly. He was family. Sometimes, family was all you had, and sometimes you didn’t get to choose who they were. “You know… a man has to choose what’s worth fightin’ for... as ye well k--” Jamie suddenly felt her tongue laving over the broken, bleeding skin of his knuckles. His instinct was to pull his hand away, but he was stuck, mesmerized, and inexplicably aroused by the sight. She cleaned his wounds as if she were a cat, only her tongue was soft, warm, and wet, and oh so sinful. Her lips eventually closed around his skin as she sucked a splinter from his middle knuckle, then turned her head to spit on the ground.

When she lifted her gaze back up, she caught him staring at her and she blushed clear from her neck to her hairline. She dropped her gaze back to his knuckles then dabbed at the open cuts with her blanket. “That was weird--I’m so--” It was Jamie’s turn to cut her off as he was suddenly grabbing her face and kissing her hard on the mouth and pulling her tightly against him. Zahra pushed against him, pushing him back until his back hit the tree he was just abusing. His hands gripped her hips and his mouth went to her neck, but with a quick pull on his hair, she pulled his face away from her. “No, no. My turn.” She quickly dropped to her knees and lifted his kilt, which she had to admit much more handy than pants. She was totally see more of the appeal these days.

Her mouth was on him a moment later, and Jamie had to bite his knuckle to prevent himself from making too much noise. It was only the second blow-job he had ever had in his life, but holy hell he didn’t think any other woman could ever do it better. Zahra was absolutely ruddy amazing with her mouth. He hated to think it might be something she’d had to learn as a slave because he hated to associate anything positive to that time, but Holy Mary Mother of God, Zahra’s mouth was absolutely sinful. He fisted her hair in his hand to pull it out the way so he could watch her, because it was definitely a glorious sight. She looked almost high, or drunk, or both, generally just blitzed out of her mind when she was sucking on him, as if she were enjoying it almost as much as he was. It was a heady, intoxicating, provocative sight, and Jamie knew he wasn’t going to last.

“Leeloo?” he cautioned as he was already, embarrassingly so close. She seemed to be able to sense this and instead of pulling off of him so he could finish in the leaves, she only seemed to suck him harder, work him into her hand and her mouth faster. She even brought her other hand in to fondle and massage his sack, which seemed to be his final undoing. His hands were suddenly gripped into her hair, and her own hands held onto his wrists as he thrust into her mouth once, twice, and a third time before he was coming, spilling his orgasm down her throat. He felt her throat working around him as she swallowed every drop, sucking on him still even as he began to soften, making sure he was completely spent before she slowly slipped him out of her mouth.
She let his kilt drop, and nuzzled her cheek and her chin against his pubic, bone, and up his stomach. Jamie groaned, brow furrowing gently at the sight. Then he helped pull her to her feet, and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his face against the side of her head. He whispered something in Gaelic, some familiar sounding words of praise, and awe, before he was lifting her face to look at him and sealing his mouth to hers. He could taste himself on her tongue, but he didn’t seem to care. “Tha gaol agam ort,” he muttered against her mouth, kissing her again. “Tha gaol agam air do bheul,” he growled out softly and nipped his teeth against her bottom lip. That was a new one but she could use her imagination as to what he was declaring his love for.

Zahra giggled softly and returned the playful bite with one of her own. “We should get some sleep,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Aye,” he whispered back, seemingly reluctant to let her go.

“Come on,” she leaned away from him, taking his hand. “I think we’ve abused this poor tree enough.”

“Aye,” Jamie chuckled and leaned away from the tree to let her lead him away. “Poor thing is prob’ly scandalized.”

Zahra laughed softly as the two snuck back into camp and snuggled up in the open, by the fire, on Jamie’s palet, under his blanket. Jamie wasn’t a Jacobite, not really. He’d just fallen in with them. Maybe, then, there was hope. Maybe he wouldn’t be pulled into their hopeless war. At least, that was the thought that helped her drift to sleep again that night... that and Jamie’s scent and arms surrounding her, his taste still lingering on her tongue.

The next morning as they were breaking camp, everyone seemed to be in high spirits as they packed everything away. Zahra watched with a sort of bittersweetness gripping at her chest. She’d grown to love these men like family, like brothers. A part of her yearned to tell them their King Stuart was using them, that they would never overthrow King George, that their battle was already lost, but not only would they never believe her, and probably have her burned for Heresy or witchcraft, but she also couldn’t be the one to break their spirits like that. This cause gave them hope, that one day Scotland would be theirs again, outside of English rule. She couldn’t be the one to burst that bubble for them. She loved them too much.

So she smiled, and joked, and bantered with them as normal as they broke down camp and headed back out on the road again.

Zahra was humming a song to herself, or so she thought it was to herself, but then Jamie had heard her. “What’s that?” he asked. It sounded catchy.

“I’m sorry?” she asked unsure of what he meant.

“That tune ye’re hummin’. What is it?”

Had she been humming? Oh shit, she had. “Oh, umm,”she worried her bottom lip. “It’s just a dumb Country song.” Jamie looked at her expectantly. “What?”

“Let’s hear it,” he said. The woman had been downright demanding of them and their Scottish road songs.

Zahra worried her bottom lip and took in a deep breath. “On the road again... I just can’t wait to get on the road again... The life I love is makin’ mem’ries with my friends... And I can’t wait to get on
the road again.”

“See, I dinnae mind this one so much,” Rupert chimed in as he was listening as well.

Zahra grinned as she tried to remember the rest of the lyrics. “On the road again… Goin’ places that I’ve never been… Seein’ things that I may never see again… And I can’t wait to get on the road again… On the road again…” Her brow furrowed as she tried to recall the lyrics some more, she had to kind of repeat the song rapidly in her brain before she nodded, and kind of mumbled herself into the next like. “Like a band of Gypsies we go down the highway… We’re the best of friends… Insisting that the world keep turnin’ our way… And our way… Is, On the road again… I just can’t wait to get on the road again… the life I love is makin’ mem-ries with my friends… And I can’t wait to get on the road again.”

“On the road again!” Angus joined in, with a pleased-at-himself expression.

“Like a band of gypsies we go down the highway…” Zahra continued with a grin.

“We’re the best of friends,” now Jamie, Rupert and Murtagh joined in.

“Insisting that the world keep turnin’ our way… And our way…” There was a deliberate pause in the song, but Zahra kind of died off as she noticed something eerie in the distance that chilled her to her very core.

Oblivious, her companions continued the song “On the road again… We just can’t wait to get on the road again…” Until they noticed Zahra was no longer singing, and had din fact turned Brimstone off the road and was trotting a little faster up the hill. “Zahra!” Jamie called, and they all turned to see what had drawn her attention, then followed her up the hill.

They all met at the top where they saw two men crucified on X crosses. They dismounted and approached the scene to investigate further. Zahra moved in close to examine the bodies. She needn’t bother for a pulse they were very obviously dead, but she did test for rigor mortis. They had none, which meant it had been at least 48-60 hours they’d been out here, possibly longer. “This can’t have been the watch,” Zahra stated, looking back at the men.

“Nae. Redcoats.” Jamie shook his head and crossed himself.

“Traitor,” Dougal explained the T carved into each of their chests.

“They’ve been out here at least a week,” Rupert observed.

“More likely,” Willie agreed. “By the smell.”

“Bloody bastards!” Angus spat.

Zahra pulled the dagger from her belt and began to cut the first victim’s feet loose. “Help her,” Dougal ordered. “Take them down… Wrap the bodies.”

“We’ll give them a proper Christian burial,” Ned agreed.

Zahra helped the men cut the bodies loose and while the men worked on digging two shallow graves, she worked to prepare the bodies for burial as best she could. She gave them both a proper cleaning, stitched the scars on their chests closed, then adjusted or mended their tattered clothes as best she could before wrapping them in sackcloth.

Once the graves were dug, the others lowered the bodies into each one, then worked to pack the dirt
back on top of them. When that was done, two wooden crosses were stamped at the head of their graves. They didn’t know either man, so no words could be spoken on their behalf. No eulogy, or restful prayer for their souls. It seemed wrong to her.

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound,” Zahra began singing, her voice melodious, but also melancholy, yet enchanting. “That saved a wretch like me…” Jamie squeezed her hand. He didn’t know the song, none of them did, but it was beautiful. “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see…” Jamie knew Zahra wasn’t religious, at least that she did not share in their personal faith, but she sure could havefooled him with this song. “Twas grace that taught my heart to feel, and grace my fears relieved… How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed… Through many dangers toils and snares, we have already come… Twas grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home…”

Her song had left not a one of them with a dry eye, except maybe Murtagh, that man was impenetrable it seemed. Even Dougal’s eyes began to water. “Thank ye, lassie,” the man said as he squeezed her shoulder, then moved on to his horse.

They all nodded their heads in gratitude and respect as they returned to their beasts of burden. Jamie wrapped his arm around her shoulders and placed a kiss on her hair before walking off with her back to their horses.

There was no need to use Jamie’s scars at the tavern that night. Zahra might not understand the words, but she could understand gestures and emotions well enough. She could only imagine how graphically Dougal was describing the scene they’d found on the hill. It was wholly evil to do such things to a man, no matter his crime. Barbaric and just plain evil.

Zahra leaned into Jamie, who wrapped his arm around her as they watched Dougal’s emotional retelling of the day’s events. She had to fight back tears in her own eyes as she watched every villager get up to drop money in the plate. She was very well aware that history was written by the victors, and every war had two sides, but from where she was sitting, she couldn’t even try to remain impartial. Atrocities were sure to have been committed on either side, but that display on the mountain today… that was unforgivable.

After Dougal’s rabble rousing it didn’t take long for the drinks to start pouring, and drams to start draining, chins to wagging. Scots were a wholly lively bunch when they were drinking. Jamie placed a kiss on the side of her head and whispered to her that he was going to grab them a couple drinks of their own. She grinned and watched him go, but then caught a few haggard looking townsmen looking at her with intent in their eyes. Zahra was grateful she still had Jamie’s sash pinned around her neck as it was covering the most revealing part of her dress. She was, in fact, covered mostly from head to toe, even wearing fingerless mittens on her hands.

One of the men was staring at her hard enough she could almost feel it. He suddenly whispered something to his friends and started to stand, but then Jamie returned, blocking them from her view, as he sat next to her and handed her a mug. He was in relatively good spirits tonight, not having been humiliated for Dougal’s cause. Zahra, on the other hand, was feeling a wee bit overwhelmed. Too many people. Too many strangers, and drunken strangers to boot. She took her drink with a stilted smile. “Thank you.”

“It’s alright,” Jamie assured her. “I’ve got ye.” He gave her a wink, and Zahra couldn’t help but smile, genuinely this time, before she took a drink.

A lively song was eventually struck up by some of the men with musical talent, one wouldn’t exactly
call them a band, but it was decent enough to dance to. Jamie grinned at Zahra and downed the rest of his drink before he stood and offered her his hand. She looked at the hand, then out onto the barely-existent dance floor, then up at Jamie with an arch to one brow. “Come on!” He taunted her with a boyish grin.

God that grin was dangerous. Zahra rolled her eyes but then downed her drink as well, took his hand, and let him pull her to the small clearing in the middle of the room, where he led her through a lively jig or two. A few other couples joined in, all of them laughing at each other because the space was so small they kept bumping into one another.

Well into the night, Zahra claimed she was tired and wanted to go to bed. The tavern was large enough to host their party for the night, so they would be able to sleep on an actual bed for once. Jamie walked her up to her room where they shared a kiss in the hallway, but when Zahra opened the door and attempted to pull him inside, Jamie stopped as if some invisible wall were preventing him from crossing the threshold. “What’s wrong?” Zahra asked, still holding onto his hand.

“I was thinkin’ it may be best if I sleep out here tonight,” he stated a bit stiffly.


“Lots of drunken townsmen in the taproom tonight. I’d hate for any o’ them to wander up here with--ill intentions.”

“Well, all the more reason for you to come inside, where it’s warm, and you can keep a close eye on me.” She tried tugging gently on his arm again, but he stubbornly resisted.

“Leeloo… As much as I want to, ye’re reputation means too much to me to dare sully it in such a way.”

“My reputation?” She asked with an arched brow. “Jamie…” She stepped out into the hall to get close to him so she could drop her voice low so only he could hear her. “We’ve been sleeping together for weeks. In tents. Under the stars.”

Jamie sighed and held her face. “Tha’s different. The men know what ye are to me and I am to you, and tha’s never been--in public--like this.”

Zahra took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly before she wrapped her arms around his middle and rested her head against his chest. “I don’t know if I can sleep without you anymore.”

Jamie wrapped his arms around her shoulders and rested his chin atop her head, rubbing her back slowly. “Aye. I ken whatcha mean, but it’s just for one night.” He gripped her shoulders gently and leaned back to look into her face. “And I’ll be right out here.”

She sighed heavily. “Fine. But at least let me give you one of the blankets and pillows from my bed.” Jamie nodded, and Zahra entered her room to grab a pillow and blanket off her bed, which she then returned to hand off to him. Jamie took the items, and Zahra leaned out to give him a last, lingering kiss. “Good night, Jamie.”

“Goodnight, mo ghaol,” he responded and waited for her to close and latch the door before he situated himself on the ground outside her door.

Zahra pulled her other pillow and a second blanket off her bed, then she moved to the door and situated herself until she was at least somewhat comfortable.

“Leeloo?” She heard Jamie’s voice on the other side of the door.
“Yes, Jamie?” she responded as she tried to get her pillow in a comfortable position.

“What are ye doin’?” he asked.

“I told you—I can’t sleep without you.” She slipped her fingers easily under the large crack beneath the door, and she smiled when she felt Jamie reach his own fingers under to touch hers. “For the record I think this is completely stupid.” She heard him chuckle at her and she smiled. “But because I love you… I’m willing to humor this incredibly dumb request.”

“Thank you, mo ghaol,” he said, and she thought she could hear a yawn, and something muttered sleepily in Gaelic. Zahra was drifting off shortly after him. So much for sleeping on a real bed for the night.

Chapter End Notes

So what I loved most about writing this chapter was that I found challenge in the fact that Claire and Zahra could not be more different people, so I had to diverge away from the canon story/events quite often in order to make it work.

Claire wants nothing but to go home to Frank. Zahra wants nothing more than to stay with Jamie. Claire was deliberately avoiding getting close to these people, while Zahra has been doing nothing but trying to earn their trust and their kinship.

I've never read the books, but in watching the show I see that while the men weren't super kind by any means, quite a bit of the alienation and hostility was on Claire's end. She was often being very hostile, and quite frankly, always looking for an argument or fight. So I had to say to myself a lot, what would Zahra do, and then completely go off on my own tangent hahahaha. Anyway! Hope you enjoyed it! Thanks for reading, commenting, kudos, etc, etc! Love you!
Garrison Commander

Chapter Summary

Zahra and Randall engage in a battle of wits, and for the first time in his life Black Jack may have met his match.

Chapter Notes

This was fun and challenging to write. Hope you all enjoy it as much as I did!

Jamie had roused first, and the loss of even the small touch of his fingers under the door had been enough to stir Zahra awake. Jamie knocked on the door, and when she opened it he handed her back the pillow and blanket. “Good morning,” he said as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and stretched his back.

“Morning,” Zahra said as she took the items, then they both leaned in for a kiss. “Come down for breakfast whenever ye’re ready.” Zahra nodded and they shared one last brief kiss before she closed the door.

About an hour later, Zahra was making her way downstairs. She’d ordered a fresh, warm bath which she had taken the time to enjoy, before she’d dressed herself for the day. When she came downstairs she recognized the creepers from last night, but paid them no heed as she headed straight for Jamie and the others. “Good morning,” she said with a grin.

She was greeted with a few nods and mumbled ‘morning’s. Most of them were still eating, except Jamie who looked like he was just finishing up his last bannoch. “Ye look extra bonny this morn,” Jamie said before he finished up his tea.

“I had a real bath,” Zahra admitted with a happy grin. “It was wonderful.”

Jamie stood to vacate his spot for her. “I’ve got to go give the horses their breakfast, too.” He gave her a brief kiss on the lips. “I’ll be back.” Zahra nodded and watched him go before she sat down in his newly vacated seat.

Without even needing to ask, a plate of warm porridge, sausage, and a fork was placed in front of her. “Thank you,” she told the server, who just nodded and walked off.

The men at the table behind them were still talking very loudly, in Gaelic. She tried to ignore them as she reached for one of the bannoch’s out of the wicker basket in the middle of the table, and spread some butter onto it before taking a bite. “Hmm. Needs some vegemite,” she remarked idly before taking a bite of her oatmeal.

“See ye’ve got yer appetite back,” Angus remarked, then he tilted his head to peak around the table,
pointedly gazing at her belly.

Zahra reached out and slapped him upside the head. “Will you knock it off. Jamie remains every much as pure today as he was when I first met him.”

“Doesnae mean ye couldnae have been stuck by another man,” Angus insisted, wagging his eyebrows suggestively at her. The men at the table behind them said something else really obnoxiously in Gaelic, which made Murtagh actually turn around and glare at them murderously.

“Alright Angus. I’m only going to say this to you once, so listen.” She began to count on her fingers, using her pointer finger first. “A... I really, really want to hurt you for even suggesting I would be unfaithful to Jamie.” She counted on a second finger. “And 2... In order to get pregnant one has to have a uterus, and mine was--surgically removed when I was fourteen.” She dropped her hand and took another bite of her oatmeal as if she had just said the most normal, ordinary thing.

“Oh, dear,” Ned said, frowning softly as he looked up at her from his notes.

Murtagh gazed at her appraisingly for a short while. “Does Jamie know?” he asked, brow furrowing slightly.

Zahra looked at him and nodded. She finished chewing, then swallowing before she answered. “It was one of the very first things I told him, actually. My failed attempt to convince him he didn’t want me.” That answer seemed to satisfy whatever Murtagh was wanting to know so he went back to his breakfast.

More raucus Gaelic came from their inconsiderate neighbors, and this time they drew not only Murtagh’s attention but the rest of the men all looked at them with interest and murder in their eyes as well. “What?” Zahra asked as she noticed their behavior, and she glanced behind her.

“Oh, dear,” Ned said again but for an entirely different reason.

Angus was the one to stand first and Zahra watched him as he calmly walked over to the noisy table, then immediately, violently slammed the most obnoxious man’s head into the surface of the table. “Here we go,” Zahra said, fighting a smile on her lips, as every man at her table, except Ned, was suddenly at war with the others, and a huge brawl broke out.

Zahra tried to stay out of it, she really did, but when one man tried to attack Angus in the back, she broke a chair against his back instead. When he turned on her, Zahra palmed him deftly in the nose, efficiently breaking it and causing him to go down in blinding pain. Another man got a steel-booted foot firmly planted on his backside before she kicked out and sent him crashing headfirst into a wall. Yet another man tried to pull poor Ned into the fray, so Zahra punched her fingers into a very specific bundle of nerves between his ribs on his back, then twisted her fingers painfully. The manipulation of those nerves caused the man’s entire body to immediately go rigid, and immobile. All she had to do was give him a shove, and he fell over like a tree in the woods. She made sure Ned was ok, which was when a drunken Scot grabbed her from behind. Zahra slammed her head back, effectively breaking his nose and making him drop her in the process. He tried to take a blind swing at her, which she dodged easily. She dodged again when he attempted to strike her a second time, but when he swiped at her a third time, Zahra immobilized his arm in an arm lock, then with an impressive show of her acrobatic skill that would make Natasha Romanov jealous and proud, Zahra pulled herself into a double leg grapple around the man's neck and shoulders, which promptly brought him to the ground in the same action. A quick yank on the man's arm dislocated it, and she kicked him in the gut with her heel before rolling away from him. She did a spider back bend, then kicked her feet to flip herself back to a standing position. She had her fists up,
ready for more, but found that the brawl was pretty much over, as only the MacKenzie men were left standing, winded and scrappy, but standing...

Fortunately, they had been far too engaged in their own fisticuffs to pay attention to Zahra, but Ned had witnessed the whole thing and had no bloody idea how to feel about it. Zahra was plum full of surprises it seemed.

Zahra immediately relaxed her stance when she realized the fight was over. They’d won. She smoothed out her skirts as if everything was normal. “Well,” she inhaled and exhaled exaggeratedly. “That was an invigorating way to start the morning. Some of you look like you could use some patching up, though… I’m gonna go get my bag.”

She met Jamie as he was coming back, he’d heard commotion and come running, but was too late. “What’s goin’ on?” he asked, stopping her on the way.

“You know, I’m not exactly sure?” Zahra admitted honestly. “One minute we were eating breakfast with a very obnoxious table behind us, then suddenly Angus got up and bashed one of their heads on the table, then all hell broke loose.” She was practically beaming.

“Sounds like I missed a helluva fight,” Jamie said.

“Oh, you did!” Zahra was still grinning.

“Sorry I missed it,” Jamie said with a chuckle.

Zahra slapped him on the shoulder. “Me too. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t really be happy about this, but they were honestly being ridiculous and I’m pretty sure they were the assholes who were creeping on me last night, so… Yay us!” Jamie smirked and shook his head. “Anyway. I’ve got a bunch of residual adrenaline, if you couldn’t tell, which is why I’m being kind of a spaz right now, so yeah.” She clapped her hands, once. “Boys are inside, need some mending. I’m gonna go get my bag.”

Jamie huffed dryly to himself but nodded. He watched her go for a moment before he went inside and found most of the brawlers had cleared out to lick their wounds, while just the MacKenzie party remained. “What’d I miss?” He said jokingly.

When Zahra had returned with her medical bag, she carefully assessed each man so she knew what to treat and how to treat it. She would probably do a majority of the first aid on her own, but she had been able to give Jamie some basic instructions to follow, so he was at least helping clean and bandage some of their cuts, which were many.

“So we’ve got three split lips,” Zahra started ticking off her injury assessment. "Two bloody noses, twelve smashed knuckles, and four loosened teeth.”

“And my ribs hurt a wee bit,” Willie stated. Zahra looked at him in concern, adding it to her mental checklist.

“Bastard’s fingernail was sharp as a boar’s tooth,” Rupert said as he pointed at the cut on his face. “Gouged a hole in me.” Jamie was there to help clean it, though.

Zahra was cleaning Angus’s knuckles with a strong alcohol, and the man shouted out in pain and pulled his hand away. “Really, Angus? Don’t be such a baby.” She took his hand back when he offered it to her and she was a little more gentle in her cleaning the second go round. “Don’t get me
wrong, gentlemen. I know tensions have been high, and while I appreciate a good bar brawl as much as the next girl, was that really necessary?"

Murtagh set a fresh bundle of bandages on the table next to Angus, and said, “You were the reason it was necessary.”

Zahra stopped what she was doing and turned, glancing at Jamie before focusing on Murtagh. “What do you mean?”

“It was your honor we were defendin’ lass,” Murtagh said as he sat at a vacant booth. Out of all of them, he and Dougal seemed the most unscathed. “The lout called ye a whore,” he continued, and Zahra tried not to smirk at the way he pronounced whore. At his admission, her eyes drifted appraisingly over every one of her comrades, before landing on Angus who was deliberately avoiding her gaze. He’d thrown the first punch and started everything after all.

“Ye’re a guest of the MacKenzie,” Murtagh continued to explain. “We can insult you,” he said with a raise of his brow. “But God help any other man what does.” Murtagh smirked, and nodded, along with the others.

If she’d ever doubted that these men really saw her as friend or kin, that pretty much put all doubts to shame. They’d just taken on an entire tavern of angry drunken Scots to defend an intangible thing in her name. She met Jamie’s eyes and they locked gazes for a spell, then he gave her a wink. She smiled and turned back to tend to Angus. “Thank you,” she said loud enough for them all to hear, but she was looking at Angus. The man just shook his head and looked away nervously.

After everyone was mended, they meandered out to their horses and wagon to pack and prepare for the road. Meanwhile, Rupert took his turn to tell them about one of his own sexploits. “So there I am, in bed, harelip Chrissie on my left, and sweaty Netty, the butcher’s daughter, on my right.” Zahra huffed a dry laugh, smirking at the way he said butcher. She shook her head as she ran her gloved hand over Donas’s mane. “They get jealous of each other, start arguing about who I’m goin’ to swive first... Can you believe it?”

“I believe the only true jealous lovers story you have is from that time your left hand was jealous of your right,” Zahra stated with a smug smirk as she continued to stroke Donas’s muzzle.

Rupert almost immediately burst out laughing, followed by the rest of the men. Angus was even clapping at her for that one. “Careful, she’s a witty one,” Jamie said as he gazed at her adoringly from the other side of his horse, whom she was positively spoiling with all the pets. He ducked under the beast’s head and pressed a brief kiss to Zahra’s lips before he turned to check his side satchel. “It’s a hard ride ahead,” Jamie said. “Three days till we cross Culloden Moor.”

She didn’t know exactly why that name was striking up red flags, and she didn’t want to go snooping around in her brain or memories to find out. She was pretty sure it had to do with this Jacobite uprising thing and the end of the Highlanders, but she refused to sink into the details. She didn’t want to know how many of these men she was going to lose.

“Ye alright?” Jamie asked close to her ear as he came up behind her and placed his hand on her waist. Zahra turned and wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a fierce hug. He returned the hug, wrapping his arms around her just as tightly.

“Auch, you two! Away!” Angus complained from atop his horse.
Zahra leaned back and stole a quick kiss before she dashed away to let Jamie get on his horse while she climbed astride Brimstone. At Dougal’s orders, they were once again trudging along the weary highway.

It was a hard ride, just as Jamie had said. The road was winding, long, and cold as they made their way over hills, and through valleys, with few short breaks in between, trying to cover as much ground as they could in the daylight. The men sang a few more marching durges, and even asked Zahra to sing them something else fun or bonny from her home.

When they found a place to stop for the day, Zahra climbed off her horse and helped them set up camp as she normally did. She nearly bumped into Ned, and when she apologized and tried to greet him, the man just nodded at her curtly and breezed passed her to go sit with Dougal. Not so much as a hello, or how are you. Maybe it didn’t mean anything, maybe he was just as tired and road weary as she was, but it was odd for the older gentleman to not banter with her even a little. Maybe she was reading too much into it and her own discomfort from the grime and ick from the road was contributing to this feeling of being off. She couldn’t describe it, there was just something that was making her feel on edge.

“I’m going to the river to wash,” she announced, as she gave Brimstone a few pets.

Angus and Rupert got up to follow her, but Dougal waved them away. “Let ‘er go.”

Zahra nodded in thanks and led Brimstone with her down the hill to the river below. Jamie would have loved the chance to sneak away with her, but they still had camp to set up, and Dougal had ordered him to stay and help.

At the river, Zahra let Brimstone graze a bit, as she climbed down to the bank. She removed her mittens, and her wool sleeves to wash her hands, and arms in the water.

“Who are you? Really?” Zahra heard Dougal’s voice suddenly call down to her.

Zahra looked up and rolled her eyes. “Jesus Christ, Dougal, still with this?”

“I think ye’re still lyin’ about who and what ye are!” Dougal declared.

“I’m fuckin’ exhausted, Dougal that’s what I am,” she responded tiredly.

“I’m fuckin’ exhausted, Dougal that’s what I am,” she responded tiredly.

Dougal huffed angrily out his nose. “Assassin or no’, Ned said he observed ye fighting in the bar, using techniques no man he’s ever seen done.”

She didn’t know what he was accusing her of and therefore didn’t really know how to respond. She was beyond frustrated. The tension of the past four weeks combined with her general feeling of disorientation today, suddenly seemed to be catching up with her all at once. “I have specialized training in multiple combative arts, Dougal, because I’m clearly not a man. Therefore, I am forced to improvise and take whatever advantage I can get. Sometimes that means doing weird shit you’ve never seen before, because you’re a man.”

He opened his mouth as if to speak again and she cut him off forcefully. “No! I’m fucking done with this bullshit! I’ve told you who I was, who I am. You know everything. I’ve done every fucking thing you’ve ever asked me to do since I met you, and then some.” Angry tears stung her eyes but she refused to cry in front of him so in her eyes they stayed. “I’ve taken your abuse, your criticism,
your distrust, your unwanted advances, and your clear loathing without much complaint… I have *willingly* followed you into this cold hell which is just as much a prison as Colum’s surgery, yet I am *still* beating my brains out over here trying to prove to you that I’m not your enemy. I’m not your enemy, Dougal!” She declared forcefully. “But I am so—” She took in a few deep breaths and her entire demeanor deflated a little with each exhale. “--so fucking tired of you treating me like I am.” She rubbed her temples, feeling a huge migraine coming on. “I don’t know what you want from me…”

Dougal had never had anyone, leastways a woman speak to him that way before. Zahra was a fiery hellcat of a woman. Fearless. Brave. Strong. Dougal wanted to believe she wasn’t the enemy, but there was too much of his own suspicions and unknown variables that prevented him from accepting her as truth. He realized in that moment that it might be his own jealousy that was partly fueling his anger towards her. Towards her *and* Jamie. How did the welp end up with this perfection? “Zahra-—” He tried to reach for her but she immediately shoved his hand away and backed up.

“Don’t--fucking--touch me,” she spoke warningly between clenched teeth as she glared at him dangerously. She was spoiling for a fight at the moment and only needed the slightest provocation to do so.

“Madam,” a voice suddenly spoke from above them. Dougal and Zahra both turned in surprise to see an entire team of redcoats on horseback, cresting the hill above the river. Dougal reached for his saber, but Zahra reached out to stop him, with a shake of her head. She might have been spoiling for a fight but this was not what she had in mind. They were severely outnumbered and outgunned. They would both die. Dougal huffed out his nose, then removed his hand from the hilt of his sword.

Zahra turned to face the redcoats with a smile. “Greetings, officers. Beautiful day, is it not?”

“It is, mistress.” One of the soldiers responded. “And may I say it is a pleasure to see you again.” Again? Zahra squinted a little to see more clearly and she almost immediately recognized the officer as the Brit from Donalda and Alistair’s village. Shit that was like four or five weeks ago. Had this dude been tracking them since then? The man climbed off his horse, and approached the edge of the small cliff. “Once more, I ask you…” More riders came from the trees behind them. They were surrounded. Overkill much? “Is everything alright?” the soldier persisted, gazing at Dougal pointedly, then back at her.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again as well, Officer…” She politely left it open for him to fill in his name.

“Lieutenant Jeremy Foster of his Majesty’s army,” he responded with a smug smile directed at Dougal. “And this time, I do mean to ascertain the lady’s well-being.” He looked at Zahra seriously.

Dougal stepped up the embankment to meet the soldier on closer ground. “The lady is none o’ yer concern.”

“And you are?” the soldier asked.


“MacKenzie or not, if you are holding this citizen against her wishes you’ll be dealt with.” They stared each other down for a moment before Jeremy turned his focus on Zahra once more. “Tell me, Madam… Are you here by your own choice?”

She met Dougal’s intent gaze for a moment, before breaking out into a smile and turning her
attention to Jeremy. “Your concern is deeply appreciated, Lieutenant, really. As is your obvious
regard for my welfare, but I can assure you, what I said to you that day in the village is the honest
truth.” She nodded her head at Dougal. “I am an honoured guest of the MacKenzie clan, and happily
engaged to Mr. MacKenzie’s own nephew. So, in short, yes. I am most definitely here by my own
choice.”

“As you wish,” Jeremy responded, disbelieving. “Nevertheless, I am certain my commander will
wish to speak with you. He’s presently in residence at the Inn at Brockton. Will you accompany
me?” He indicated back towards his horse.

“Well,” Dougal responded. “If the lady goes, I go.”

“Alrighty, then,” Zahra said as she fetched her fingerless mittens from the bank and pulled them back
onto her hands, followed by her wool sleeve guards. She’d left Jamie’s scarf with her change of
clothes back at camp, so her chest tattoo was on display and for the first time in her life, she wished it
wasn’t.

Zahra returned to Brimstone and gently stroked her muzzle as she waited for Dougal to return with
his horse. “So… Lieutenant Foster... You’re quite young to bear such a rank. You must be a great
soldier.” The compliment earned her a bashful smile from the younger man.

“You honor me with your words, madam.”

“Leeloo,” she said with a smile. “Leeloo Quigley.” Jeremy nodded politely and looked ahead
suddenly when Dougal rode around the bend. Zahra took that as her cue to mount her horse and
when Dougal joined them, they headed off together with these redcoats.

Zahra could not describe the dread she was feeling at this turn of events. She didn’t know what
would lie in store for them at Brockton, but if the Redcoats questioned her, she didn’t know how
well her limited 18th century history knowledge would hold up against a British interrogation. She
suddenly felt Dougal’s hand on her shoulder, and she turned to look at him. He nodded at her, his
attempt at trying to be comforting. It wasn’t working. His touch was actually making her feel more
on edge, and she had to subtly roll her shoulders and her upper arms to shrug his hand off of her,
which he took as a cue, thank god.

The ride was cold and weary, and when they came upon the town of Brockton, Zahra could
practically feel Dougal’s hurt and unease. This was a Scottish village, and on MacKenzie lands, but
it was now occupied by Redcoats and such made it enemy territory. A hard thing for a proud
Scottish Laird and Warchief to have to face. Feeling like an Outlander in his own country, on his
own land. Maybe in that moment, they could understand each other.

After traveling through the village, they came to a stop outside the inn and stables. Lieutenant Foster
ordered his men to look after their own horses as they didn’t trust their care to their Scottish hosts.
Zahra dismounted Brimstone, and gave the girl a few loving strokes down her neck.

“If you’ll follow me,” Jeremy said and stretched out his arm to indicate where he’d like her to go.

Zahra and Dougal stared at each other for a moment, before Zahra took a deep breath, lifted her
skirts a bit and followed after the Lieutenant. They were led up some stairs, into the inn, then down a
few hallways until Jeremy opened a large door, and stood aside to let his ‘guests’ enter. “My Lord.
May I present Miss Leeloo Quigley, and Mr. Dougal MacKenzie.”

“Come in, come in!” An officer in a white wig said as he stood, then all gathered around the table
Zahra smiled softly, and placed her crossed hands over her stomach as she nodded her head at the General. “This is a happy surprise,” the man stated as he moved around the table and drew closer to her, giving her a visual assessment from head to toe. Zahra did not miss the way his gaze lingered on the ink roses on her collarbone. “A most enjoyable surprise. It has been far too long since I last gazed upon a lovely English rose.” And he wasn’t even gonna be subtle about it.

Zahra’s smile brightened and she bowed her head as she let him take her hand and place a kiss on her knuckles. “You flatter me, my lord.”

“Ah, yes. The Lieutenant said he believed your origins were from the American Colonies.” She nodded. “From what he claims, it sounds like you have quite a story to tell.”

Zahra smiled bashfully, deliberately playing the part of a humble, dulcet female. “I’m grateful you’ve invited me here for the chance to tell it.”

“Nonsense, I love stories,” he said in a very flirtatious, husky tone. “I’ve not heard a good one since I first set foot upon this blasted turf.” Her smile widened and she nodded coyly. “You must be absolutely famished,” he declared as he gave her body a once over again. She was very petite and lean. He took her by the hand and led her to a vacant seat at the table. “I hope venison is to your liking.” He pulled out a chair for her and waited for her to sit. “Only the very best quality, I assure you.”

“Sounds positively scrumptious,” she said, smiling gaily as she adjusted her skirts and took the offered seat, and waited for him to push in her chair.

The other officers sat after her, but the General stayed and leaned over her shoulder, having no regard for her personal space. Zahra somehow managed to keep the smile on her face as he bragged in her ear. “I shot the beast myself. It’s a great country for hunting, I’ll give them that. The cheese is surprisingly edible, too.” He pointed out the items on the table as he talked about them. “And the claret is my own. Bottled in ‘35.” He grinned down at her, very pleased with himself. “Need I say more?” He stood up and snapped his fingers at the server and pointed at the empty glass at Zahra’s place, and the man moved to fill her glass. Zahra gave him a sympathetic look and whispered her thanks. “Now, Lieutenant Foster, you’re going to introduce me to this noble Scottish gentleman.”

“My Lord, may I present Dougal MacKenzie, war chief to the Clan MacKenzie, and brother to its Laird.” Jeremy introduced Dougal, then turned to Dougal to introduce his SO. “You have the honor of meeting Brigadier General Sir Oliver Lord Thomas. Knight of the Bath and commanding officer of the Northern British Army.”

“War chief, eh?” Lord Thomas said to Dougal. ‘I’ll say this for you, you look the part.”

“A fine specimen of the local inhabitants, My Lord.” one of the officers at the table chimed in.

“How might I address you, sir?” Lord Thomas asked.

“Ye can call me MacKenzie, if’n it please ye,” Dougal stated simply. “Or if we’re bein’ formal, ye can call me Chief MacKenzie, which in matters of war and bicker leaves us ower fae each other as equals dinnae ye ken?”

The men at the table sort of looked around at each other, obviously not understanding what he just said. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” Lord Thomas said. “But I failed to understand a single word the creature said.”

Zahra sighed and turned to meet Dougal’s eyes, a small frown on her lips. They were deliberately
humiliating him and she didn’t appreciate it. Dougal stoically stared ahead.

“I believe, my lord,” the same brown noser from earlier chimed in. “He was attempting to say Chief MacKenzie would be acceptable. There was more, but I must confess it eluded me.”

“If I may be so bold, my lords, I believe what Chief MacKenzie meant was in matters of etiquette and war, his title as Chief of the MacKenzie clan would make him about equal with your Lord General,” she looked at Lord Thomas and bowed her head, lowering her eyes.

“Really?” Lord Thomas said with a condescending grin and a chuckle. “Someone really ought to teach these people the king’s English.”

Zahra sighed as Lord Thomas made his way back around the table. She turned to look at Dougal once more, and the man gave her a wink. Zahra was playing her part exceptionally well. He knew she was playing a part because he’d never heard her speak so formally, and so clearly since that first night at dinner.

“I believe he’s speaking English, sir,” Lieutenant Foster chimed in. “Their form of English anyway.”

“Well, it’s a form that’s damn offensive to the ear,” Lord Thomas dropped another insult.

“If I may be so bold again, Lord Thomas,” Zahra started to say. “But are there not parts of England, such as the east end of London, Newcastle perhaps?—where the local dialect has become so skewed it is unintelligible to common ears?”

None of the table guests seemed at all comfortable with what she’d just said, but Zahra was not apologetic. “Yes, yes. You’re quite right,” Lord Thomas admitted with a sly smile. “You make a fine point, madam. The world would make a lot more sense if everyone spoke like Londoners.” The soldiers at the table laughed at the Lord’s joke.

“If ye wish to hear Londoners speak,” Dougal spoke up from behind her. “Perhaps ye should have stayed in London.” Zahra controlled her breathing, watching Lord Thomas’s reaction.

The kiss ass tried translating again. “My lord, he says--”

“No need, Leftenant. I understood him perfectly well that time.” Lord Thomas eyed Dougal menacingly. He brought his goblet with him as he moved around the table once more, still addressing Dougal. “I would be more than happy to oblige, sir, if only you behaved like the loyal British subjects you’re supposed to be.” Jeremy stepped back as Lord Thomas passed. “That way my troops and I could return to more civilized environs.”

The two war generals stared each other down for a tense moment, before Lord Thomas tried to regain some of his composure and joviality from moments ago. “I must say though, I quite enjoy being a man in the field. If only my servants moved as quickly as my soldiers.” He laughed, which earned several polite smiles and obligatory chuckles from those gathered at the table. “If I stay here long enough I could become a Laird.” he joked as he made his way back to his seat. “Laird Thomas. What do you think all? Only then I suppose I’d have to wear one of those woolen skirts.” He gazed up at Dougal. “I’m told it’s a grave insult to ask a clansman what he wears underneath that thing.”

“It’s called a kilt, sir,” Kiss ass unnecessarily clarified again.

“I know perfectly well what it’s called, Leftenant,” Lord Thomas said without breaking eye contact with Dougal. “So tell me,” he continued to speak. “From one Laird to another.” Lord Thomas deliberately mocked the Scottish accent when he emphasized the word Laird with a hard roll of the R.
“Are ye purposely tryin’ to embarrass the lass?” Dougal asked, cutting him off. “Or are ye just an arrogant wee smout?” Zahra had to purse her lips to keep from smiling or snickering. It was a brief break in her composure, but she quickly recovered and once more donned a neutral expression.

“Good Christ man.” The fat bastard chimed in now. “Do you know to whom you speak?”

“You watch your words, sir, or I’ll have you,” Lieutenant Foster threatened Dougal.

“Well, you pull that needle, and we’ll see who pricks who,” Dougal taunted back. This was going south fast.

Zahra stood quickly with a scraping of her chair, getting between Dougal and the Lieutenant who’d just drawn a dagger. “Lieutenant… Dougal… Enough. Please.” She held a hand, palm out, towards each of them, glancing from one to the other. “You’re all behaving like playground children arguing over a toy.”

“Yes, yes, quite right. Quite right,” Lord Thomas agreed as he once more made his way around the table towards her. “The Lady’s sense of propriety puts us all to shame.” He stepped behind her to fix her chair. “The question of the kilt will remain an enigma.” He took her hand, helped her back into her seat, and once more tucked her chair in behind her. “Might I say, madam,” he spoke close to her ear once again. “If I were brave enough I would commission you a colonel in one of my regiments.” Zahra smiled even though every part of her felt like her skin was crawling. “You do know how to order men about.”

“Aye, she does that,” Dougal agreed. Zahra thwapped him on the arm playfully.

Thomas eyed Dougal once more. “Well, it’s been a delight meeting you, but I’m afraid the venison is losing its heat. I would ask you to join us, but as you can see—” He indicated the full table. “No room.” He clicked his teeth with his tongue. “Beastly sorry.”

“Ye can keep yer scraps,” Dougal spoke calmly. “They’re still serving good Scottish ale in the Taproom.” Dougal placed his hand gently on her shoulder, and Zahra covered his hand with hers. “I’ll be downstairs,” he told her and Zahra nodded. He then turned and made his way out of the dining room.

“How are we ever going to make peace with such an ill-mannered people?” Lord Thomas asked to no one in particular. It was rhetorical and as such no one answered, thankfully. Zahra took a deep breath, as she placed her napkin in her lap, then reached for her goblet to take a small sip. It was just one diplomatic dinner. Just one. She could do this. She was trained to do this. It was just like slipping into a familiar formfitting dress.

“So, my lord, if I’ve got my facts straight... you’re a sommelier, as well as a connoisseur, an army general, an English Lord, and a proper gentleman.” Thomas grinned at the flattery.

“I suppose that about sums me up, yes,” he said with a snooty chortle.

“If I may yet again be bold, my lord... my guess would be your superiors sent you out here in an effort to save some of the ladies back home for themselves?” She said in an intentionally flirtatious tone before she took a small sip from her cup. She wasn’t really drinking it, just giving the appearance she was.

Thomas pinched his face in joy, grinning hard at the obvious boost to his overinflated ego. “Ooh, I like her.”

Dinner was served, and Zahra had to admit after surviving on cold rations and dried biscuits for the
past month, it was nice to enjoy a warm, hot, filling meal. She couldn’t comment on the taste, but she was sure it was as delicious as it looked. She engaged Lord Thomas’s ego as often as she could, trying to fill the conversation more about him than herself.

For her part, Zahra kept to the same story she’d been telling since she got here. She had only been vacationing in Inverness while her father conducted business. On her way to a harvest festival, her party was set upon by bandits, and in fear of her life and her body in the Scottish wilderness she’d attempted to disguise herself as a man by cutting her hair. She left out her run in with Black Jack Randall, skipping ahead to the band of Scottish soldiers who had found her, rescued her, and kindly taken her in. In return for their kindness and hospitality, she had offered her services as a medic to Laird Colum in exchange for passage back to Inverness, and the MacKenzie’s help in reaching her father. In the process, however, over the course of the past six weeks she had fallen in love, and wished to marry.

“He is very well-educated in math and languages. He speaks several fluently, including Latin and French.” She gushed about Jamie, though she neglected to disclose his name if they didn't ask straight out. “He’s a real, honest gentleman, through and through, cares more about my honor than his own. He’s kind, warm, funny, chivalrous, witty, charming… He and Dougal but heads quite a bit, as you can imagine. I think you would like him if you met him, my Lord.”

“Well, tis a shame he could not have been the one to accompany you today, instead of Chief MacKenzie. Perhaps, we would have invited him to join us for supper.” Lord Thomas held up his goblet and snapped, waiting for the server to fill it. “Have you been able to reach your father?”

“Yes, of course,” Zahra said with an enthusiastic nod. She was lying, but the last thing she wanted was more questions about her non-existent merchant Lord father and his equally non-existent ship. “The MacKenzie’s have been very helpful in sending word to him for me. That was almost a month ago, I am sure the news has reached him by now and put his mind at ease.”

“What is the name of his ship?” Lieutenant Foster asked. “Perhaps we could spread word for you?”

“Oh, there's honestly no need.” She said with a grin. “I watched them dispatch the letter myself. I’m sure once we return to Leoch there will be word waiting for me.” She was smiling on the outside, but on the inside her heart was beating a tattoo against her ribcage.

“Of course, of course.” Lord Thomas agreed. “Leftanant Foster, how quickly could we get word to the fleet to be on the lookout for Mistress Zahra’s father and his ship?”

“It may take a few days, sir, but as we have the fastest, largest fleet in the world.” Jeremy turned to look at Zahra. “If he docks in any of our ports, Mistress, we’ll know it. Someone will find him and bring word for you.”

“You really don’t have to trouble yourselves, honest,” she tried to decline, but they weren’t listening. Men knew best.

“Nonsense, it’s no trouble at all,” Lord Thomas waved her concerns away.

“Well… how wonderful, then! Thank you.” She said with a bright grin. It felt like her heart was gonna leap out of her chest, and she felt nauseous, though to her credit she didn’t look like it. She was definitely good at playing this part. “I feel like celebrating!” She drained the last bit of her wine.

“Ah, we will join you!” One of the men declared as he got up to refill all their glasses. Zahra was very well aware she had yet to actually tell them her father’s name or the name of his ship, a fact that they hadn’t seemed to catch onto yet, and she hoped and prayed that maybe they would forget until
she was already gone. She smiled brightly as she thanked the man for refilling her glass.

“To family reunions, and your upcoming nuptials,” Lord Thomas raised his glass. “May they be blessed.”

Zahra was grinning brightly as she raised her glass to join him in the toast, then the door was jarringly pushed open, and the rabbiting of her heart increased tenfold as she saw who entered. Her blood ran cold, and the nausea in her gut became sickening.

“My lord, are you aware that at this very moment—” Randall interrupted rudely, not only with his abrasiveness but also his smell. He must have been on the road a long time

“Captain Randall, are we under attack, sir?” Lord Thomas interrupted him.

“We are not,” Randall shook his head.

“You’re putting the claret at risk,” Lord Thomas insisted, covering the cop of his glass.

Zahra used the distraction to slowly raise herself from her chair, with her glass, then she turned just as slowly to inspect the painting behind her as if she were but admiring the art. “This is lovely,” she whispered so only the gentleman who’d been pouring her wine would hear, as he’d given her a questioning look.

“I suggest you step outside and rid yourself of half a league’s worth of dust,” Lord Thomas ordered.

“By all means, we must protect the claret,” Randall spoke back, then turned to leave, only as he did, he caught sight of the woman standing admiring the artwork. Since Zahra had been without Fichu or Scarf, her upper back and part of her shoulder were still on display, as was the obvious roses that adorned her clavicle and part of her shoulder. Randal paused on his way out the door as his eyes caught on that tattoo and a memory flashed in his mind of an encounter by the river.

“For God’s sake Randall, I know you spend a great deal of time in the field, but stop staring as if she were Sunday dinner,” Lord Thomas rolled his eyes.

Zahra turned, not in Randall’s direction, but the other way, so the fall of her hair hid the side of her face from Randall’s view. “Hmm? I’m sorry, my lord, were you addressing me?”

Thomas shook his head, smiling. “No, of course not, madam.” Randall started walking backwards trying to get a clear view of the woman’s face, and Lord Thomas tracked the man carefully with his own eyes.

“Is this DaVinci?” Zahra asked of the painting.

“Yes, it is I believe.” Lord Thomas covered his claret again as Randall drew nearer. “A replica obviously, but still… Amazing how a bit of culture managed to make its way into these dismal lands.”

Before Randall could get a clear view of her face, she had turned back to look at the painting, and he grit his teeth. “It’s lovely,” she said.

Randall was still staring, and Thomas rolled his eyes with an exasperated sigh. “Captain Randall—” He said, drawing the man’s attention. “Allow me to present, Mistress Leeloo Quigley of New York.” Zahra swallowed hard, but then she donned the most beautiful smile as she turned in Randall’s direction. “Captain Jonathan Randall,” Lord Thomas finished the introductions.
Zahra tipped her glass towards him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Captain.”

“Charmed,” he stated curtly as he gazed into her eyes. Zahra knew, in that moment, he knew. She’d given him her name at the river, he’d clearly seen her face. It was in his eyes. He knew. Her smile, however, did not falter. She could play this part forever if she had to.

She turned away and took a sip of her wine, wincing slightly as Randall stepped out and beat the mud off of his boots against the door in the hallway. She was still playing the dainty female, so she covered her nose as if the smell was too great for her womanly senses. She took a few more steps away, admiring another painting. This one was a portrait of a young girl picking fruit.

“I trust I am sufficiently presentable,” Randall asked as he walked back into the room, arms raised.

“Yes, yes. Someone pour a glass for the good captain,” Lord Thomas said. The man declined with a wave of his hand. “Now if you’ll be so good as to explain your purpose for barging in here?”

Randall crossed his arms behind his back at the wrist. “My lord, at this very instant, Dougal MacKenzie, war chief of Clan MacKenzie is downstairs--” He turned to face his lordship. “--quaffing ale.”

Lord Thomas looked bored. “That is not news, Captain. It was he who brought Mistress Quigley to us.”

“Was it indeed?” Randall turned to look at her, and Zahra smiled prettily at him, then gave him a dainty wave of her fingers. “Hmm,” he huffed dryly.

“Do you propose to admonish me, sir?” Lord Thomas asked the captain. “Perhaps you’re of the opinion that a general must explain himself to a captain.”

Randall shook his head. “No, I meant no offense, sir. Though, now you mention it--a foreign woman and a Scottish war chief… I can’t for the life of me piece that one together.”

“Oh, it’s a fascinating tale, Captain.” He turned to look at Zahra, who smirked flirtatiously, and lowered her gaze coyly. “It’s full of robbery and murder… It’s unfortunate you missed it.”

Randall was staring at Zahra, who met his eyes right back, and she tilted her head at him, still that lovely womanly smile on her face. “If I ever write a memoir about it, Captain, I’ll make sure to send you a signed copy,” Zahra said with a smirk, and she tipped her glass in his direction one again.

“Mistress Quigley amongst the Savages,” Randall titled her non-existent book, making the men laugh.

“Well, I doubt Mistress Quigley would choose such a provocative title,” Lord Thomas argued against Randall’s suggestion.

“Yes, the lady claims she was well treated by her Scottish friends,” Jeremy stated, further disproving Randall’s use of the word savages. “She told me they’ve become a pseudo-family as it were. She’s even engaged to be married to one of them.”

“Is she now?” Randal harrumphed at her.

"Hopefully, she'll add some much needed sophistication and propriety to these people,” Lord Thomas suggested.

“Well, I wasn’t aware that the English and the Scottish could be friends,” Randall said as he leaned
forward against the table, gazing out the window. “I’m sure Private McGreavey would agree with me… if he were able.” Randall’s words made the entire table uncomfortable. One thing Zahra knew without needing to actually know him, was that Randall was very deliberate and careful with his words. A man like him thrived on control and being in control. There was not a single thought or word that escaped his mouth that he did not purposely intend. It made Zahra take extra care and caution to actively listen to not only what he was saying, but also what he wasn’t saying.

“Do not mention that sad subject,” Lord Thomas spoke reverently. “You’ll give Mistress Quigley the vapors.”

Clearly, Randall had a point he was trying to make, so Zahra was willing to play along… For now. “I have spent a great deal healing all manner of ailments, my lord. I do not easily swoon… So, please tell me, Captain. What happened to Private McGreavey?”

Randall stared directly at her as he spoke. “Two weeks ago he made the mistake of wandering away from patrol.” He spoke clearly, quickly, as if he’d rehearsed this tale many times. Again, every word out of his mouth was deliberate and concise. “We found him two days later, sitting, legs crossed, tied to a tree, his arms folded in his lap.” That was all he said, trying to make Zahra believe that was the end of it.

Zahra already knew in the brief moments she’d spent with him, that Randall was a sadist. He was building up this story in a deliberate way to entrap Zahra into some sort of false pretense so he could embarrass or shock her in the worst way. He’d carefully chosen the words that McGreavey would no longer be able to agree with him, which meant the private was either dead or otherwise incapable of speech. Obviously, that wasn’t the end of Randall’s story. “May I assume he’d either been shot in the head, or decapitated?”

Randall watched her for a moment. She’d ruined his punchline. “They’d taken his head and placed it in the poor bastard’s lap, madam.”

Zahra nodded, taking in a deep breath and exhaling slowly as her gaze dropped to her lap. She crossed herself and stayed silent a moment. Lord Thomas and the other gathered officers recognize her moment of prayer and so one by one they each crossed themselves as well. And bowed their heads with her. Randall just rolled his eyes. Zahra eventually took in a slow breath and lifted her head with tears in her eyes. “As I am certain you are all more than well aware, there are evils in this world that are beyond human understanding… These evils, however, do not exist in Scotland alone.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that, madam?” Randall taunted.

Zahra’s eyes fell to Randall and she sniffled, before bringing her napkin up to dab at her eyes. Randall inhaled deeply through his nose as he stood up straighter. She held her wine goblet in her lap, gazing into the liquid as she spoke with a wavering, emotional tone. “No more than two days ago while traveling with my Scottish companions, we came upon two highlanders crucified on a hill… My party attributed the actions to English soldiers.”

“If so, then it would be the result of English justice,” the fat bastard piped in.

Zahra turned her gaze on him. “They’d had their bellies violently sliced open, sir, before they’d been left to die. They would have existed in unspeakable agony for almost a whole day before finally succumbing to their wounds, or going into hypovolemic shock which would have drastically prolonged their suffering when their internal organs began to cease functioning one by one.” Every man at the table looked like they were going to be sick.

“Undoubtedly Traitors to a man,” Kiss-ass said.
Zahra sniffled again. “That is what the letters crudely carved into their chests would suggest… but no matter their crimes, I don't believe any man deserves to die in such a way. It's inhuman.” Her eyes drifted to Randall once more, who was staring at her intently.

“Well, you can be sure that Private McGreavey’s sentence was administered just as inhumanely,” Randall said as he made his way over to the window.

“As I said, Captain, my Lords, evil may exist in all men, not just the Scottish. Every side should be ashamed of their mutual depravities,” she watched as Randall gazed out a window.

“Dog me,” Fat bastard said again. “That’s a woman’s view for you, if ever I heard one. That is why I make it a point never to discuss politics with a lady.”

“I thought this was a topic on morality, sir, not politics,” Zahra said.

“And I’m forced to question whether the lady’s morality is any clearer than her politics,” Randall spoke ominously from the window, deliberately changing the subject, once more trying to ensnare her in an altogether different way.

“What are you implying, sir?” Lord Thomas asked.

Zahra beat Randall to the punch. "I believe what Captain Randall is unjustly trying to accuse me of, My Lord, is far too salacious, shameful, and slanderous for me to mention in polite company."

"Explain yourself, sir," Lord Thomas ordered angrily.

Yes, Jacky boy. Please explain yourself. Randall was a sadist and he was deliberately trying to torment and entrap her, to get an emotional rise out of her for maximum humiliation. It was how he got his jollies off. Only, poor Jacky boy had probably never met an opposite who knew every move in his game. She could already tell she had thrown him off by calling him out for his slight. He hadn't been expecting that.

She watched him lick his left bicuspid and sniff through his nose. "I am simply left to wonder, after all this time living with savages,” Randall began, staring Zahra down. “If Dougal MacKenzie has shared more than just bread and shelter with the lady. Perhaps, he has also shared his bed.”

"And I am left to wonder, sir," she said, her eyes watering once more on cue, and her voice wavered slightly from emotion. "Is it simply my gender that offends you so, to cause you to loose your venom on me in such a hurtful and despicable manner, or is there some slight I have unknowingly committed against you? If so I beg you please tell me and I will make amends?"

Her emotional display was definitely having a huge effect on Lord Thomas and the other officers who had grown affectionate to her over the last few hours. “Captain Randall, you are out of line, sir!” Lord Thomas scolded him angrily.

Zahra swallowed hard and lowered her gaze as if embarrassed. Randall was losing control of this situation and that did not sit well with him at all. “If I am wrong, my lord, I do apologize, but—what other reason would the lady have to choose these barbarians over her own people?” Randall continued to try and rile her, rile them. “These aggressors who wantonly shed English blood?”

"Obviously, Captain Randall, you know nothing of the power or the bond of love,” Lord Thomas met Zahra’s gaze. She knew the Lord was a romantic the moment she met him. ‘Dougal MacKenzie nor any of his company have spilled English blood, as far as I know. As the madam said, not all Scottish are barbarians. Dougal MacKenzie brought Mistress Quigley willingly into our midst. She has been nothing but forthcoming and honest with us, and I do not appreciate your baseless
accusations against this woman's character." Randall opened his mouth as if to speak again. "I do not wish to hear another word, Captain, unless it be an apology to Mistress Quigley for your despicable slander."

Yep, Randall had definitely lost control of this narrative. Sorry, Jacky boy. Zahra had been working this table with her wiles for the past several hours, and she wasn’t about to lose them so easily. Zahra gazed at Randall over the rim of her wine goblet, tears still threatening in her eyes, daring him to say something else, anything else, and watch her turn it in her favor. She could see the muscles working in his jaw, and watched him lick his lips, one of his tells that he was barely in control of his anger. His top was about to blow as it were. The last thing he wanted to do was apologize to this woman and admit he wasn't in control.

"We are waiting, Captain," Lord Thomas said.

"It's alright, my lord," Zahra responded. "I do not need Captain Randall to apologize in order to offer him my forgiveness."

"That is very magnanimous of you, Mistress," Lord Thomas said.

"In fact," she continued. "I do not blame a man in the Captain's position for his paranoia or suspicions. I mean look where we are?" She smiled softly, and several of the gathered officers including the Lord huffed dryly in amusement at her comment. "He has undoubtedly been out here in these wild highlands, far from the civility and propriety of England for a long time. Maybe too long? Bottom line is, it does not shock or offend me that some of his--gentlemanly sensibilities have begun to falter."

Randall looked about to burst. Just as he was about to speak, however, the dining room door suddenly burst open violently, cutting Randall off before he’d had the chance to begin, and breaking the tension of the room as a winded soldier ran in. “Sir, three enlisted men have been fired upon by persons unknown just outside of town.”

“Are these Scots rascals that bold to attack an armed British camp?” Lord Thomas asked rhetorically. Randall lowered his head. “My Lord, I know you’ve only recently arrived, but small ambushes are almost weekly occurrences.”

“Yes, thank you, Captain, I have read the reports.” Lord Thomas focused on the interrupting soldier. “Any casualties?” he asked.

“One dead, two wounded,” the soldier replied. “One of the men, sir, he’s in a bad way. He’s downstairs. We’ve sent for the surgeon but no one is sure of his whereabouts.”

“Show me,” Zahra said as she stood up out of her chair, then addressed the confused looks of the officers. “I told you I’m a trained healer.” She followed the soldier out of the room, and with it took her first real breath in hours. She knew without a doubt she had just earned herself a powerful enemy in Randall, but she couldn’t dwell on that right now. There was physicking to be done.

Downstairs in the taproom it was like a warzone. Men were crying in agony as they were laid out on wooden tables. When she got to the bottom floor landing, Dougal was there to greet her, taking her by the arms. “Zahra? Ye alright, lassie?”

“Can I tell you later?” she said.

“When I saw that bastard Randall go upstairs--”
“I know.” she cut him off. “I almost had a panic attack when I saw him, but it’s fine. I handled it. Lord Thomas was eating out of my hand. I’m fine. We’re fine... What’s happening here?”

“I’ll shed no tears over redcoat blood, but my men would never undertake such an action without my consent,” he promised.

“So it wasn’t us?” Zahra clarified. Dougal shook his head. “Good!”

“It’s Randall ye need to worry about,” he cautioned her.

“I know. He tried to accuse me of being a traitor and a whore, only not in that order. He’s a sadist and a control freak.” She stated. "Honestly at this point I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s the one who staged this attack himself to make the Scots look bad.” Dougal smirked at her. She really was on their side wasn’t she? “They’re gonna be looking for someone to blame, though.” She looked at Dougal cautiously.

"Without proof, they cannae hold me,” he assured her.

“Still, it would give me peace of mind if you got the boot out of dodge,” she hitched her thumb towards the exit. Dougal held her arm, looking into her eyes. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. I’ve gotten out of harrier situations than this. I can handle Randall.” She pulled off her gloves and woolen sleeve covers, before pushing them into the pockets of her dress.

He took her arms again. "Dinnae take him lightly, lass."

"I'm not taking any of this lightly, Dougal. It's only that compared to the psycho who enslaved me, Randall is a fucking puppy. Trust me... Now go!” She hoisted her skirt a bit and dove right into the fray. “Stand aside, and move this bench out of the way.” Dougal watched her for a moment before finally turning and taking his leave.

Zahra had never had to physically, on her own, perform a live amputation before. She’d only ever done it on the training cadavers at the academy. She was intimately familiar with making tourniquets to stop blood loss, but actual live amputation was something new, and she didn’t have any of her medical supplies. “This arm is gonna have to come off I’m afraid.” One of the soldiers offered his short sword which he’d just sharpened that morning. It was crude, but it would have to do. “I need something for a tourniquet.” Another man surrendered his wife’s scarf and Zahra tied it as tight around the man’s shoulder as physically possible until she saw the bloodletting slow and cease. “I need boiling water and clean cloth!”

An older man was suddenly pushing his way into the room. “I’m the surgeon here!"

“Hurry!” She called for the water and cloth.

“Do you have medical experience?” He asked her in monotone.

“Aye. Enough to know if we don’t remove this arm and pack the wound, he’s gonna die.” She looked up at the surgeon as he set out his equipment.

“You’re not going to faint when I begin to saw?” he asked.

Zahra took in a deep breath and shook her head. “I’ve stayed awake through worse.” Like her own back being flayed off. “Grab his knees,” she instructed to the uninjured soldiers. “You, take this shoulder.” She directed another soldier to hold the man down.

“Opium,” the soldier handed off the drug. “Down his throat if ya can.”
Zahra poured the liquid into his mouth slowly. “Hold on, soldier!”

The surgeon placed a wooden bit between the man’s teeth. “Bite son. Bite until yer teeth crack.”

The surgeon moved to get his saw, and Zahra helped hold the man down. “Hold him steady!” She called, and a moment later he started screaming as the surgeon began to saw his arm off. Zahra definitely had a stronger constitution than many men, but that saw had gotten to her. It had sounded too much like her own torture, the blade slicing through flesh, the squelching of blood, grinding of bones, the copper scent that filled her nose, the warm liquid coating her hands, even spraying into her face. It had brought back some awful, horrifying memories. Somehow, despite all that, she gratefully managed to stay awake for all of it, even helped pack and dress the wound afterwards. The man would live. She had even made it through two other bullet holes that needed the bullet removed before cleaning, sewing, and bandaging. The moment she was done, she found the nearest lavatory and immediately threw up Lord Thomas’s fancy dinner into the waterless ‘throne’.

She thoroughly cleaned her hands, her face, her neck. She pulled her gloves and woolen greaves out of her pockets and slowly made her way back upstairs. She wished to ask for leave to return to her fiance. After her mittens, she was pulling on her sleeves as when she entered the room. She found the soldiers were gone save for two. Captain Randall was enjoying a shave. When she saw who was left, Zahra started to turn to walk back out again, not feeling up to dealing with his shit.

“Nurse Quigley,” Randall taunted. “Are you back from saving lives?”

She exhaled heavily, and gripped the door handle weakly as she faced him. “I am. May I ask where’s Lord Thomas?”

“He’s off hunting rebels,” Randall answered. “Not that he’ll find any.” He huffed dryly. “Having seen him on a horse, he’ll be lucky to stay in the saddle.”

“Please, try not to speak, Captain,” his barber pleaded with him, the boy was obviously terrified of hurting the man, probably with good reason. “My barbering skills aren’t up to shaving a moving target.”

Zahra rolled her eyes and turned to leave, until she heard the boy gasp in fear. When she turned to look, she saw red against Randall’s cheek, meaning the boy had nicked him. “I’m sorry, Captain. On my life it was an accident.” The boy’s jitteriness made Zahra wonder in what ways had Randall tormented him to make him as jumpy as an abused dog.

“On your life,” Randall stated with barely contained anger. Zahra moved further into the room. She’d defend the boy if she had to. She locked gazes with Randall, until he held out his hand for the razor, and the boy handed it to him before he stood up. “Sit down,” he ordered and the young man did as he was told. “See a soldier needs a steady hand. Otherwise, he will never hit the target he aims at.”

Zahra had moved around the table, her towel over her shoulder, she was gripping onto the back of a chair not to far from them, prepared to intervene if she had to. Randall was suddenly forcing back the boys head, exposing his neck, and Zahra held her breath. “You control your nerves,” he said as he smoothly ran the blade up the boys neck, over his Adam’s apple. “Your nerves do not control you.” The boy was a hair’s breadth from pissing himself. When the blade cleared his chin, Randall grinned, and gave the boy a slap on the cheek. “My, my. Aren’t we a beardless boy?” he inhaled through his nose, and cleared his throat, then met Zahra’s gaze with a smile. The sick fuck was undoubtedly turned on by that. Zahra wouldn’t be surprised if he’d actually gotten off. She felt sick and disgusting just having been witness to it, even if it had been to make sure he didn’t hurt the boy.
“Take my things back to my lodgings,” he ordered and the boy could not have moved any quicker if he was on red bull. “And come back and see to it that we are not disturbed.”

“Yes, Captain,” the boy whispered, still trembling as he took the razor and bolted from the room. With him he’d taken Zahra’s chance to leave peacefully without having to engage with this asshole again.

“When do you expect Lord Thomas and the others may return?” she asked.

Randall pursed his lips and shook his head. “They didn’t say.”

“Then, if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll be going,” she nodded her head and turned to leave.

“Going where exactly?” he asked, making her stop in her tracks.

She paused, donned a smile, and turned back around. “I’d like to return to my camp before nightfall.”

“You mean the MacKenzie camp?” Randall clarified.

“Naturally,” she responded politely.

“Without an escort?” he queried as he picked up a bottle of Thomas’s claret.

“I wouldn’t--drink that,” she began to say.

Randall actually smiled at her as he moved around to open the window. “The road is far too dangerous for one as--delicate as yourself.” He’d said delicate but they both knew he didn’t think she was anything of the sort.

“I think I’ll take my chances,” she said as she watched him pour the wine out the window, then drop the bottle to shatter on the gravel below. He stared at her as he closed the window, then leaned back against it. This dude really had a flair for theatrics. Holy shit.

“Madam,” he started to say. “Ever since our first encounter I have been in a state of extreme discomfort.”

Her brow furrowed, and she crossed her arms over her chest. She was still perfectly comfortable playing this part. “Captain, if this is your way of apologizing for trying to call me a whore and a traitor in front of Lord Thomas...I told you I did not need it, but I will accept it anyway.”

Randall huffed dryly. “You’re clever I’ll give you that… But allow me to put your fears to rest.” He approached her slowly, and Zahra had to fight every instinct in her body telling her to back away. She was not afraid of him, would not give him the satisfaction. “I do wish to apologize,” he said as he came closer. “For that awful day in the woods… The mere memory of it leaves me shamed.” His gaze dropped to her neck where she sported an old scar, and he reached out as if to touch her.

Her jaw muscles worked as she clenched and unclenched her teeth. This was another one of his games. He was laying a trap, waiting for her to walk into it. She shrugged away from his hand before he could touch her and took a step back. “I’m sorry, Captain. I don’t know what poor soul you have me confused with but I’m not her… This scar?” She felt her neck where he’d been staring and reaching for. “I got that on a boar hunt with the MacKenzies almost a month ago. I can’t offer you absolution as I’m not the one you may have wronged.”

He stared her down for a long time, then smiled and backed away to give her space. “Please, don’t
misunderstand. I am not a casual person with women. I look forward to the opportunity to reveal my true nature to you.” Zahra already saw your true nature buddy, no mystical revelations required. “And I can only hope that honesty will be met with honesty.”

“So,” she squinted, thinking. “If I’m interpreting that correctly, you wish to interrogate me, is that right?” Yeah, so be prepared to have every ounce of your precious patience tested here buddy. Zahra could easily be the sort of captive that most captors wished to be rid of by the end of the day.

Randall huffed out his nose, then indicated a chair for her to sit in, even so much as pulling it out for her. Zahra deliberately avoided that chair and chose instead to take the oversized one at the head of the table where she had assumed he had planned to sit. He watched her as he moved to take his own seat, then cleared his throat. When he didn’t seem to be forthcoming with the questions, she started picking her nails, using her towel to try to get the bloodstains out of her cuticles.

“Let us begin with you telling me who you are?” he asked casually.

“Well, you see that, my dear Captain, is what we call a loaded question,” Zahra responded brattily. “Can you be more specific, please?”

“Why are you here in Scotland?” he clarified.

“K, that ones easy,” she leaned forward and took a deep breath as if she was about to launch into some detailed story. “I was on vacation... Next question?” She winked at him and clicked her teeth.

“Vacation?” he asked.

“Mnhmm,” she nodded enthusiastically. “You know, rest and relaxation, shooting the breeze, taking a load off, etcetera, etcetera, so on and so forth.”

“I believe we pledged honesty, madam,” Randall declared.

“You think I’m lying about being on vacation? Well I’m not. I was staying at an inn in Inverness.” She giggled. “Funny. Inn in Inverness, try saying that ten times fast. Inn in Inverness, Inn in Inverness, Inn in Inverness, Inn in Inverness, Inn in Inverness, Inn in Inverness. Inn in Inininver--See I can’t.”

Randall cleared his throat. “Madam--”

“Right, so I was staying in an Inn hosted by this lovely lady named Mistress Bard.” Madam...

“Sweetest thing. Bakes a mean strawberry tart.”

Randall cleared his throat again.

“Speaking of strawberries, oh man, I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many beautiful fresh fruits and vegetables in all my life. Apparently, I was there right in the middle of their harvest celebration.” Madam!

“The Sam-wine something or other I can’t remember the exact name of it.” She giggled again. “That’s a funny word, Sam-wine. I wonder if they actually make wine?” Madam.

“Get some Wine from Samhain? Get some Samhain Wine? They need to coin that, super catchy! They’d make a killing on merch.”

Randall suddenly slammed his palm on the surface of the table, and Zahra jumped as if he’d scared the dickens out of her. He really hadn’t but she was acting a part. “Jeepers!” she cried as she gripped at her chest. “Scared me to death.” Her brow furrowed in concern. ”Is your hand ok?” Awww, did she break your little control bubble, Jacky boy?
Randall stretched his neck, then cleared his throat. “Do you think you’re being clever?”

“No. You asked me a question, and I was trying to answer it until you rudely interrupted me with all your fist-slamming antics. Have you ever given thought into anger-management courses, Captain?”

She was derailing the subject again and Randall was growing more impatient by the second. He’d never met someone so unpredictable. She was testing his very hard earned control and he didn’t like it. “Allow me to enlighten you on what is going to happen here,” he said.

“Please, do!” She said and leaned forward, propping her chin on her fists, as if waiting for her favorite uncle to tell her a fairy tale.

“I found you wandering the countryside, dressed in men’s clothing—”

“Now who’s lying?” she interrupted him, leaning back in her chair.

“I know it was you, Madam. You may stop the charade.”

“I’m telling you, Captain, you have the wrong—” he slammed his hand on the table once more, making her jump again which she deliberately over embellished.

“I recognize the markings on your skin.”

“What this?” She indicated the rose on her chest. “Clearly you’ve never been to New York, or the Orient. I’m not the only girl with a tattoo like this.”

“I know it was you, and—” he spoke forcefully.

“But it wasn’t!” She declared just as strongly, cutting him off. “Look, Captain. Whatever guilt you have over this girl must run deep. I don’t know if maybe you killed her, or raped her or worse, it’s not my place to judge, but I am not that girl!” Gaslighting 101. She could write a book about it. “It’s ok, you know? I’ve seen a lot of soldiers suffer mental anguish in the field. Distorting events, shaping memories to fit their own narratives to help them cope with the things they’ve done. I get it. I do.”

Randall sniffed, and swiped at his nose, then he calmly got up, grabbed a sharpening knife and a piece of kohl out of his jacket pocket. He sharpened the kohl then moved to sit a few chairs away from her. He folded a napkin into a large square, then gazed at her a long time, before starting to draw on its surface. Was he drawing her fucking portrait? This asshole really did have a flare for dramatics. “What is your name?” he asked.

“She same as it’s always been. Leeloo Quigley,” she stated calmly. “Well, I guess if we’re being very specific, it’s Leilani Quigley, after my mother. Leeloo was what she used to call me. What are you drawing?” She asked, feigning interest.

He remained silent as he finished his drawing. When he was done he sat back, and brushed off the crumbs. “Please,” he gestured at the napkin. “I would like to know your opinion.”

She sighed and stood up, arms crossed, and made her way over to look. Randall stood, and as she approached he added one last touch, before standing back. It was a crude sketch that had managed to really capture her likeness. Considering it was done in mere moments and on a cloth napkin, she’d say it was actually pretty good. A talent wasted on an evil bastard like him. “So you’re an artist? That’s neat.”

“You think so? I’m glad.” He chuckled. “I think I shall call it—Beautiful Lies.”
Zahra rolled her eyes and turned away. “Still, with this, Captain? What is it with you men and believing the worst of a woman just because she doesn’t kowtow and obey your every whim? I am not who you think I am, Captain!”

“Perhaps, not, but you are more than what you claim.” Oh man, did that mean her gaslighting maybe actually worked? “You wish to find your father, you wish to return to the MacKenzies, very well.” There was most definitely a catch here and she looked at him skeptically. “I know that Dougal MacKenzie is raising funds for the Jacobite cause.”

“Forgive me, Captain, I’m just a Colonial Merchant’s daughter who’s spent a lot of time at sea.” She said with a furrowed brow. "As such, I am admittedly behind on a lot of English news... What is a Jacobite?"

Randall clenched his teeth and continued on. “I merely lack the necessary proof to take him into custody.”

“No, but seriously. Is their leader a guy named Jacob or something?” She persisted as well. "Or maybe you can only be in their party if your named Jacob?"

“You will furnish me with that proof,” he continued, not taking the bait.

“Firstly, Captain, I would love to help you but you honestly gotta help me here first and tell me what a Jacobite is, ‘cause--I’m fishing in the dark here.” She sounded and looked so genuine, like she honestly didn't know.

Randall inhaled deeply and exhaled through his nose, then moved to walk around the table. “Do not stand there and pretend that you have lived among the MacKenzies these past months, been their healer, trothed yourself to one of their men, and not heard them voice support for that abominable failure James and his witless offspring Charles.”

She looked utterly helpless and clueless, and she fish-mouthed a little before shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you, Captain. I’m responsible for mending cuts, scrapes. Bloody knuckles, dislocated shoulders. Occasionally, they let me cook. It’s not like Dougal or the others are discussing strategies and politics with me. Nor would I expect them to, it's not my place.” She shrugged again.

“It would be if you were sympathetic to his cause,” Randall stated.

“I don’t even understand what the cause is!” She stated clearly as if talking to an idiot. "How could I be sympathetic to something I've never heard of before?"

“Have you seen any of your Scottish companions attempting to raise funds for the rebellion?”

“No!” She stated firmly and without hesitation.

“You’ve not heard a single MacKenzie speak Jacobite treason?”

“No, Captain! Jesus. Is there an echo in here? No.” She inhaled and exhaled dramatically. “Even if there were some sort of treacherous conspiracy, it’s not like I’d know it anyway. I don’t speak a lick of Gaelic which is pretty much all they say when I’m around.”

“Madam, I would not believe you,” he said as he stared at her intensely once more. “if you told me night is dark and day is bright.”

She took in a deep breath and rubbed her face with her hands. “This is getting us nowhere!”
“Then start telling me the truth,” he ordered.

“I am!” She fired back, then tossed her arms up in frustration. She plopped herself down in a chair and put her face in her hands.

She heard bootsteps come around the table and approached her chair. “You will not leave this room until I am satisfied that you are as innocent as you—” There was an uncharacteristic pause in his sentence. “—claim to be?” She felt him pull at the fabric of the back of her dress and she immediately shot to her feet turning her back away from him. He hadn’t gotten an actual look.

“Either you can cooperate with me, or I shall be forced to use methods less pleasant than talk,” he stated calmly.

“This was supposed to be pleasant? Forgive me, Captain, I don’t know what conversation you have been a part of, but—” Zahra yelped when Randal suddenly had her by the hair, shoving her back into a seat, and pulling her head back painfully.

“You test my patience, madam.” He spat at her. “Such a thing is unwise.”

She started laughing. “Never said I was smart.” Randall growled, pulled her from her chair by her hair, then slammed her up against the wall, pinning her there with his own weight. She was still laughing. “Whatcha gonna do, Jacky boy?” She taunted. “You gonna rape me? Like you did to that girl in the woods? Is that it? Is that your fantasy?” He pulled her away from the wall and punched her square in the jaw, which sent her down. She whipped her head and her hair around as turned to look at him. “Was that good for you?” She taunted as she flashed him a wicked, bloody grin before turning and spitting on the floor. In the next moment, she’d barely managed to clench her stomach muscles in anticipation for the impressively hard kick Randall suddenly aimed at her gut. She definitely felt a rib or two crack.

Zahra groaned in pain, collapsing to the ground winded. When she spoke her voice was hoarse and strangled from having all the air forcefully knocked from her lungs. “Ok... could’ve done without the pointed toe boots... Just saying.”

He suddenly pulled on her hair again, forcefully stretching her head back. “I dwell in Darkness, madam, and Darkness is where I belong. You will get no sympathy from me... I will get the truth out of you.”

Zahra started wheezelaughing. “Can you even fucking hear yourself? ‘I dwell in Darkness, madam,’” She mimicked him insultingly and he shoved her to the ground. She was still wheezelaughing and it was sucking all of his enjoyment out of this entire thing.

“Corporal Hawkins?” Randall called his valet who opened the door and came in, freezing at what he saw. “Corporal have you ever kicked a woman?”

“Oh sure. Call in the cavalry just when it was getting to the good part.” It was probably not good to poke the bear but this was honestly like a typical Saturday night for her back in the 23rd. Zahra thrived in the Starfleet MMA amateur circuit. Only difference here she wasn’t actively fighting back. Last thing she wanted was to be sent to the gallows for assaulting an officer.

“Sir!” Hawkins looked positively scandalized.

“It’s very freeing.” Randall said as he kicked her once more, causing her to groan and cough more. “Come.”

Zahra grinned up at Hawkins, wheezing out another taunt. “Did you know--he dwells in darkness?”
“Kick her,” Randall ordered. Hawkins looked even more scandalized and terrified. “Kick her!” Randall ordered again. The boy tapped her with his boot. “I said kick her, milksop.” The boy looked hesitant and Randall screamed at him. “Kick her!”

The boy brought back his boot and kicked her as hard as he could, which made her cough all the air from her lungs yet again. “That was… good one…” she exhaled out on a strangled wheeze.

“You see, they’re so—” Randall inhaled through his nose and smoothed back his hair. “—soft.”

Randall walked away and Zahra met the boys frightened eyes. “It’s ok,” she whispered to him, with a nod of her head. “It’s ok.”

“Sorry,” the boy mouthed to her. Just as he was about to kick her again, suddenly the door burst open with a loud bang and Dougal stormed in.

“I don’t recall requesting your presence,” Randall stated calmly as he watched Dougal move around the table.

The frightened boy couldn’t back up quick enough away from the highlander as Dougal approached. “Not his fault,” Zahra rasped out as Dougal crouched to lift her.

“Up ye come, lassie,” he said as he lifted her onto her feet. “Ye’re done here.”

“I’m alright,” she rasped out again. She was coughing, and wheezing, and gripping her middle, but she managed to stand on her feet just as two riflemen entered the room.

“Hold!” they said.

“I dinnae come here to fight,” Dougal declared. “You tell yer wee laddies here to step aside… Before I lose my temper.”

“You have no right to that woman,” Randall argued. “Not while she’s being questioned by a British Officer.”

“She is a guest of Clan MacKenzie,” Dougal put his arm around her, and she gratefully leaned into him for support.

“She is an English subject first,” Randall argued further.

“And she was brought here for fear she was being held prisoner by my brother.” Dougal was pretty diplomatic himself it seemed. Go figure. “Now, she will have assured ye that that is not the case, and by right, must be returned to me for protection.”

“I’m afraid further questions have arisen,” Randall did not like losing control. Especially not of this woman.

“Well,” Dougal glanced at Randall and the other men in the room. “Ye won’t be asking them on MacKenzie land. Not unless ye want to start a war here, on this day.” Zahra glided her tongue over her teeth, then turned and spit another mouthful of blood onto the carpet.

Randall’s controlled facade was back in place and he huffed dryly in amusement. “I suppose we’re done for the day, but be sure to deliver her to Fort William by sundown Saturday.” Dougal wrapped his arm about her, and Zahra leaned into him weakly. Saturday was only two days away. “If she is not present at the appointed time, you will be accused of harboring a fugitive from English law, and you’ll be hunted down and punished, even unto death… Warchief or not.” Randall turned to the
Dougal held onto her to help support her as they slowly made their way around the table and out of the room. “I look forward to our next meeting, Mistress Quigley.”

“I think you mean next beating?” She quipped back with a bloody grin. She couldn’t help herself she had to get in the last word.

Once they were at their horses, Dougal started to fuss over her and she shoved his hands away as she reached for Brimstone’s reigns “I’m fine, Dougal,” she wheezed out a cough and struggled to pull herself up, and was forced to accept Dougal’s help. She was pretty sure she had a fractured rib, she was breathing ok so she knew it hadn’t punctured her lungs thank god. “I just want to get the hell away from here.” Once she was situated on her horse, he quickly got onto his and the two were galloping away at a steady speed shortly after.

This was the hardest ride she’d ever been on, not just because the road was bumpy and hard, nor was it even because each trot of her horse aggravated her injuries. No this was the hardest ride so far because every fiber of her being just wanted to break down. Black Jack Randal was a sadistic sociopathic psycho and it had taken every single ounce of her training, willpower, and self control to get through that meeting. She’d had to use tactics she’d never thought she’d need again. She’d had to bring herself to a dark place to survive Randall’s darkness and it had been like reliving Jargen's abuse all over again, only slightly more mild.

When they finally came to a merciful stop, Zahra did not recognize the place. “Dougal… What are we doing here?” This wasn’t camp. No one was here waiting for them.

“There’s a fresh spring nearby and I thought you could use it,” he stated as he walked past what looked like a headstone.

“You read my mind,” she declared as she weakly followed after him, taking each step carefully, and even needing his hand to help her down into a craig. There was a beautiful Eden like water spring at the bottom. Zahra watched him crouch and take a few fistfuls. “Of all the springs in the world, you had to bring me to the one that required a hike.” She stated with a smirk, before she crouched, groaning in pain from the strain the position put on her ribs. She ended up moving to her knees instead which was less painful, then she leaned over the water, bracing her hand on the rocks as she cupped a handful to her mouth. She swizzled the water to clean her mouth, then spit it back in the water. She repeated the same action a few more times, until she was sure she could no longer taste copper. Only then did she finally take a few handfuls to drink.

While she was drinking she heard the sound of metal being drawn. “Are you a spy for the English or the French?” Dougal asked a moment later, and when she faced him she was not surprised to see him holding his hand behind his back as if she didn’t know he’d drawn his blade.

She looked up at the heavens, blinking back tears. She had refused so many times to cry in front of him but it had been a miserable day and her emotional control had already been tested beyond her normal limits. “No, Dougal… I’m not anybody’s spy.” Despite her best efforts, a few tears managed to slip down her face. “I’m just a girl who got lost, and fell in love with a man, his land, his kin… I’m tired, Dougal… I’m so tired… I just want to go home and have Jamie hold me for a while.” She turned to look at him, and swiped the tears from her face. “Please, just… can we please go home?”

He watched her for a moment. “Aye,” he said as he flipped his blade around and put it back in its sheath. “We're done.”

She sniffled and swiped at her nose and eyes with her gloves. “You really think you could have
“I wouldnae liked it,” he said truthfully. “Ye’re a handsome woman, but if you proved false I would have had no choice. But… I ken now ye’re telling the truth.”

“And this time was different from the dozen other times I tried to tell you, how?” she asked.

He extended his arm at the spring. “Saint Ninian’s spring... Some folk call it the liar’s spring. Smells like the fumes o’ hell itself, ye’re lucky ye cannae smell it. They say if you drink from that and prove untrue, it’ll burn yer gizzard out.”

“A magic spring?” she asked skeptically. Dougal nodded. “And you’re just bringing me here now, because?” she said with a soft smirk. “You realize how much drama and fighting could have been avoided if you’d just brought me here six weeks ago?” Dougal chuckled softly, and Zahra crossed her arms over her chest as she looked at the water. “Pity we can’t use this on Randall. He undoubtedly hates all this superstitious stuff.”

“Aye,” he said. “Well, ye don’t need to see him again.”

Zahra took in a deep breath, wincing and reaching for her ribs when that hurt. She wouldn’t let Dougal or any of the others suffer because of her. “I can put a sleeping draught in everyone’s food and leave in the night. None of the men have to know, you can tell Randall I drugged you and fled in the night.”

Dougal smirked and shook his head. “Nae, Lassie. What I have in mind is somethin’ I think both you and young Jamie have been waitin’ for.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Dougal nodded. “An English officer cannot compel a Scottish person, unless there is proof a crime has been committed, and even so, cannot force a Scottish subject from clan lands without permission from the Laird concerned.”

“I see Ned’s rubbing off on you,” she said with a smirk.

“Aye. I thought things might eventually come to this if the English ever got involved, to keep you with us. Ye see I can only legally refuse to hand ye back to Randall if I change ye from an English citizen, to a Scot.”

Which meant marriage. Zahra grinned and moved in to give Dougal a hug, mindful of her ribs. “Thank you, Dougal.”

“Dinnae thank me yet, lass,” he said as he gave her a familial pat on the back. “We still have to pull a wedding off somehow before Saturday night.”

“Yeah… but I meant for coming to get me,” she clarified. “I was fully prepared to take the full brunt of Randall’s abuse, even be his prisoner and all that, but--well let’s just say I’m much happier with this outcome.”

“Auch.” Dougal shook his head, wrapped his arms around her shoulder and led her back towards the way they came in. “Jamie would’ve never forgiven me if I’d left ye in the hands o’ that mad bastard.”

“No doubts he would then try to come to my rescue and get himself killed, and then where would we
be?” They chatted some more as they hiked back out of the spring and got on their horses to make the final push back to camp.

Jamie had been a pacing, nervous wreck from the moment Dougal had returned to get his horse and told them what happened by the river; that he and Zahra were being escorted to Brockton Inn. Dougal’s orders had been strict and clear, stay put and guard the camp and cargo. Every fiber in Jamie's being had wanted to go after them but Murtagh had basically forbid him from going. The older man had managed to talk, and at one point had actually knocked some sense into him. They needed to trust Dougal.

Once the sound of hoof beats could be heard, Jamie leapt up from his seat by the fire and was racing to meet the riders. Once Zahra saw him, she breathed out his name, and tears stung her eyes as huge relief washed over her. She pulled Brimstone to a stop, gripped her arm against her middle, and happily let Jamie help her down as she slipped into his arms with a soft groan. Yep definitely a fractured rib or two.

The man worried frantically over the cuts and bruises on her face, the split in her lip, the way she was gripping at her side. “I’m alright,” she tried to comfort him. “I’ll be alright.”

Jamie glared at Dougal. “What the bloody hell happened?”

“It was Randall,” Zahra said softly and Jamie’s eyes suddenly met hers, softening some, but she could see the anger rolling like thunderclouds in his impossibly blue eyes. Jamie then lifted his head to look at Dougal and the man nodded.

“He’s demanded we hand her over at Fort William by sundown Saturday,” Dougal explained as he moved closer and placed a hand on Jamie’s shoulder. “We cannæ wait til we get back to Leoch lad,” he spoke quietly. “She needs to be a legalized Scot before Saturday.”

Jamie looked at his uncle, gave the man a nod in understanding, then turned back to look at Zahra. He brushed his thumb over the angry looking bruise on her cheek. “What are we waiting for?” Jamie smiled and gently pressed a kiss to her lips, mindful of the split. “Let’s plan a wedding!” He heard a few of the men make whooping sounds of celebration. Zahra sighed wistfully as she wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder. This was really happening... The circumstances might not be ideal, but they’d wanted this since back before the gathering… She was really getting married... Laurie and Jim would have a cow.
Traditions

Chapter Summary

Zahra does some research into Scottish wedding traditions in an attempt to please and impress her husband to be.

Oh, and Jamie surprises her with a few traditions of his own.

Then there's the actual wedding...

Chapter Notes

So, ya know... This chapter is pretty much entirely just fluff. Fluffy fluff fluff!

As always, love your comments, kudos, and recs. Enjoy!

While Ned drafted up a complete Marriage contract, Jamie and Zahra had found a secluded spot by some large boulders where Jamie was helping her tend to her wounds. He was helping clean the split on her lip with some alcohol. “Some bride I’m gonna make with my face all jacked up like this,” she tried to joke as he cleaned her lip.

“Just a little extra color,” he teased back, bringing his hand up to touch her cheek, gently brushing his thumb over the angry bruise there. “Doesnae subtract from yer beauty at all,” Jamie said sincerely.

“Liar,” she said softly.

He smirked crookedly, brow furrowing in the center. “You doubt my sincerity?” he asked, sounding hurt.

She took in a slow breath, brows knitting together from the pain in her ribs. “You haven’t--looked me in the eyes for more than a second or two since I got back... Hate to say it but if a few bruises turns you off now, you’re never gonna wanna see me naked.”

“Tha’s not--” he exhaled out his nose. Jamie knew all about her scars and brands and things and still his greatest desire was to see her completely bare before him.

“What is it then?” she asked gently.

Jamie exhaled out his nose, then looked up to meet her eyes, and she was arrested by their pure blueness. “All I’ve wanted to do since you said his name is track the bastard down and murder him in the most agonizing way possible.” His jaw muscles worked as he clenched his teeth, trying to bite back his anger. He held her cheek, brushed his thumb over her split lip. “Every time I see how badly he hurt you I feel this--burning anger all over again and I’m trying--”

“Hey!” She said, reaching up to hold his face in her hands. “You wanna know why he hurt me this bad?”
“Cause he’s a psychotic bastard,” Jamie answered unapologetically and she could feel his jaw clenching beneath her hands.

“Well, there’s that, but--” She inhaled, smirking softly. “I broke him, Jamie.” Jamie’s brow knitted together, not understanding. “Not physically or anything, but up here.” She tapped the side of her head. "You have to realize I was physically, mentally, and emotionally terrorized for fifteen years by a man who was even more psychotic than Randall. I know every tactic, every move, every game in his arsenal. A man like him thrives on power, control, manipulation. Power over others. Control over everything. manipulating any given person or situation to serve his whims... He gets off on inflicting pain and humiliation in every form. Humiliation and manipulation are how he imposes his control. I watched as he tried to play me today, tried to humiliate and manipulate me, serve me up to his superiors on a platter, but I was one step ahead of him... I turned his own superior officer against him.” She smirked, huffing dryly at herself in amusement.

She held Jamie’s face in her hands, making him look at her. “I saw the moment he broke, Jamie, I wish you could have seen it, too… I didn’t have to take his abuse, but I laughed at him while he did it. I could have easily killed him right then and there if I wanted to. I had your dagger in my breast.” She lifted his hand to press against her sternum where his sgian-dubh rested between her breasts. “But then I never would have been able to come back to you, and that--that would have been worse than a thousand beatings.”

Jamie had tears in his eyes when he gazed longingly into hers. Those strikingly blue eyes then roamed slowly over the bruise on her cheek, the split in her lip, then back to her eyes. “You amaze me, Leeloo. With yer cunning, yer bravery, and yer strength.” Zahra smiled a bit bashfully, then winced slightly as it pulled at her lip. Jamie chuckled softly and held her face as he leaned in to kiss her.

Zahra moved into him then, gripping at the material of his waistcoat as she deepened the kiss, needing more, needing Jamie to drive the last vestiges of her encounter with Randall away. Only when he backed her up against the boulder behind them, she winced and broke her mouth away as she involuntarily groaned out in pain from the pressure on her ribs.

Jamie held his hands out to the side and leaned back to give her space. “I’m sorry,” he said guiltily.

Zahra groaned softly and lifted her hand to touch her side and she shook her head. “Not your fault.”

Jamie looked to where her hand was holding her side. “Let me see,” he urged.

Zahra shook her head. “It’s just a bruised rib or two. No big deal.”

“Leeloo,” he insisted with a concerned look.

“There’s nothing you, or I, or anyone can do Jamie,” she admitted tiredly. “You can’t set or mend a broken rib.”

“Broken?” He asked, concern growing. “Ye said it was bruised.”

“Bruised. Broken.” She waved her hand in the air as if it didn’t matter, as if she could wave away his concern. “Either way, there’s nothing that can be done but wrap it and let it heal.” She gripped at his vest again, tugging gently. “Honestly, this corset is probably the only thing helping right now.” He gazed at her, still concerned. Held her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. “I’ll be alright. If I need your help I’ll ask for it, remember?”

Trust her. He did. He trusted if it was more serious she would tell him. “Yer right. I’m sorry.”
“Besides, you’ll get the pleasure of unwrapping me and getting as long a look as you want on our wedding night,” she reminded him with a soft, sultry smirk.

“Aye, that’s right.” Jamie gave her a wide, boyish grin, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders as he moved in for a gentle kiss. Though, with bruised or broken ribs, all the passionate fucking he’d promised her would probably have to wait. Didn’t matter. He was positive it was going to be amazing regardless.

Rupert and Angus eventually interrupted their canoodling, poking fun at them for being too impatient to wait for their wedding night now. They were being summoned because Ned had apparently finished drawing up their Contract of Marriage and they were eager to get on the road. The men had already broken camp while Zahra and Dougal were otherwise detained. They hadn't planned to set out for the next village until the following morning but they couldn't wait now. They were going to be forced to travel through the night.

They quickly set out on the road, and Zahra used the last vestiges of sunlight to thoroughly look over the contract Ned had written up. She made sure to read and examine every word. When she was satisfied, she passed it to Jamie to read as well. It was a pretty standard contract. Nowhere in it did it say anything like Zahra would have to surrender all will and control to Jamie or anything like that. It was a solid marriage contract, fair to both parties. Zahra was happy to agree to it, no questions asked. After she passed it off to Jamie, she focused on trying not to pass out on her horse from the hard ride to the inn that was soon lit solely by the moon and their scent lantern light.

They reached the village early the next morning, all of them weary from the road. It was now Friday morning. Zahra was due to be delivered to Fort William tomorrow.

They stabled their horses near the inn, then gathered around in the stable as Ned explained to them their next steps. “We do not have much time,” Ned began. “Captain Randall is expecting Mistress Zahra to be delivered to him tomorrow.” Zahra tucked herself against Jamie’s side and he stopped petting Donas to wrap his arm around her shoulders and placed a kiss on her hair. “Now, we are all about to embark on a boat built entirely of paper.” He tapped his portfolio. “The letter of the law is the only thing that can keep Zahra out of Randall’s hands, and so if it is to work, then we have to follow it to the letter.” He continued tapping the folio holding the contract. “The marriage must be consummated right away.”

“Dinnae think there’ll be any problems there,” Angus ribbed the couple, wagging his eyebrows suggestively, causing them all to chuckle at the joke. None of them knew about Zahra's broken ribs except maybe Dougal and Jamie.

“Yes, of course,” Ned continued unabated. “Witnesses must swear that they were present in the building, if not in the room itself.”

“No, Angus, that doesn’t mean you get to watch,” Zahra declared, anticipating what Angus had just been opening his mouth to say. Angus clicked his tongue against his teeth in disappointment.

“Ye didn’t say I couldn’t, though,” Rupert pointed out, which caused Zahra to roll her eyes and they all got another laugh. “Does that mean I can?”

“No!” Both Jamie and Zahra said at the same time, but then Ned was clearing his throat again.

“There cannae be any secret agreements between ya, now.” Dougal looked between the both of them. “No sayin’ ye have when ye have not, ye ken?” Dougal was pointedly looking at Zahra, knowing she wasn’t in the best physical condition at the moment.
“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Like what?” Dougal asked back.

“Like consummating with Jamie hasn’t been at the forefront of my thoughts for going on like, six weeks now?” It was the least crude way she could think of to say that she’d been dreaming of shagging Jamie’s brains out since they met. Jamie blushed a little, chuckling softly along with Murtagh, Rupert, Angus, and Willie. Ned even got a little chortle out of it but he quickly earned his throat and schooled his features. Zahra had basically just admitted that she had wanted Jamie since the beginning and that was a hefty boost to his ego… and an unintentional kick to Dougal’s.

“Very well then,” Dougal nodded. “I just--I know ye took a few hard blows at the hands o’ Randall,” his eyes briefly gazed down to where she was cradling her side, before lifting back to her face. “Not only did ye manage to keep silent, lass, but I heard ye laughin’ at the bastard, which is a fair sight more ‘an I’d expect of any ordinary woman.”

“Well, I think we’re all aware by now how extraordinary Mistress Zahra is,” Ned commented idly from the side. Zahra smiled at him graciously and the man nodded. Apparently, whatever had caused his stiffness towards her yesterday was gone.

“You both know Randall…” Dougal said as he lifted a hand to of each of their shoulders. Zahra assumed this was some sort of weird pre-wedding pep talk. “You know what he’s capable of. We cannæ let Zahra fall into his hands again.” They all three shared an intimate, sort of knowing gaze between them.

“I think what Dougal is trying to say is that there’s no backin’ down from this now,” Ned clarified imploringly. “This is our last resort.”

What Zahra wasn’t fully understanding was why Dougal and Ned were acting like this might be something Zahra didn’t want. She raised her hand as if to ask the teacher to speak. “Just so we’re clear… I want this. You guys aren’t like--forcing me into something I don’t want here, so you can please stop acting like you are… I am all aboard this boat made of paper.” She smirked at Ned when she referenced his statement from earlier.

“Aye,” Jamie agreed, moving to wrap his arms around her shoulders, giving her arm a gentle rub. “I, on the other hand, have a couple conditions.” Jamie suddenly had seven pairs of eyes staring at him as if he’d grown another head.

“You do?” Zahra asked, brows knitted together in concern.

Jamie rubbed her shoulder comfortingly as his lips twisted up in a sly smirk. “Aye.”

“Auch, Christ. It’d be easier just to kill the both o’ ye,” Dougal whispered exasperatedly, rolling his eyes as he gazed towards the heavens.

“Aye. But much harder to explain,” Jamie said with a boyish smirk.

Dougal crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall, crossing his ankles. “Alright, lad. Out with it.” Zahra looked at him, equally curious about these conditions.

“First,” he started. “I want us to be married properly… in a church… before a priest.” Dougal sighed and scrubbed his hands over his eyes, then motioned with his hand for Jamie to continue. Jamie looked at Zahra, his smirk turning into that full, adoring, boyishly handsome grin. “The other two, I wish to be a surprise.”
Zahra lifted her brow, and asked, “You mean surprise for me?” Jamie nodded, and Dougal rolled his eyes. “Good surprises?”

Jamie smirked and did this sort of half shrug half nod gesture, “I hope ye’ll think so.”

She raised a single brow, assessing him for a moment. If he were any other man she might be concerned, but this was Jamie. She trusted him. “Very well. I guess I can—go order a bath or something.” She hadn’t had one in a couple days and with the way her injuries were bothering her it was gonna take a while for her to do so anyway.

“The landlady, Mrs. Baird’ll help ye,” Murtagh informed her.

“Thanks, Murtagh,” she responded before looking back at Jamie. She was obviously reluctant to leave him. Look, maybe she wasn’t as cool and confident as she was letting on, ok? Because honestly the encounter with Randall was still rattling around in her insides, so she was nervous to leave Jamie because he was the only safety net she felt she had at the moment.

Jamie seemed to be able to sense her masked distress, so he squeezed her hand and leaned down to give her a kiss. “Ye’ll be alright. I’ll see you soon,” he promised.

Zahra nodded and with a heavy sigh she left their company, heading towards the inn. Jamie watched her go for a moment, made sure she was inside before he turned back to the others and conspired with them for his final two conditions.

Inside the Inn, Zahra found Mrs. Baird and she wondered if this Mrs. Baird had any relation to the Mrs. Bard she’d met back in the 23rd? “Mrs. Baird?” Zahra asked when she met the woman sweeping the taproom.

The older lady turned around. “How can I help ye, lassie?”

“I’m Leeloo Zahra, I’m--”

“Oh! Ye’re the lass with the MacKenzie’s party! Come, come. I’ve got ye a room all set upstairs.” The woman set her broom aside behind the bar of the taproom, then grabbed a key from under the counter before leading Zahra up the stairs. “They’ve already brought yer bags inside and we’ve got some water heating o’er the fire fer a bath.”

“Thank you,” Zahra said as she followed the woman up the stairs and down the hall to the room at the farthest end. She waited for the woman to unlock it then lead her inside. It was a standard room with a double bed, vanity, dresser, washing pitcher and basin, as well as a wooden bathtub. “Where may I get the water for a bath?”

“Ah, don’t fash yerself, Mistress, it’s already ready for you. Just waiting for the water o’er the fire to finish heating to warm it up,” Mrs. Baird confirmed, and moved to the fire where a huge cauldron had been set over the spit. She used her skirt to lift the lid to check the water. “Will ye be needing my help, lass?”

“I’m sure I can manage, Mrs. Baird,” she thought about removing her skirts and her corset and having to wash herself with broken ribs, but then she also thought about having to explain her tattoos, scars, and recent injuries to a complete stranger. She debated which one would cause her more anxiety and stress. In the end she decided she wasn’t up to the struggle and pain of undressing and bathing on her own. “Actually, on second thought, I better take the help.”
“Of course, Mistress,” Mrs. Baird acknowledged with a smile. “I’ll send up my daughter to assist ye, then. There’s some fruit and cheeses on the dresser for ye, and some sherry.”

“Thank you,” she said again, smiling brightly.

Mrs Baird smiled just as brightly and moved to hand Zahra the key. She then reached up and touched Zahra’s cheek. The woman looked as if she wanted to say something but decided against it, then turned to leave. Zahra exhaled in relief when Mrs. Baird left. How much did she wanna bet Mrs. Baird was thinking Zahra was a battered wife and that was why she was being so kind to her?

Zahra moved to the dresser and poured herself a glass of sherry that she sipped on slowly, and munched on some cheese and fruit while she waited for Mrs. Baird’s daughter. She thought about Jamie and his surprises, and how she had nothing to give him. No surprises. Nada. Zip. Zilch. For their wedding. Should she have a surprise? She should right? Isn’t that what newlyweds did? They gave each other wedding gifts? What was that tradition? Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue? Did she need to get all that? Holy crap, she had no idea what she was doing! She wanted this to be special for Jamie too. They only planned on getting married once. “Shit!” she cursed, then as if on cue, there was a knock on her door.

“Who is it?” Zahra called.

“My name’s Paisley, Mistress. I’m Mrs. Baird’s daughter,” a feminine voice called from the other side of the door.

Zahra moved to unlock and open it to let the woman in. She was older than Zahra had expected, but pretty. Thick. Kind eyes. She smiled at Zahra as she made her way in, then held out her hand to shake. “Welcome to Bowerstone inn, Mistress. Mr. Murtagh informed me ye may have some injuries what need special tending.”

Zahra just kind of stared at the bath, then up at Paisley. “Yeah. That’s true, but… Can I ask if you’re married Paisley?”

The woman smiled, crossed her hands in front of her and nodded, smiling proudly. “Goin’ on eighteen years, Mistress. We’ve five bairns. All boys, ages three through sixteen.”

“Well,” Zahra said smiling back. “So you’re like a pro.” She was kind of in awe at this woman. She sipped her sherry and gingerly took a seat. "I have no family here, so would you mind if I asked you some advice?"

Paisley nodded. "Of course, Mistress."

Zahra worried on her bottom lip as she thought for a moment what she wanted to know. She wanted to do something special for Jamie but she didn’t know what. "So, I’m getting married tomorrow and-- I’ve no clue what I’m doing.” She poured a second glass for Paisley, and offered it to the woman then invited her to sit which she did, on trunk at the foot of the bed. “What are some Scottish traditions? I’m completely in the dark, but I’d like to surprise him.”

“Well,” Paisley began, grinning but looking thoughtful. “Ye’ll want a sixpence in yer shoe, and a lock o’ white heather in yer bouquet, that’s for sure.”

“Why a sixpence in my shoe?” Zahra asked.

“It’s for a blessing of prosperity and fortune,” the older woman explained.

Ok made sense. Zahra didn’t know where she was gonna get a sixpence from though. Maybe
Murtagh or one of the others would loan her one? Hey, that would be something borrowed right? “And the white heather?” Zahra asked.

Paisley beamed. “Well that’s from my favorite legend, ye ken? Malvina, the daughter of a Scottish bard, was engaged to a warrior named Oscar who was sadly slain in battle before they could wed. The messenger what delivered the news gave Malvina a bouquet of heather as a last token of Oscar’s love. Malvina wept for her lost lover, but as her tears fell on the heather the blossoms turned a pure white... Though Malvina was sad, she wished naught but happiness on others, and hoped that anyone who found white heather would have good luck in their love and marriage.”

“I love that,” Zahra said with a smile.

“There are some bony fields of flowers in the hills. We could go and pick a proper bouquet for ye?” Paisley offered. “If’n ye like.”

“Really?” Zahra asked, beaming. “Can we please?”

Paisley nodded. “Maybe we’ll even be lucky and find a sprig of white heather.” Look. Paisley had five sons, and wasn’t sure if she was willing to try again with only hope that she might be blessed with a girl. With her luck it would be a sixth boy. She was probably never going to get this chance to dote upon a bride as if she were her daughter while she was spry enough to do it. Zahra would have to be the next best thing. “Would ye like to go before or after yer bath, lass?”

Zahra eyed the tub and thought about how exhausting it was gonna be to get out of her corset and wash. She’d rather do that before bedtime. If they were gonna go pick flowers she’d rather do that first while she still had some energy left. “Before,” she said.

“Alright. Lemme go tell mother where we’re goin’,” Paisley said as she stood.

“I’ll come with you,” Zahra said as she set her glass down. Paisley set hers down as well and the two walked out of the room and down the stairs to the taproom below.

While Paisley talked to her mother, Zahra said she would be right back she needed to go tell her party where she was going. Mrs. Baird informed her that they’d all run off on errands but when Zahra asked where she said she didn’t know specifically. Zahra asked Mrs. Baird to inform them where she was if they came back asking for her. They each grabbed a cloth-lined wicker flower basket before heading out.

They walked through town, past the buildings into the hills that were positively littered with various Scottish wildflowers. There were marigolds, violets, crocus, poppies, milk-vetch, thistles, and bluebells. Bluebells! Hey, there was her something blue. There were also fields upon fields of heather as far as the eye could see. Zahra could name every flower she saw, and she picked dozens in varying colors and blooms, being sure to avoid the thorny or stinky ones. “I could make him a boutonniere,” Zahra commented more to herself than anyone in general.

“Wha’s a boot-in-ear?” Paisley asked.

Zahra huffed dryly in amusement, smiling as she looked up from where she was kneeling in the heather. “Umm, well it’s French in origin, but it’s like a floral brooch or pin a man wears on his lapel in formal settings.” Paisley nodded, though she didn’t really look like she understood.

“Have ye gotten him a sark yet?” Paisley asked, squinting against the sun.

“What’s a sark?” Zahra asked back.
A groom’s wedding shirt, lass,” Paisley answered as if that was supposed to be common knowledge.

Zahra looked a little stunned. “Am I—am I *supposed* to get him one?”

Paisley shrugged. “It’s tradition... Is he no’ getting yer dress?”

A dress? Holy shit, Zahra hadn’t even thought about that! Of fucking course she needed a dress. She couldn’t get married in her travel clothes. What? Fuck. Wait, was Jamie getting her dress? Was that one of her ‘surprises’? “Umm, I don’t know. It’s possible, I guess. He said he had a couple surprises for me.” Shit, fuck, she had no idea where she was supposed to get a wedding shirt for him from. Fuck, shit, damn, fuck. Fuck!! She sighed heavily as she stood up because kneeling was really starting to put too much strain on her ribs. They hadn’t found any white heather so she would just have to resign to her fate that she would have to go without it.

“How big is yer man?” Paisley asked as she stood as well, dusted off her petticoats, then the two began to walk through the flower fields back towards the village. They had plenty of flowers and spurge to make a beautiful bouquet.

Zahra looked thoughtful for a moment as she gripped her flower basket handle in front of her with both hands. “He’s large-ish. About six foot three. Muscles for days.”

Paisley grinned at the faraway look Zahra suddenly got. “Well, my husband was brawny, tall, and lean back when we first married. He’s more cake than beef these days, though.” Paisley said, laughing merrily at herself. “But I love the round cuss. I’m sure he’d not mind ye havin’ his sark. Not like he can fit in it himself naemore. It’s just takin’ up space in a box in our bureau.”

Zahra turned to her, brow furrowed slightly. “You’d really do that? But--you don’t even know me, Paisley. We’re strangers. I’m a stranger.”

Paisley gave her a look like she was stupid. “Ye’re an honoured guest of the MacKenzie, Mistress, and I know exactly who ye are. Word travels fast round these parts, as ye should well ken by now. I know twas you what helped my cousin Sariah get over a painful sickness.” Zahra’s jaw almost dropped. This really was a small world. *Was that* maybe why Paisley and Mrs. Baird were being so nice to her? “Fergus an’ I would be honored if ye’d have it, Mistress. It’s the least we can do... Consider it a gift for yer wedding.”

Zahra’s eyes watered softly and she reached over and squeezed Paisley’s hand. “Thank you, Paisley.”

Paisley smiled and squeeze her hand back and the two shared a small moment, then continued walking. “Oh look!” Paisley suddenly stopped as she bent over and picked a flower. When she stood back up, she showed Zahra. It was a beautiful sprig of white heather. “Ye must be blessed, Mistress.” She indicated the ground next to her. “There’s a whole patch here. We can pick some extra to weave into yer hair and make it all bonny tomorrow.”

Zahra beamed, grinning brightly and picked a few sprigs for her own basket. Maybe she would be able to surprise Jamie after all. “Paisley,” Zahra said as she took the woman’s arm. “I’m really glad I met you,” Zahra said after they were done picking the heather and headed back to the village.

Paisley bent her elbow and tapped Zahra’s hand over her arm. “Me too, Mistress.” They walked to the village like that, arm in arm like old friends.
Back at the Inn, Zahra and Paisley headed back upstairs and dropped off their flower baskets on the vanity. Mrs. Baird eventually brought up some small sheers, binding cord, and some linen cloth to wrap the bouquet in once it was made. Paisley said she was going to stop at home and speak with Fergus, but she would be right back. Meanwhile, Mrz. Baird said she had supper to prepare but she would come help if she could. Zahra nodded and got to work selecting, preparing and arranging flowers for her bouquet.

Paisley returned a short while later with a large, flat linen box, which she set on the vanity next to where Zahra was working, then lifted the lid. Inside was a very handsome, very beautiful, almost satiny textured, long sleeve shirt in an off white color. It had silky white cording tying up the collar, which folded over a couple inches at the top. Zahra ran her fingers over the fabric, then lifted one of the sleeves, which were ruffled slightly at the ends. It reminded Zahra of something out of a French romance novel. “It’s beautiful,” she admired. She wasn’t sure if Jamie would like it, but she frickin’ loved it. She gave Paisley a gentle side hug. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Mistress,” Paisley answered then carefully lifted the shirt from the box. “I’m gon to give it a light wash and let it air out a bit. It’ll be ready for ye for certain by tonight.” Zahra nodded, and bit down on her bottom lip.

Zahra may not believe in higher powers often, but she had to say that someone it seemed was watching out for her. Maybe it was Rick himself? Who knows. Whoever it was, she thanked them in her mind as she finished arranging her bouquet. She wrapped it with some linen then some twine, and it was set in a short vase with some water. With the leftover spurge, Zahra decided to make Jamie a boutonniere after all. She used a traditional Scottish thistle as the center, a sprig of milk vetch, a small sprig of the white heather, then a but of leafy spurge behind it to hold it all together. The ends were trimmed so only the buds and a short stem remained, then she secured it tightly with some twine. A little water was poured into a teacup and she placed the boutonniere inside. They would hopefully keep until tomorrow morning.

Zahra sighed and relaxed back on the oversized cushioned dressing chair as she admired her work. She wouldn’t ever take up a job as a florist, but for a poor woman’s needs, they were lovely. She reached over for her earlier discarded glass of sherry, and a piece of cheese, munching and sipping casually as she just took a moment to relax, breathe, and just be.

She’d started to doze in the chair, startling herself awake after her head bobbled forward. In that moment, she realized she hadn't really slept since the day before yesterday. And in that time she'd been brutally beaten. No wonder she was so bone-weary and dog-tired. She really wanted to take that bath and go to bed. She looked at the fire and saw that someone had removed the water from the fire while she was gone with Paisley. She slowly stood and went to put it back on to heat up for her bath. When she attempted to lift the metal pot/cauldron, however, it was heavier than anticipated and caused her to yelp softly in pain from the strain on her ribs.

“Auch, ye daft lass. Let me do that,” Paisley declared as she had just entered the room. “Mr. Murtagh warned us about yer injuries. I was wonderin’ how long it’d take ye before pushin’ yerself too hard.” Paisley shooed her back gently then gripped the pot handle firmly with her skirt as leverage, before she lifted it gently onto the spit over the fire. While that heated up, the woman started helping Zahra undress which would take long enough that the water should be heated by then. “A broken rib is it?” Paisley asked as she gently helped Zahra out of her bodice, then her petticoats.

Zahra nodded. “We had to ride through the night, and I accidentally dozed off and fell off my horse,” she admitted sheepishly. Paisley had no reason not to believe her so she nodded. Zahra held onto Paisley’s shoulder as the woman helped her step out of her petticoats, and then her boots, and leggings.
Paisley didn’t question why Zahra was wearing leggings, but Zahra knew it wasn’t long before the real shock was going to come. “You should know—I was burned badly in a fire as a child and I have scarring from it on my back that I’m told is very shocking, so don’t be afraid when you see it, ok?” Another lie that fell so easily off her lips

Paisley paused slightly from undoing the lacing on Zahra’s corset. “Ye do seem to be mighty accident prone, do ye not?”

Zahra chuckled and nodded her head. “Regular clutz here.”

Paisley let Zahra’s warning seep in, then continued undoing the laces. When the corset was loose and off, Zahra exhaled deeply in relief, but that was immediately followed by a soft groan of pain as she reached for her broken ribs that were no longer being supported by her corset. She was forced to stand as straight as possible on her own merit to avoid putting strain on her middle. Paisley helped Zahra out of the last piece of clothing, her shift. The scarring on the woman’s back was shocking but it indeed looked like an old burn scar. Paisley hadn’t said anything about it, nor, thankfully, did she remark about Zahra’s tattoos, though she had that same judgmental look on her face as Mrs. Fitz got when she helped Zahra bathe.

Paisley held Zahra’s hand as the woman climbed into the tepid water already poured into the bath. Zahra gasped softly at the cold, then let out a few more hisses and groans as Paisley helped her lower herself into the wooden basin. Paisley moved over to the fire and grabbed the water pot with the hem of her skirt, and came back to the tub to gently tip some of the hot but not scalding water into the tub to warm up the cold. Zahra sighed softly when the water heated up and she tried sitting up straighter and reaching for the bath tray with the sponge and soaps and oils and stuff. “Please, Mistress. Let me?” Paisley asked as she took the sponge for her.

Zahra was not used to needing help doing this part but she really was in a lot of pain and so incredibly tired. Too tired to be stubborn and argue. “Alright,” she resigned with a nod. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mistress,” Paisley said with a soft smile.

Paisley washed Zahra with great care, almost like a mother washing her daughter. It was an altogether different kind of intimacy that Zahra had never really experienced before, this sort of maternal care. Sure Mrs. Fitz tried, but she was a little too brash and judgmental and not really soft about it. Not like this. Zahra had dozed off sometime around when Paisley had been giving her hands and arms a thorough washing and rub. Paisley didn’t bother rousing her.

The older woman had just added a little more warm water to the bath to warm Zahra up a bit, letting her relax some more, when there came a knock at the door. Paisley answered it and her mother came in with a tray of dinner, enough for more than one. Mrs. Baird set the tray on the dresser, removing the cheese and fruit tray from earlier. The two women whispered and chatted quietly in Gaelic while Zahra was dozed off and soaking. Mrs. Baird then sat with the soaking/dozing Zahra while Paisley went downstairs to check on the condition of Zahra’s groom’s sark.

When Paisley returned a short while later, she had the shirt packed back up in clean linens inside the thin box she’d brought it in. She set it on the dresser next to Zahra’s flower arrangements, before moving to rouse the woman in the tub. “Mistress?” Paisley whispered, touching Zahra’s shoulder. Zahra sniffled awake, jolting a bit which aggravated her injuries and she made a pained face. Paisley frowned softly. “Sorry. I was trying not to startle you. We’ve brought some dinner, Miss? Ye really should dress and eat.”

Zahra nodded and Mrs. Baird held out a large linen towel, while Paisley helped lift Zahra out of the
tub, then into the waiting linen. They helped her dry off, then slip into a clean night-shift. Zahra was so relaxed, and tired, she was basically like puddy in their hands, going wherever they told her to. She was guided to a chair by the dressing table and a small plate of dinner was set in front of her and her stomach rumbled involuntarily. “Thank you, both. So much.” There was enough food for more than one. “Please, will you stay and eat with me? There’s more than enough. I would enjoy the company.”

Both women nodded, and made themselves a plate and sat upon the bed while the three of them chatted and gossipped like old friends while they ate. It wasn’t some wild and rambunctious bachelorette party with some of her closest friends, but it was still great fun. Better than anything Zahra could have hoped for at this juncture. She only wished Mrs. Fitz, Geillis, and Laoghaire could be here too. She missed Geillis so much.

Paisley and Mrs. Baird were strong, clever women, though. Wonderful company, with their own humourous anecdotes and jokes. They doted upon Zahra as if she were their own daughter or granddaughter. Offering advice, that Zahra had never asked for but humoured them by listening to nonetheless.

“And ye must never be too eager to please a man, or they’ll walk all over you. Never be afraid to take your pleasure first, either, or ye may never get it,” Paisley cautioned, to which Zahra just nodded, smiling brightly. Her plate was empty, as well as her second glass of sherry, when she was overcome with a yawn.

The two older women exchanged a glance, before Paisley stood and retrieved the small hand washing basin from the table in the corner. “Zahra. There’s one more tradition we have, where the matron of yer family washes the bride’s feet.”

Zahra’s brows pinched together a little and she started to shake her head. “That’s really not--”

“My grandmother did it to mine before the night of my wedding,” Paisley explained.

“Aye, as mine before her washed mine as well,” Mrs Baird admitted too. “Paisley tells me ye have no family here, Mistress, and it would please me greatly, lass, if ye’d permit me to wash yer feet?”

Zahra inhaled slowly and shifted her gaze between the both of them, and tears stung her eyes once more. “You’ve both--done so much for me already I--”

Mrs. Baird touched her hand. “And ye’ve done so much for our people, lass.” Every village the MacKenzie rent party had visited had been touched not just by the Chief MacKenzie, but by tales of Zahra’s generosity and her selflessness and willingness to aid whomever asked, no questions asked. “Tis the very least I can do for you.”

Zahra blinked back her tears, and eventually she nodded, afraid words would fail her. The small washing bowl was set at her feet and Paisley poured some warm water into it. Mrs. Baird got on her knees and with an unexpected gentleness and care, the oldest woman began to wash and massage Zahra’s feet with warm water and essential oil that smelled subtly of lavender.

Zahra had tears in her eyes by the time the woman had finished washing then drying her feet. Paisley helped her mother off her knees. Zahra winced as she stood and wrapped them both in a very firm, fond embrace. “Thank you,” she whispered. Both women returned her hug just as firmly.

Paisley helped Zahra get into bed and the woman sat beside her on the edge and pushed back her hair off her forehead. “I’ll be back in the morning to help ye get ready, lass.”
Zahra nodded softly, and closed her eyes. “Thank you, mum,” she whispered, obviously incredibly weary and slightly delirious from the day’s events, possibly recalling some long dormant memory of her early childhood.

Paisley smiled softly, not bothering to correct her. “Get some rest, lass,” she said before she brushed Zahra’s hair back and placed a motherly kiss on her forehead. Zahra was already asleep, practically dead to the world from the moment her eyes had closed.

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Stardate 2263:214 (aka Sunday, August 2, 2263)...

Location: Jeshetera (a planet rich in resources near the edge of Federation space)...

Javera Outpost...

Zahra had just barely gotten back the week before from her deep undercover op that had taken quite a heavy toll on her psychologically and physically. She had passed both her medical and psych evaluations but Psych had ordered her to take some vacation time off to rest and recuperate. Medical had passed her off with a squeaky clean bill of health, but she was on a high-protein diet to try to gain some of her weight back that she had drastically dropped during her six month sting in Orion Syndicate space. She’d lost an unhealthy amount of weight.

Still. She had some time before she was scheduled to leave, and she hadn’t been put on restrictive duty, so when a mission came up, she jumped on it.

Javera outpost had somehow disappeared and Starfleet was up in arms about it. It was just gone. Completely, absolutely, utterly gone. Not a single trace. That was what they had been told in their debriefing. Javera outpost was no more.

The loss came as a huge shock to the Federation, as the base had been there for nearly twenty years with no issues. The Jesheterians were kind and hospitable and model Federation citizens. They had their own culture and their own quirks, but they were not violent—nor were they particularly technologically advanced. No communication to the people of the planet was successful.

Still, the Federation base that had been existing peacefully and simply on Jeshetera was completely gone without any sign that it had ever even been there. Families had been notified. The two hundred officers residing in the base were considered missing, but based on the distress call that had been issued minutes before the base had disappeared, it seemed as if they were most likely dead.

The closest investigatory starship had been the Enterprise, and an away team was chosen from it’s most skilled Security, Science, and Medical officers. Jim had insisted on leading the away team, so naturally Bones had come with him, along with Spock, and Zahra had been trusted for security. Yes. She was their designated redshirt.

They took a shuttle down as the planet’s natural atmosphere was resistant to beaming technology. As Zahra piloted the shuttle in, once they broke atmo and passed the thin layer of clouds, they had expected to be flying into a smoldering warzone of some sort. What they saw instead, however, was a fully functioning Starfleet base, pristine and seemingly untouched, right out their viewscreen.

“Spock?” Jim inquired as he leaned over the shoulder of the Vulcan’s co-pilot’s seat.

After Spock peered into the viewport of their scans, his hands were a blur over the science terminal “Scanners indicate that what we are seeing is in fact, very real, Captain. The base appears to be--intact. Untouched. Fully operational.”
Leonard had come up to lean behind Zahra’s chair and they all sort of glanced around at each other in concern. “Try hailing them,” Jim ordered.

Zahra reached out and tapped an icon on her terminal… “No response, Captain.”

“Captain… It appears as if there is some sort of interference coming from the planet’s surface that could be why both our scans and our comms seem to be--malfunctioning.” Spock explained after doing some more fancy maneuvering with deft fingers.

Jim leaned over and placed his hand on Zahra’s shoulder. “Bring us down nice and slow, Lieutenant,” he ordered as Zahra and he locked gazes for a moment.

Zahra nodded. “Yes, sir. Slow and steady she goes.”

Jim and Bones sat back down in the seats behind Zahra and spock and they all anxiously peered out the viewer as Zahra skillfully, smoothly maneuvered them down onto the nearest landing pad. When the shuttle touched down, they could see out the screen that the citizens and uniformed federation officers working at the outpost were clearly moving about, at work or leisure as if nothing were wrong. Their shuttle got a few questioning looks, but for the most part everything looked normal. Optimal.

“Orders Captain?” Zahra said as Jim once more got up to lean over the back of her chair.

This was not the mission they had briefed for, however, “We proceed with our mission as planned. We investigate the distress beacon and find out what’s happened here if anything. Everyone be on your guard.” Jim squeezed her shoulder again. “Let’s keep the engine running though, shall we? Just in case.”

Zahra smirked and nodded. “Yes, Captain.” She sequenced the shuttle for debarking, but she did not shut it down. If they had to make an emergency getaway, it would only take a minute or two to start launch, as opposed to the normal 30 it usually took for a full start-up sequence.

Zahra locked the ship to her passcode, so no one could steal it, then pressed the button to open the exit ramp. She hopped out of her seat then moved to the front with Jim where they exchanged cautionary glances as they waited for the ramp to lower. Once the ramp was down, they all walked out slowly, with Zahra and Jim taking defensive positions as Spock and Bones already had their tricorders out taking preliminary scans, not just of the environment, but the buildings, and the people.

“Mr. Spock?” Jim asked, as he nodded at a passing citizen with a polite smile.

Spock’s Vulcan brows knitted slightly together. "Readings are--normal, Captain.”

Zahra was itching all over, but it was more metaphorical than physical. Just a bad feeling. “Well, something sure the hell isn’t right.”

“Biosigns?” Jim asked directing the question at Bones.

“213,” Dr. McCoy responded. There were two hundred Starfleet officers and, apparently, some Jeshetarians wandering around.

Zahra was having a hard time shaking this weird feeling in her gut. She moved closer to Jim. "Did we just step into the Twilight sector or something, Captain?" So her earth culture references were a little off sometimes.

“I think you mean the Twilight Zone, Lieutenant, but I know the feeling.” Jim nodded. “Let’s try to
find the CO. See if we can get some answers.”

This was all fishy as hell and Zahra didn't like it one bit. She could smell trouble. Had a sixth sense for it. It gave her goosebumps. Rick used to call it her spider sense, but she’d follow Jim’s lead. "Obviously. Distress calls like that aren't sent for nothing." Zahra muttered more to herself.

One of the Jeshetarians, with their typical dark skin and light blue freckles, dressed in a flowing purple robe gave the group a friendly wave and smile. Jim was the only one who returned the greeting. Diplomatic poster boy of Starfleet to the very end. "Hey, sorry, hi,” he greeted with a grin. “Captain Jim Kirk of the Enterprise.”

“Arquoar of Jeshetaria. Pleased to meet you, Captain. How may I be of service?” The man did not seem the least bit fazed by Bones obviously scanning him.

“Likewise, Arquoar,” Jim responded jovially. “I was wondering if you could tell us where we could find the commanding officer?”

"Oh, yes!" the male Jeshetarian said cheerfully. "Right this way!" The male had a jaunty step to his walk. The away party followed Arquoar, Bones, Spock, and Zahra hyper-vigilantly scanning and observing their surroundings as Jim took a more diplomatic approach with Archie boy.

“What brings you folks to our little paradise at the edge of the federation, hmm?” Arquar asked. “Did you find something exciting and new on our planet? We love it when Starfleet visits!” This was not uncommon for Jesheterians. They were known for being extremely friendly and hospitable. It was a value that was regarded highly among the people and there was never any ulterior motives. Call her bitter or jaded, but Zahra didn't totally completely believe that no one could have any ulterior motives.

“You could say that,” Jim responded politely, not wanting to reveal too much until they were able to speak to the Starfleet CO. “We just need to speak to the Starfleet officer in charge before we can discuss it further. You understand?”

"Oh, of course, most certainly!” Arquoar chimed. "Spirit above, not that I can think of at least!” Spirit above was said with the same intonation as one might say God, or Lord.

The away team all traded glances once more. They'd just spent the day in briefings, listening to that distress call. Something about the way the man said spirits above sounded familiar, but none of them decided to pursue it just yet, allowing Arquoar to lead them further through the compound.

"Anything you might could tell us about the colony's operations might be helpful," Spock invited with a polite smile. "We just want to ensure everyone is safe and accounted for."

"Oh, well! The mine has been very prosperous for both us and our Starfleet compatriots!” Arquoar
said cheerfully, then began rambling on and on about a particular mine they had recently discovered. It wouldn't mean much to any member of the party.

They listened tolerantly as Arquoar led them to a lift that they were then told would take them to the officer’s level, and from there they would find the Captain who was in charge of the Javera base. Apparently, he was a well-regarded human named John Spindler.

"Hope all goes well for you, Starfleet!" Arquoar walked away happily, singing to himself.

“Thank you for all your help, Arquoar,” Jim responded as they waited for the lift.

When it arrived, they all stepped on and there was only one button, meaning this lift only went to one other floor. Jim pressed it and the lift doors slid closed.

“Remind me to never take for a posting with any Jeshetarians,” Bones piped in sourly once they were alone.

“Come on, Bones,” Jim said. “He wasn’t that bad.”

“He was gushing about a goddamn mine, Jim. As if it were a goddamn Christmas puppy,” Bones argued.

Jim and Zahra laughed at Leonard’s comparison. Spock just looked like he didn’t understand. “I thought it was very informative.”

“Of course you did,” Bones said sarcastically, once again making Jim and Zahra chuckle quietly.

They arrived at the officer’s level and were easily directed to the Captain’s offices. Jim stepped inside Spindler's office first, finding it was just as pristine and beautifully decorated as the rest of the base. Spindler himself cut an impressive figure for a man, with his command Gold shirt stretched over a muscled physique, and naturally honey-golden hair perfectly coiffed, he had an attractive presence that was born of confidence, not arrogance.

When he saw them enter he stood up behind his desk to meet them. "Welcome, welcome," he greeted warmly, stretching his hand out to each of them for a shake. Something had been niggling at the back of her mind since they’d heard the name John Spindler, and seeing him now, hearing him speak in person, Zahra thought she remembered. She had gone to the Academy with a John Spindler, but the most bizarre thing was that she could not remember Spindler ever being so tall, or built, nor having such blue eyes. Must be a different John Spindler?

“I must admit, I was surprised to hear that an Enterprise shuttle had landed here,” Spindler continued. “Is there something I can help you with, Captain?”

“Thank you, Captain. I am going to get right to the point,” Jim said as he crossed his arms behind his back in a relaxed attention. “We received an SOS distress call from your outpost no more than two days ago, and our preliminary scans indicated the base was, to put it plainly, gone.”

Spindler blinked. "I have to admit, I'm a bit confused," Spindler sounded apologetic. "There must be some mistake. Maybe a prank or something?" Zahra was looking at Spindler with an increasingly skeptical, wary gaze.

"That is why we are confused, sir," Spock said. “Starfleet could not find any trace of your base as it seemed to have completely disappeared. The recording we have is--most concerning.” Spock was also studying Spindler's face, his brows knit.
"I'm not sure what to tell you, Mr. Spock," Spindler said, addressing the Vulcan by name even though Spock had failed to give it. Apparently, Spindler and Spock knew each other from the Academy as well, but Spock didn't seem to be having the same doubts and skepticism as Zahra. "There must have been a mistake," Spindler insisted.

Spock began to play back the distress signal from the beginning. It was John’s voice. “Do you recognize the voice?” the Vulcan asked.

As he listened, Captain Spindler’s eyes widened in recognition, brow furrowing deeper in confusion. “It sounds like--me,” John finished, utterly surprised and confounded.

“I thought so, too,” Spock confirmed. “Captain Spindler, sir, we also have scans generated from this planet that corroborate the distress call we received. Up until our shuttle broke atmosphere, all evidence pointed to this colony’s destruction.” Spock said, eyeing John thoughtfully.

"I don't know what to tell you. I'm just as confused and distressed as you are, Spock. I can't think of anything that would have caused that--"

Zahra was watching John very closely as he spoke, and suddenly, just for a moment, Spindler's eyes flashed in color to a dark brown that Zahra remembered being closer to the John she knew at the academy’s natural eye color. Just as quickly as they appeared, however, they were back to blue, and apparently they had been talking and Zahra had missed it, only catching onto the end.

"--very concerning, I'll make sure to run all the necessary investigations,” he finished talking.

Zahra blinked and shook her head. She looked around to see if anyone else had seen that but they were all of them carrying on as if everything were normal.

“Have you had any non-federation visitors recently?” Bones asked.

John shook his head before answering, “No. No, we haven’t.” He confirmed, smiling at Zahra where once again his eyes changed back to brown but stayed that way for a solid five minutes as he continued answering her superior officers' questions. None of them seemed to be even the least bit concerned with his rapid change in eye color. She blinked and they were back to blue again.

“Would you mind if we took a look at your records for the last 48 hours?” Jim asked.

“Yes, of course,” as Spindler said these words, he suddenly opened his mouth and instead of teeth, he had eyes. Brown eyes. All of them lined up neatly in his mouth like they belonged there. “Feel free to do as you see fit.”

"Holy fuck!” Zahra cursed audibly and reached for her phaser, hand hovering over where it was resting in its holster.

Jim turned to look at her, brows knitted together. “Zahra?” Jim turned to look at her, and suddenly Spindler was gone. Just--gone. “Does… no one…” Her head lolled back and suddenly everything was gone, not just Spindler.

It was impossible to say where she found herself because she wasn’t anywhere. She was nowhere. She was nothing. She had no sensation. No pain. She had no body. She just was. Her consciousness in its barest, purest form. For someone like Zahra, it should have been absolutely terrifying, but for reasons she had no comprehension of understanding, she wasn’t afraid. Not even a little bit. There was no fear, as if this was the most natural thing she could possibly have ever been doing or have happened.
You are not like the others. Zahra felt their meaning more than heard their words in her mind. It was like a million consciousnesses speaking all at once, in unison, never interrupting. She could sense something—something massive, powerful, and so, so unbelievably beautiful, but equally it was so impossibly intangible. Something glorious, magnetic, magnanimous, yet not even the least bit frightening. It was simply foreign. Unknown.

Who are you? Zahra felt more than spoke the words, as she had no body, nor voice to say them.

We are nothing, and everything... We are sadness and joy... We are pain and pleasure... We are darkness and we are light... We are you and we are not you... We are of the universe, yet we exist beyond it... In it, but also outside of it.

'I don't understand,' she pleaded, but again she did not feel afraid.

Of course not, child... The Eletariel cannot be understood... We just are.

Again, she felt no fear. Just peace. Acceptance, but still curious. 'Why am I here?' she wanted to know.

You have been chosen.

‘Chosen for what?’ she asked.

A gift, or a boon if that is easier for you to understand. To a woman like Zahra, it was very rare that something was ever given for nothing. It is difficult for someone like you, who is so deeply restrained by time and space, to understand... but please know that we seek no compensation, nor do we desire anything from you. We simply wish to give you what you desire... The voices said, obviously being able to sense her thoughts.

'I have done nothing to deserve any such gifts,' she argued, feeling unworthy of this superior being’s attention or grace.

On the contrary, Leilani Fre’ja Leeloo Zahra Quigley. We see all... Your sacrifices have been many but your rewards few... You want for very little, but give so very much... We have brought you to this place... We have looked inside of you and beyond... We know what it is you seek and we have returned that which was taken from you...

She found herself trusting the voices. Not manipulated into it or anything, but somehow, somehow she just understood that with all their immense power, they had nothing to hide and nothing to gain from deception. Somehow she knew if they wanted something from her, they could take whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it.

It is done... we have already granted what you desire most and have set you upon a path... you have but to have the courage and strength to survive it... things will happen not as you expect them, and not how you might think, but do not be afraid... after this, you will not remember us, or this place, or what we have said or done here, but you will see when the time comes what has been given...

It seemed all too good to be true, so cryptic and mysterious, but before she could ask anymore questions she could feel herself slipping away, the sensations of her physical body and consciousness coming back to her just as this non-existence floated away like a dream she could not remember or grasp.

“Zahra?” Jim suddenly asked, shaking her shoulder gently.

Zahra blinked, and looked at Jim, then around at her away party whom were all giving her equal
looks of confusion. “I’m sorry, Captain, I umm,” she cleared her throat. “I must have dazed off there for a moment.”

“I’ll say,” Jim still had his hand on her shoulder still. “You feeling alright?”

“Five by five,” she said with a smile as if nothing was wrong, and honestly it wasn’t. It was like that weird creepy, something’s not right feeling she’d had since they landed was just gone. Spindler looked like regular old Spindler like he always had… So yeah, she was feeling fine. “We were just talking about personnel files and records right?”

“Right,” Jim said with a clap on her shoulder. “I was asking if you wanted to do some recon for us while we look over the records.”

Zahra nodded. “Of course, Captain.”

“Meet us back here in one hour,” Jim ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Zahra said before giving Jim a playful salute, then turning and leaving Spindler’s office to do the requested recon of the base. She questioned a few of the officers and the locals. Everything seemed to be in tip top shape, hunky dory.

They spent the better part of the day there among the Jeshetarians and officers on Javera outpost, but after a thorough review of records and files, they were forced to attribute the incident to some sort of crazy computer malfunction. A ticket was opened with Federation intelligence to examine the incident further to make sure no systems had been invaded or tampered with. For the most part, as far as away missions went, this had to be, hands down, the most boring and uneventful mission any of the members of the away party had been on.

“I didn’t even get to shoot my phaser once,” Zahra griped teasingly as they boarded the shuttle again and she took her seat in the pilot’s chair.

“At least no one got captured this time, right? I’d call that a win,” Jim teased, knowing what a master escapist Zahra was. She’d once saved him, Kai, and Dr. Marcus from a Klingon ambush by somehow managing to unlock Kai’s and her manacles then ambushing their guard. Jim had joked from then on Zahra would be assigned to all the away missions that were captured.

Zahra flew them back to the Enterprise. They were debriefed, and not a one of them gave this boringly uneventful mission another thought. Zahra was hugging her goodbyes as she boarded a shuttle back to Earth two days later.

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Stardate 1743:264 (Saturday, September 21, 1743)
Location: MacKenzie lands, Scotland…

Zahra drifted awake with a splitting migraine that was threatening to tear her skull in two. It was honestly like the migraine to end all migraines. She couldn’t remember the last time, or any time she had ever had one this bad. She tried to roll over, but the action jarred her other injuries, primarily her ribs. She ached everywhere, and just the simple action of breathing was painful. “Jamie?” She mumbled in her sleep, reaching for him only to find herself alone.

“Nae, miss,” Paisley said as she entered the room with a tray full of breakfast.

Zahra squinted, her vision blurry. She griped her skull with one hand, and her side with the other. Her ribs somehow ached more today than they did yesterday as all her injuries had the chance to
settle. “Paisley,” she said, her voice strained. “I need--my bag... My medical bag... please...” She was trying not to cry but she hurt so bad.

Paisley looked morbidly concerned but she nodded. “Aye, mistress. I’ll be right back.”

Zahra coughed out a groan of pain as she tried to sit up again. She didn’t know which was worse, the pain in her head or the pain in her ribs, but she laid back against the pillow trying to decrease any strain on her middle, and both hands gripped at her head.

“How much did she have to drink?” Zahra heard Murtagh’s gruff voice a short while later.

“Two glasses of sherry, Mr. Murtagh. That’s all, honest.” That was Paisley.

Zahra groaned when she felt the side of her bed dip with added weight and a strong, masculine hand touching her forehead a moment later. She didn’t have a fever, which caused Murtagh to breathe a sigh of relief. “Zahra, lassie. Can ye hear me?”

Her only response was to grip at her hair tighter and groan in misery.

“Leeloo?” Jamie’s voice called to her, laced with concern.

“Auch, ye daft idjit, I told ye to stay put,” Murtagh called out angrily.

Murtagh’s weight left her bed, only to be replaced by someone else, and she felt his hand on her cheek. “Leeloo, darling. It’s me. I’m here.” He leaned up over her, pressing his arm above her head and brushing his thumb across her forehead. “Tell me what’s wrong?” He asked softly.

“Nngh, everything,” she responded weakly, still gripping her head. “My head... my ribs... my face... My head... Oh, my head.” She was breathing shallowly, almost sounding like she was close to hyperventilating, but the shallow breaths were the only way to prevent her ribs from hurting with each expansion of her lungs. She needed a 23rd century analgesic and a bone mender, stat.

“Listen, I know ye had big plans today, but she cannae get married like this,” Paisley cautioned them as she wrung her hands in her dress gently.

Murtagh and Jamie exchanged worried glances. Unfortunately, for all of them it had to be today. It was killing Jamie, seeing her like this. “Leeloo, I need to see?” Jamie said as he made sure her bedsheet was covering her at least to her waist, then started pulling up the fabric of her shift. When Zahra didn’t protest, he continued until he heard Dougal enter the room obnoxiously, and he stopped before exposing her.

“Oi, what’s takin’ so long?” Dougal shouted as he too came in the room. They had both taken much too long for ‘bringing Zahra her bag’. Dougal took one look at the woman practically writhing in pain on the bed. “Give her some opium, and get her moving,”

“Opium?” Jamie stood up angrily. “Ye cannae put her out of her mind just before--”

“I can, and I will,” Dougal cut him off, then snapped his fingers at Murtagh to hand him Zahra’s medical bag. Murtagh reluctantly did so. Dougal opened the flap. The painkiller was labeled in it’s own pouch inside, easy enough to find. She had already measured the liquid into proper doses in small glass vials. He removed one vial, put the pouch back, then handed the bag back to Murtagh before he marched towards the bed. Jamie stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Do I need to remind ye of what happens at Sundown today, lad?” Dougal warned menacingly.
“No,” Jamie said forcefully as he took the tiny glass tube out of Dougal’s hand. He grit his teeth then turned to the bed again. “Leeloo, it’s me, love. I’m gonna help ye sit up, alright?” He sort of maneuvered himself into the bed behind her so she was propped up slightly, with her head resting against his chest.

“Jamie? Everything hurts so bad.” She had tears in her eyes and a death grip in the material of his leggings.

He cradled her head gently, then pulled the tiny stopper from small tube. “I know love.” He pressed his cheek against the top of her head, laying a kiss on the crown of her forehead. “I’ve got some medicine right here. It’ll stop the pain, alright?”

There was only one thing in this century she knew of that had the capacity to stop this level of pain. Opiates. She didn’t want to be blitzed out of her mind on her wedding day. Any other day, sure, but not today. “No,” she cried and knocked it out of his hand, causing the vial to drop on the floor and roll under the bed.

“Leeloo, stop.” Jamie tried to urge her to lay back down, but she was already using her grip on his slacks to help pull herself up to a sitting position.

“I’m good,” she lied, gripping at her side. She looked over at Dougal then. “I’m good… I promise… I’m good.” It was a total lie, but she refused to do any of this while higher than a kite, and then possibly end up addicted after the fact. No. She squared her feet then moved to stand, Jamie helping support her by her hand.

Satisfied then that she was going to do this of her own will, Dougal nodded. “Let’s go,” he said to Jamie.

“Wait!” Zahra squeezed Jamie's hand.

“Lassie, we dinnae have time for--”

“I said wait!” She spoke firmly at the older man, then reached for the dresser to stabilize herself. Jamie stood behind her, ready to support her if she needed it. He’ll admit there was a lot to be said about Zahra’s level of stubborn determination and sheer force of will. She reached for the thin box on the dresser and turned toward Jamie with an actual smile on her face, it was almost surprising considering how much pain he knew she was in. “Look… This… is for you…” She handed it to him.

“What is this?” Jamie asked with a look of wonder and bewilderment, even a little awe and surprise.

“Open it, silly,” she said, a little strained and she closed her eyes, gripping at her side once more.

He set it on the nearest surface and opened the lid on the box, then pulled apart the fabric covering it and his bewilderment turned into genuine, unadulterated awe. “Leeloo?”

“It’s a sark,” she said softly, resting her head on his shoulder.

“I know what it is,” he said as he ran his fingers down the very luxurious material. It was French in design he could tell. It was beautiful. “How did you--”

She gazed at Paisley with an actual smile on her face. “A friend--gave it to me--to give to you.”

Jamie turned and saw Zahra looking at Paisley, and he too looked at the older woman with gratitude and admiration on his face. He closed the lid of the box, then turned and wrapped his arm behind
Zahra’s shoulder, pulling her close as he pressed a kiss to the top of her hair. “Ye amaze me, lass.”

Dougal was growing impatient. “We dinnae have time--”

“Alright, Uncle. I know!” He handed the box to Murtagh, then turned to Zahra and held her face in his hands. “I’ll see ye again in an hour or so,” Jamie assured her, then leaned in to press a tender, loving kiss to her lips. “Tha gaol agam ort,” he whispered.

“Love you too,” Zahra replied back softly. Look she was in a serious amount of pain here people. Speaking basic words in her own language was taking a toll, let alone trying to summon the wits for that guttural Gaelic she was growing to know and love. Jamie smirked and gave her cheek one last loving stroke before he was turning and following Dougal and Murtagh out of the room.

In the hall, Jamie took the box from Murtagh, and handed him the wrapped package from Ned. Jamie had personally not seen the dress yet, but he was assured it was lovely. He tasked Murtagh with delivering it because he also wanted the man to stick around to keep an eye on Zahra in case anything happened, or if she got worse. Jamie didn’t trust anyone else.

The moment the men were gone from the room, Zahra reached for Paisley and the woman rushed to her, helping support her. “Oh, Mistress… Surely ye can postpone the wedding one or two days?”

Zahra shook her head. “No,” she admitted in a shaky tone. “Unfortunately, we can’t.”

There was a knock at the door. Paisley helped get Zahra into the oversized, padded dressing chair by the vanity before she moved to answer the door. It was Mr. Murtagh, and he was carrying a large bundle.

Paisley stepped back so he could enter. “Ye’re dress… Mistress,” Murtagh said as he laid it out on the bed, and helped Paisley unwrap it.

The woman gasped upon seeing it and ran her hands over the embroidery. “Oh my goodness, Mistress,” she said before she took it in her arms almost like one would hold a bride, and turned to show it to Zahra.

It was one of the most beautiful things Zahra had ever seen, and she had a genuine smile on her face as she reached out to touch the fabric. “That’s--my dress?”

“Mnhmm. Ye’re gonna look like a right princess, ye are,,” Paisley said before she set it back on the bed, then shooed Murtagh out of the room.

Shortly after Murtagh left, Mrs. Baird entered with a tray full of breakfast. Zahra ate her breakfast, while the two women worked some magic in styling and pinning Zahra’s hair in two soft, loose braids across the top of her head, leaving several strands out to fall wispily against her face. They then wove several twigs of the white heather through the braids, then added a little pop of color with a small blue-bell or two interspersed throughout.

The hair had been the easy part. Now… Now came the hard part… The dress had come with its own lacy, silky soft shift that was practically see through, along with several layers of petticoats, a custom embroidered corset, then the actual, luxuriously embroidered dress.

Zahra would have to stand for at least an hour while they dressed her. Her head was still splitting, worse than her ribs, but she was suffering through on sheer force of will alone. She had asked Mrs. Baird to boil her some water for tea, and she’d made herself her own herbal remedy blend from some
of the herbs in her bag, which would hopefully help take at least some of the edge off. It was nothing even remotely close to opium, but it would help. Mildly.

After she finished her breakfast, which had been a simple slice of warm bread and porridge, and after her second cup of tea, she managed to summon the strength and will to stand and be dressed. She was given a chair to brace her weight on if needs be for even some mild respite, but for the most part she remained standing as Paisley and Mrs. Baird got her dressed. They started with the soft, thigh-high stockings, then the lacey, chiffon-like chemise, then came the corset, which would provide the first relief Zahra felt on her ribs when they actually secured the corset tightly about her. She could breathe and stand easier as the constriction of the corset took much of the strain off of her back and stomach, trying to force herself upright. She breathed a sigh of relief when they cinched it tightly closed. Who would have thought she would have ever been grateful for a corset?

The rest was almost breezy after that and she was glad she had not let them give her the opium. Fucking Dougal. Impatient asshole. Sure her head was throbbing and she was starting to see the appeal of an icepick lobotomy, but still. She’d suffer through this pain a hundred times over if it meant she got to remember this day with all her faculties intact.

When the dress was fully assembled, Paisley helped her slip into the matching silver slippers, and showed her the silver sixpence she dropped in the woman's shoe before she slipped it on. Paisley was amazing.

The older woman stood, then turned Zahra to face the vanity as she secured a matching lacy ribbon around her neck as a choker. “Ye’re positively the most bonny thing I ever saw, lassie. If I’d had half your looks as a lass, I’d have had my pick o’ any highlander in these hills and beyond. Ye’re Jamie’s a lucky man.”

Zahra shook her head, meeting Paisley’s gaze in the mirror. “I’m the lucky one,” she said, smiling softly at her reflection. She’d never been the dress wearing, dulcet female type. Her personal style used to be more tomboy-meets-lipstick-lesbian than dress-wearing-girly-girl, but she had to admit... She did look like a fucking princess. Well, except for the gratuitous amounts of tattoos showing. Both of her tattoo sleeves were on full display, along with the roses across her clavicle. So, maybe a punk princess? The ugly bruise on her cheek, and the split lip even seemed to be overshadowed by this beautiful dress, and the wonders Paisley and her mother did with her hair… She only hoped Jamie liked it as much.

“She’s ready,” Paisley said to the waiting Murtagh out in the hall.

The man turned to enter the room with her long brown cloak draped over his arm, but his pace slowed as he was taken aback by the vision before him. He stepped up next to her, meeting her eyes in the mirror and a genuine grin spread across his lips as he placed his hands on her shoulders. “Aye, lassie… I’ve nae seen a prettier lass since Jamie’s mother was alive.” Zahra beamed at the almost romantic sounding compliment coming from the man. Not romantic towards her but… was there a love triangle in Murtagh's history? She made a note to ask Jamie about it later. Murtagh patted her gently on the shoulders, then placed a mustachioed kiss on the side of her head. “Come,” he said before he stepped back and held out her cloak which he helped secure about her shoulders, hiding her dress almost completely from view. It had holes for the arms to come through, so when Murtagh offered her his arm to take as escort, she looped hers through it.

“Dinnae forget these,” Paisley picked up the bouquet and boutonniere which she handed to Zahra before leaning in to give her a last hug.

“Thank you, Paisley. For everything.” Zahra said and stood back. “You’re coming right?”
Paisley stroked her cheek. “Wouldnae miss it for the world, mistress.”

Zahra smiled and squeezed her hand, then let Murtagh guide her out. The stairs were the hardest part, but once that was over, it was just a small walk through town, to the church on the outskirts of the trees. Zahra was groaning softly every couple steps, and leaning pretty heavily on her companion for support. “Before we get to the church, lassie, I just--I wanted to let you know how grateful I am ye came into our lives. Into Jamie’s life.”

Zahra rested her head against his shoulder, sighing softly, then she heard him sniffle, and saw him raise a hand to swipe at his eye. “Don’t start or you’re gonna make me start,” she cautioned.

Murtagh snickered, then sniffled again. “I’ve not seen him so happy or hopeful since before his mother died... You did that, lassie.” Murtagh pressed a chaste, fatherly kiss to the top of her head once more, which made Zahra close her eyes softly. “So... thank ye.” He sniffled again. “Ye smell as bonny as ye look.”

“Thank you.” Zahra lifted her head. “Paisley and her mom gave me a footbath with lavender oils last night.” Both women were in the enlargening group that was following them to the church.

“They did?” Murtagh looked incredibly surprised about that. That was usually a bridal tradition amongst bloodkin. The oldest matron of the family, gave the bride a foot washing the night before.

“Yeah. I almost fell asleep in the chair,” she admitted with a soft chuckle, which only made her moan softly from pain. “Note to self--try not to laugh.”

“How are ye feeling, by the way?” Murtagh asked conversationally as they now had others walking with them to the church, Rupert and Angus being among them as escorts. They could only see the cloak, had no idea the beauty that lies within.

“How are ye feeling, by the way?” Murtagh asked conversationally as they now had others walking with them to the church, Rupert and Angus being among them as escorts. They could only see the cloak, had no idea the beauty that lies within.

“Honestly? Like death warmed over,” she answered tiredly. “A little nervous maybe, but I think most of all... happy. Excited.” She smiled, huffing softly. “Elated. I mean--this is actually happening isn’t it?” Murtagh nodded his head. “I just--I wish--”

When she didn’t finish that thought, Murtagh prompted her to continue, “What is it, lassie?”

“I wish my father could be here,” she said quietly. “And maybe some of my friends from back home. Laurie and Jim would be gushing and squealing so hard right now.”

“Sorry, ye’re so far from home lass,” Murtagh sympathized as he patted her hand at his elbow.

Zahra shook her head. “Don’t be… I’m not.” She was completely genuine, sincere. “I’m right where I think I’m supposed to be.”

“Aye,” Murtagh agreed as the church came into view. There were folks gathered on the grounds just outside the entrance. “Here we go,” he whispered teasingly, giving her hand another pat. “Ye ready for this, lass?”

Zahra took a few slow, steadying breaths. Her anxiety was spiking a little, there were so many people staring at her expectantly. So many strangers. Steady, Zahra. Courage, Zahra. They stopped just outside the entrance, and everyone started gathering, closing in around her. Breathe, breathe. Ow, not so hard, but breathe. “Zahra? Ye alright?” Murtagh asked. Oh no. No, not now. She couldn’t have a panic attack now!

She turned and watched as a familiar tuft of red hair came up the stairs of the church and it was suddenly like the rest of the world just floated away. All she could hear was her own breathing,
which was happily beginning to calm, and the rabbiting beat of her heart. Just the sight of him caused
any anxiety or panic she had been feeling to flee. A genuine, breathtakingly beautiful grin suddenly
lit up her features as Jamie’s figure came into full view. He was positively the most beautiful, most
handsome, and sexiest thing she’d ever seen. He was wearing his new shirt, and a new tartan she
recognized as the same Fraser pattern as the sash he’d given her. Oh man why hadn’t she worn that?
He was wearing his own colors and he looked amazing. She hadn’t even really noticed when
Murtagh had removed her cloak, only that she saw this pure, unadulterated look of joy cross Jamie’s
features that made her heart skip a beat and for a moment she forgot how to breathe.

That ruggedly, yet somehow also boyishly handsome grin on his recently shaven face suddenly
turned somewhat sly as he gave her another once-over, then marched closer to her. He placed his
hand over his heart when he stopped mere inches from her, then gave her a proper, gentlemanly
bow. “Your servant, madam,” he said softly as he stood.

It was like just seeing him had magically taken her pain away and all she could feel was this
overwhelming joy and she couldn’t stop smiling. She reciprocated his gesture by taking her dress and
offering him a formal curtsy. “And yours, sir.”

When they both stood, their eyes were for each other and no one else in that moment, neither able to
look away. Zahra worried on her bottom lip, then turned to hand her bouquet to Paisley behind her.
She stepped forward, closing the distance between them as she pinned her home-made boutonniere
to the lapel button of his frock-coat.

“Wha’s this?” He asked as he watched her closely, his eyes roaming over her features, her lips that
still sported a cut but looked so kissably soft. Her hair that was loosely braided atop her head in two
rows, with wisps of white heather woven throughout, making her look like some magical elven
creature. Where’d she find white heather and how? First, there had been her amazingly thoughtful
gift of this beautiful sark, now this lapel pin with a Scottish thistle? He had been trying to behave and
withhold any shows of affection until after the ceremony, but he couldn’t help himself. He reached
for her cheek, and when she looked up at him and their eyes met, it was like the earth stood still. As
if she were the sun itself and he was helplessly caught within her gravitational pull, and his lips
sealed warmly against hers.

Dougal shoved on Jamie’s shoulder. “A’right, a’right.” They broke the kiss, pulling away from each
other and blushing fiercely. “If you two are quite finished… Let’s get on with it, shall we?”

Jamie entered ahead of her, followed by the others. She took her bouquet back from Paisley, and the
two women shared a last embrace before the older woman went inside. Zahra pressed her hand to
her flushed cheeks, then took a few steadying breaths. She pressed her arm to her side as most of the
pain had returned, but at least the headache was mostly gone now. Just a little aura in the back of her
brain. A wedding marchey type of piper cadence began to play and Zahra remembered to enter
leading with her right foot, as Paisley had told her.

Murtagh held his hand out to her at the bottom of the stairs, and he was the one who escorted her
down the aisle to the waiting Jamie. She ignored the rest of the strangers surrounding her, only
having eyes for the man at the pew next to the priest. When she reached the pulpit, the piper music
slowly came to an end. Murtagh gave her a kiss on the cheek before guiding her up on the step to
face Jamie. He then took each of them by the hand to join them together, as Jamie’s godfather,
officially blessing their union. He then took up his place next to and behind Jamie as his best man.

The priest was a windbag, pleased with his own voice, and for the most part Zahra completely
blocked him out, still mostly hearing the sound of her own rapidly beating heart in her ears. She
couldn’t stop squeezing Jamie’s hand and biting coyly on her bottom lip. Her cheeks were still
flushed from blushing so hard. She just wanted this to be over so they could celebrate properly.

It wasn’t until Jamie looked away from her, to the priest that the world came flooding back to her and she realized she should be paying attention to this part, especially when Jamie started speaking next. “I, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser, take thee, Leilani Zahra Quigley, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forth. For better or worse, in sickness and health, til death us do part.”

Zahra felt like she was gonna float away, or her heart was gonna burst free from her chest, or both. Oh, it was her turn? “I, Leilani Zahra Quigley, take thee, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser, to be my wedded husband,” the grin that blossomed on her face, and the emotions that had tears suddenly swimming in her eyes, also threatened to choke her in her throat. She cleared her throat, and squeezed Jamie’s hand. “-to have and to hold from this day forth. For better or worse, in sickness and health, til death us do part.” She licked her lips and her breath quickened in her chest.

“Do you have a ring?” the priest asked.

“Aye,” Jamie said as he fished something out of his pocket and set it on the priest’s bible. Zahra gazed at it a moment, before turning back to look into his eyes while the priest blessed the ring in latin... “Et spiritus sancti. Amen.”

“Amen,” Jamie said as he took the ring back, and Zahra also, surprisingly, repeated the ‘amen’ part. She watched closely, worrying on her bottom lip again as Jamie took her hand and slipped the simple metal band onto her finger. It was just a simple iron band, but Zahra hadn’t been expecting any ring. Was this his second surprise? She beamed as she stretched her fingers, looking at the ring, then met his gaze once more.

Dougal was suddenly there, pulling Jamie’s own knife from his belt, where the older man proceeded to use it to cut Jamie’s left wrist. Zahra willingly surrendered her own wrist to the older man when he took it. When Dougal saw for the first time, the huge scar that was already there, that ran up the entire length of her forearm, he hesitated. It was just a moment’s hesitation, though, blink and you’d miss it, he was slicing her wrist open in the next instant, then pressing their sliced wrists together, mingling their blood. Jamie grabbed Zahra’s wrist, as she wrapped her hand around his, and Dougal was securing a white silky wrap around both of their hands a moment later and tying it tight.

‘Always so dramatic,’ Zahra mouthed to Jamie inaudibly, but Jamie was able to understand the gist of it and it made that playful smirk she loved so much appear on his face. Jamie pulled her closer and whispered, “Say the words after me.” She nodded in understanding, then listened intently as Jamie began to recite something in Gaelic. Zahra repeated every line as closely as she could understand, which after spending almost six weeks in the company of men who primarily spoke in Gaelic, was much easier than it would have been when she first got here. She didn’t know what the words meant, but she made a mental note to ask Jamie about them later when they were alone.

When the Gaelic vow was done, the priest finally said the words they’d been dying to here. “Ye may kiss your bride.”

Another huge, joyful grin spread on Jamie’s face before he was pulling gently on Zahra’s wrist, his right hand reached to hold her face, and a moment later their lips were sealed in a blissful wedding kiss. A kiss that while they somehow managed to keep it strictly PG, it still managed to steal both of their breaths away. They were broken apart solely by the sound of clapping that echoed through the small cathedral, and they turned, smiling to the wedding party.

Fre’ja! Zahra’s flowers suddenly went spilling to the ground when her hand shot up to press her fist to the side of her head as a screeching sound like a microphone’s feedback suddenly threatened to
make her head and her eardrums explode.

“Leeloo!” Jamie called but she could not hear him. Her mouth was open in a silent scream… Just as quickly as it started, it was suddenly over, though, and Zahra sagged against him weakly. Jamie gripped her close with his right arm, pressing his lips to the crown of her hair. “Come on,” he said as he practically carried her through the crowd, his right arm secured about her shoulders, holding her close against him as their left hands were still clasped and bound between them. Murtagh dipped to pick up her bouquet as he followed.

Fortunately, in their own mirthful celebrations after the highly anticipated kiss, no one actually seemed to notice that little event except Jamie and maybe a few of the others in their little band of mischiefs. Jamie nodded, and smiled, and shook hands as they walked through the crowd towards the exit, well wishers throwing rice and flower petals at them on the way.

“What just happened?” Murtagh asked as he moved up next to them, on Zahra’s opposite side.

“I’m alright,” she assured them once they were outside.

“What was that?” Jamie asked in concern, smiling politely at a well-wisher racing past to get back to the inn for the celebration banquet.

Zahra shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t know. It was just--this squealing high pitched noise and pain and then suddenly everything was fine.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “I’m fine,” she said with a smile. “I mean my ribs are still fucked, but other than that--everything’s five by five.”

Jamie pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “You frightened me.”

“And me,” Murtagh admitted.

“And me,” Rupert suddenly said from Jamie’s other side.

“And me,” said Angus suddenly next to him. “Sorry, what are we talkin’ about?” Rupert rolled his eyes and smacked his friend upside the back of his head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten any of you.” She squeezed Jamie’s hand, which was still bound by the handfasting knot between them. “I think it was just--some weird residual pain from my migraine this morning.”

“This morning was an altogether different kind of terrifying,” Jamie admitted. “Do healers always make the worst patients?” Zahra chuckled, turned her head, and bit his hand that was resting on her shoulder. “Ai!” Jamie declared, pulling his hand away. “I hope ye know ye’re gon ta pay for tha’, lass,” he declared threateningly, but they both knew it was playful in nature and not serious.

“Oh no, whatever shall I do,” she monotoned sarcastically.

The group of friends walked joyfully back to the tavern where a small feast was already spread out in the taproom, along with various ales and wines. Zahra and Jamie had carefully slipped their hands out of the fasting knot as it was tradition to save it and display it someplace special.

Once everyone was sitting with some food, Zahra tinged a knife against her wine goblet as she stood. “My friends, if I may… I just wanted to thank you for celebrating with us on this, the day of our wedding… I am overwhelmed… that I was able to make it up and down those stairs.” She fluffed a hand at her skirt, poking fun at herself and the fact that her dress was so large she filled a doorway. Her joke successfully got a laugh out of all the gathered guests. She was also poking at her injuries as well but not everyone knew about those.
Jamie who was still seated, wrapped his arm around her waist and held her close, watching her and grinning like the most prideful loon. Zahra rested her own arm atop his shoulders and continued. “I am told it is a tradition--in my new homeland--” as she said this she glanced down into Jamie’s eyes, smiling, and the man lifted her free hand to place a kiss on her wrist. “...for the bride to apparently--try to get the entire wedding party loaded, so...” Another chorus of laughter as Zahra clapped her hands. “Where’s the--oh!” Paisley had walked around to bring her a silver bowl with two small handles. Zahra took it with a “Thank you, my dear Paisley.” She then held it up for all to see. “I am told this is called a Quaich?” She even managed to pronounce it right. After she set it on the table, she took a bottle of whiskey and filled it near to the brim, then put the stopper back in the bottle which she set aside. She held the quaich carefully, before she declared, “Slàinte-var.”

“Slàinte mhath!” they all chorused back.

Zahra lifted the quaich to her lips and took a sip, then passed it onto Jamie, who took his own sip before he passed it to Murtagh, who drank, then passed it to Dougal, etcetera, etcetera, and so on and so forth until the entire gathering had drank from the cup. Zahra sat after she’d taken her drink, groaning mildly in discomfort and gripping for her side.

“Ye’re just full of surprises today,” Jamie said as he turned her face towards him and stole a whiskey flavored kiss.

She lifted her hand to touch his face and stole another one of her own. “I wanted to make you as happy as you make me,” she admitted softly against his lips. “Are you happy?”

“Oh, mo ghaol,” he said as he played with one of the loose wispy locks of her hair. “Ye didnae have to do all that to make me happy... but I’ll admit, I’m grateful ye did.” He nuzzled his nose against hers, captured her chin between his thumb and the knuckle of his pointer finger, and held her still as he stole another kiss.

Someone else demanded a toast to the happy couple, and they all cried Slàinte mhath before taking another drink. This went on for a while, until everyone was feeling nice and relaxed. And drunk.

“Sing!” Angus declared drunkenly as he stood up and reached across the table to poke Zahra’s shoulder. “Zahra, sing!”

Zahra rolled her eyes. “Sit down, Angus, you’re drunk.”

“Doesnae mean ye cannae sing, lass.” He plopped back down in his seat. "Please?” He asked nicely.

Zahra took in a deep breath and exhaled on a sigh, then rolled her eyes once more. “I suppose, since you asked so nicely.” She was practically using Jamie as a chair, because she needed the back support because of her ribs but he was honestly glad to be able to hold her. She worried on her bottom lip a little, and tapped on her chin thinking. What type of songs did Monty always like to blare in Engineering when he was drinking by himself in the rafters? They were always lively and rambunctious.

"Ooh! Ok I got one. Monty used to drive us crazy with this one, but it’s a lot of fun." She started tapping her hand against the table in a steady 4/4 beat. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh. Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh.” She stopped thumping her hand but continued singing. “Now in this bog there was a hole, a rare hole, a rattlin hole. A hole in the bog and the bog down in the valley, oh.”

The steady tapping of her hand started again. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley,
oh.” A few others started joining in the clapping or stomping. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh.” She stopped the beat again. “And in that hole there was a tree, a rare tree, a rattlin tree, a tree in the hole and the hole in the bog and the bog down in the valley, oh!” Angus yipped, and started stomping along with her as she continued the beat. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh. Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh.”

She grinned and sliced her hand in the air indicating to stop the beat again. “And on that tree there was a branch, a rare branch a rattlin’ branch. A branch on the tree, and the tree in the hole, and the hole in the bog, and the bog down in the valley, oh!” Almost everyone was joining with the stomping now as Zahra continued to sing and a few catchers on joined her weakly. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh. Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh!”

It was a Roud Folk song and most of the party goers were familiar with how a song like that worked, so Zahra would sing alone as she kept adding things to the tree in the hole in the bog, and everyone else would join in singing and stomping or clapping along to the chorus. It went on and on for many many verses, and they never seemed to tire of it, thoroughly enjoying themselves with her lively folk song. Granted, most of them were knackered so this was lively entertainment.

“And on that heel… there was a nail, a rare nail… a rattlin’ nail.” She took in a deep breath. "A nail on the heel, and the heel on the shoe, and the shoe on the foot, and the foot on the leg, and the leg on the flea, and the flea on the feather, and the feather on the chick, and the chick in the nest, and the nest on the twig, and the twig on the branch, and the branch on the tree, and the tree in the hole, and the hole in the bog, and the bog down in the valley, oh!” She managed to mostly legibly speed through that entire thing in one breath which earned her a variety of whoops, hollers and cheers when she finished with that one.

After a beat, they all broke out stomping and clapping and drumming on the table as they finished the chorus together. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh! Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh!” They repeated the chorus a second time but slowing it down drastically by the end. “Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh! Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh!”

The guests clapped, and whooped, and hollered, and cheered, beating their hands like drum rolls on the table. Jamie and everyone gathered had seemed to enjoy that immensely, but Jamie could see the toll this was taking on his beautiful bride and their night was far from over. He whispered something in her ear and Zahra nodded. Jamie slowly stood and took Zahra’s hand to help her off the bench, then led her by the hand around the gathered partiers. They couldn’t have tried to “sneak off” if their lives depended on it as every pair of eyes watched them, heckling and cheering them on.

The cheers, catcalls, whoops, and heckles only got louder as they neared the stairs. Jamie bantered back at them in Gaelic as he let Zahra go ahead of him up the stairs. When she took that first step however, she made a pained noise and stopped. She looked over her shoulder at Jamie and then the man suddenly hoisted her into his arms, bridal style, which the crowd really seemed to enjoy as they went crazier. As Jamie carried her up the stairs they got even more rowdy and rambunctious if that were even possible. When they reached the balcony, Zahra turned the handle on the door and Jamie kicked it open gently with his foot, to another round of uproarious applause. With a final wave, Jamie carried Zahra across the threshold, and the door shut behind him.
Consummation

Chapter Summary

You are the marrow in my bones and the blood in my veins.

I shall give you my body, that the two might be one

I shall give you whole my soul, until our world ends.

Chapter Notes

Yeah, just as the title implies this chapter is consummate smut with some plot thrown in for good measure. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ho, ro, the rattlin bog, the bog down in the valley, oh! Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog, the bog down in the valley, oh!” They repeated the chorus a second time but slowing it down by the end. “Ho, ro, the rattlin bog, the bog down in the valley, oh! Ho, ro, the rattlin’ bog… the bog down in the valley, oh!”

Zahra grinned as the gathered partiers all whooped and hollered and cheered, but that had been utterly exhausting. Jamie’s mouth pressed to her ear, his breath tickling against her skin causing goosebumps to bloom all over her arms, and the hairs at the back of her neck to stand on end. “Time to go to bed,” he whispered, his voice managing to carry an incredibly sexy, lusty quality to it that had desire and heat immediately pooling between her legs.

Her eyes closed, eyelashes resting softly against her cheeks, and she took a steadying breath before turning to look at him over her shoulder where she gave him a nod. “Aye,” she said softly. A sultry grin erupted on Jamie's lips and Zahra sat up a little to let him get up first, then the man held his hand out to her to help her up as well.

No sooner were they out of their seats than the cat calls and heckles began. Zahra turned red from hair to feet as she gripped onto Jamie’s hand in hers and let him lead her around the banquet tables towards the stairs that led up to their bridal suite. He stopped to let her go up first, where Zahra hefted her skirts in both hands and took the first step, but it put so much strain on her ribs, she had to stop. She dropped her skirts to grip one hand on the railing and the other held her side. She turned and gave Jamie a helpless expression over her shoulder. The man did not even hesitate as he swooped in to lift her effortlessly into his arms. Zahra wrapped her arm around his shoulders, while her other pressed against her wounded ribs. She pressed her mouth to his ear and whispered, “Tha gaol agam ort,” before nipping his earlobe with her teeth.

Jamie growled hungrily at her, though it could hardly be heard over the ruckus of the banquet party cheers. When they reached the balcony landing, Zahra quickly turned the door handle, then Jamie kicked the door open. Zahra had barely managed to get in a final wave before he turned to carry her in sideways over the threshold in true bridal fashion.
Jamie barely managed to kick the door shut behind before Zahra was gripping his face in her hands and her lips descended on his in a heated, hungry kiss. Zahra might have started the kiss, but the moment Jamie set her on her feet, he took over. His own hands dwarfed her cheeks and his lips, tongue, and teeth dueled with hers for control of the kiss.

Zahra’s side was burning from how heavily and deeply she was breathing but she didn’t care. She was driven solely by this overwhelming desire, this need to finally feel him inside of her. Just the thought erupted goosebumps all over her arms again and she moaned against his mouth. “I hate--these fucking clothes,” she muttered against his mouth as she struggled with the buttons on his waistcoat. Fortunately for her, he’d already removed his outer frock coat downstairs.

“Aye,” Jamie couldn’t agree more as he was positively flabbergasted as how to get Zahra out of the many layers of her dress.

Zahra managed to remove his scabbard belt, the one that was for carrying his weapons, but he was still wearing another one that was holding his kilt up. She tossed it aside carelessly then finished unbuttoning his vest, pushing that off his shoulders as well. Her hands then reached for the buckle on his kilt belt, but he grabbed her wrists gently and brought them to his mouth to lay a kiss on the pulse point of each one. Zahra’s brows pinched together and she whimpered softly. “We dinnae have to rush,” he reminded her softly.

“I know,” she said, breathlessly. “I just--I need you inside me like--now.” Jamie could see and feel her skin prickle with goosebumps at her own arousing thoughts, and he let out a soft whimper of his own. Zahra leaned in and stole a sensually soft kiss, that left their lips tingling. She exhaled roughly then she slowly turned her back to him. “When I said you would have to unwrap me, I didn’t know I was going to be meaning that in the literal sense.”

Jamie brushed his fingers up her arms, making her shiver and her breath quicken. “I did,” Jamie whispered close to her ear as his fingers trailed over her shoulders, and down her back to the lacing at the back of her dress bodice. His fingers began to undo the lacing and he pressed a kiss to the top of her spine, which made her shiver yet again.

"Hurry," she breathed out impatiently which made Jamie chuckle softly against her skin.

It took a minute or two but Jamie finally managed to pull the lacing of the bodice free, then untied the string for the attached skirt. There were like three other petticoats and a bustle underneath that he also went ahead and untied, before he helped push the sleeves of the dress down her arms, letting his hands glide down her skin as he did, causing more goosebumps to erupt over her skin in their wake.

Jamie was very slow and deliberate in everything he was doing and it was making Zahra dizzy with anticipation, arousal, and need. He pressed another kiss to her shoulder while his hands trailed down her sides. He pushed the layers of stiff, thick fabric down over her hips, then further on down her thighs before he let the material fall to her feet. The petticoats and fabrics were so thick, though, that they didn’t really fall past her knees, and her skirts were essentially sort of trapping her legs in place. Jamie’s hands trailed to the front of her thighs where he gripped gently and pulled her back against him with a soft groan. He whispered something in Gaelic against her ear, then pressed a kiss to her neck as he untied the lace choker there and pulled it free.

Zahra exhaled heavily and turned in his embrace to wrap her arms around his shoulders and desperately claim his mouth with hers. Jamie’s hands curved down over her backside, then further down the backs of her thighs where he gripped firmly and easily lifted her off her feet. She instinctively spread her legs to wrap around his waist as he effortlessly carried her to the nearest surface, which happened to be the dresser. He set her down on top of it, pulled her pelvis flush against his, and rolled his hips against her.
“Jamie,” Zahra breathed out against his mouth as her hands fisted in his hair. His face burrowed into the crook of her neck where it met her shoulder and he groaned against her skin. She was still in that barely there shift, her corset, stockings, shoes, and Jamie was still in his boots, kilt, and sark. He had wanted her naked, but god dammit he just needed to be inside her.

“Leeloo,” he groaned before she tugged on his hair to pull his face up so she could kiss him again. She continued kissing him as her hands pulled and tugged at his belt… Then suddenly their chamber door burst open.

“I told ye to stand back, ye coof, ye!” they heard Rupert say.

“I wasnae gonna ponce around outside the door, was I?” And Angus was right behind him. “Waitin’ for them to answer… like we were just comin’ by for a wee cup o’ tea.”

“Amadain,” Jamie angrily declared them both fools. Rupert was certainly grinning like a drunken fool as he’d been the first to catch them in their almost predicament. Jamie quickly moved to block Zahra from their view, and the woman carefully stepped down off the dresser, to hide behind her human shield. Jamie was still mostly fully clothed but Zahra was practically naked in naught but her see through chemise and corset. “And just what are ye doing?” Jamie demanded angrily.

Zahra was peeking around Jamie’s shoulder, his frame still blocking most of her body from view. “What part of ‘No. Neither of you may watch,’ was unclear to you?” Angus was smirking at her and Zahra rolled her eyes.

“Ah, Dougal sent us up to see if ye’d, eh--” Rupert gestured crudely with an obvious thrust of his hips. “Y’ken?”

“Now who’s the coof?” Angus said. “They’ve still got their clothes on!” He argued, gesturing wildly with his arm.

“Get out!” Jamie shouted as he shoved Rupert’s chest. He turned to look at Zahra and she was grinning, which she hid behind her hand.

“It can happen. I’ve seen ‘em do stuff with their clothes on before,” Rupert said, still smiling like the drunken fool he was, but he was backing out of the room all the same.

“Auch, I know that, but not on their wed--wait?” Angus seemed to catch onto what Rupert had just admitted. “You’ve seen ‘em wha’?”

“A-mach á seo!” Jamie declared again as he gave them both another angry shove.

“Tha’s no fair!” Angus said. “I was just hopin’ to get a wee keek at her nobbli--” Jamie slammed the door in their faces, then locked it, cursing them softly in Gaelic.

When he turned back around, Zahra was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning back on one arm, while the other was held tight against her side. When she locked gazes with him, she started giggling uncontrollably. “And you’re related to them, I’m so sorry,” she said teasingly.

Jamie snickered and shook his head. “Only Rupert… Distant cousin.” He made sure to clarify the distant part. “Are ye in much pain?” He asked, noting how she was leaning and the grip she had on her side.

She started to shake her head but remembered their promise to tell each other the truth and so she bit down on her bottom lip and nodded instead. “It’s like--no matter what position I’m in--it just hurts. Just this--constant ache.” She held out her hand to him. "When I’m touching you, though, when
you’re touching me… It’s easy to forget.”

Jamie reached down to pull one of his boots off, then the second, followed by his woolen stockings which went inside each boot. His steps were much quieter now as he moved towards her in bare feet, dropping his boots by the end of the bed. The look in his eyes wasn’t predatory exactly, but it was definitely hungry, lusty, arousing, desirous, wanting, loving. It made Zahra’s bosom start to heave over the top of her corset again as her breathing heavied, and quickened with each step he took closer to her.

He had taken her outstretched hand and placed it over his heart, and she was forced to tilt her head back to look into his face as he now stood in front of her. His gaze was full of longing, tenderness, love, and he reached out to touch calloused fingers to the roses inked on her chest. “You know--since the first moment I met you--I’ve yearned and ached to see every single tattoo inked on your body.” He lifted that same hand to hold her cheek and Zahra helplessly nuzzled her face into his palm. Jamie slowly sank to his knees on the floor before her, where Zahra willingly spread her legs to cradle his waist between her thighs.

“Well?” She said breathily, gazing just as longingly into his eyes. “What’s stopping you, now?”

He brushed his thumb over the bruised apple of her cheek, then surged forward to claim her lips again. Zahra’s arms wrapped around his neck, returning the kiss just as greedily. His hands then moved down to grip her hips where he pulled her flush against him at the edge of the bed. He broke his mouth from hers only to kiss a trail down her neck and her chest where he then laid a kiss at the top of each breast. Meanwhile, his hands moved down her hips, her thighs, and he leaned back away from her a bit, causing Zahra to have to remove her arms from his shoulders to once again brace them on the mattress behind her to help her sit upright.

Zahra watched him intently as he removed one of her shoes, then the other, which was when he found the sixpence inside. “What’s this?” He asked as he lifted it from the sole of her shoe.

Zahra worried on her bottom lip. “Paisley said it’s a blessing for prosperity and good fortune.”

Jamie smirked and put it back in the shoe before setting them both aside. “Oh, aye? What else did Paisley say?” He asked with a grin as he slipped both hands up under the bottom of her shift, past her knees, to her thighs where he gripped the top of each stocking and began to slowly peel them down, off her legs.

It was super distracting and Zahra had to close her eyes and lick her lips to try to focus her thoughts. “She, uh--she told me a story about a lass named Malavan, and, uh--” She licked her lips again and swallowed hard. “--her lover Oscar who tragically died before they could wed. Her tears turned the heather white…” Jamie knew the legend of Oscar and Malavan and now he also understood why Zahra had the heather in her hair and her bouquet today. The fact that she had done that for him, willingly sought out traditions of his people to incorporate into their impromptu wedding… Well it filled him with an altogether deeper kind of love and admiration, just when he didn’t think he could possibly love her more.

When he’d removed the stockings, they were discarded carelessly aside so he could run his hands and his eyes down the puzzle of severely intricate, and complicated markings that decorated her entire right leg from ankle to thigh; like a greeve of armor that covered her entire leg. At his touch, Zahra’s head fell back gently, her eyes closed, and a breathy sigh escaped her lips as she felt his calloused palms and fingers move over her skin. “I cannae imagine how badly this must have hurt,” he said as he gently traced the designs with his fingers.

Zahra smirked and raised her head to watch him, then extended one hand to comb her fingers
through his hair. “Not nearly as bad as the one on my hip, or my pubic bone.” His head lifted to look at her, then his eyes trailed down her body to glance over her hip before settling his gaze at the juncture between her thighs. She had a tattoo there? His hand reached out and touched her through the thin material of her shift, then his head lifted to meet her eyes again, questioningly. Zahra just nodded, and said, “Yeah.” Her voice was breathy, the touch sending yet another bolt of heat and arousal straight to her core. “I wanted something to--” She worried on her bottom lip, and her gaze dropped away from his in embarrassment. “--cover the scar.”

Oh no! No, no. That’s not where he wanted this night to go at all. Jamie lifted his hand, reached for her face and surged forward to claim her mouth with his once again, thoroughly kissing all those thoughts away. As the kiss deepened, his hands gripped her hips and he pulled her off the bed onto his lap on the floor. He gripped the back of her head as he dominated the kiss, pouring every ounce of love, affection, and desire he felt for her into it, drinking so deeply from her lips that it left them both panting and needy.

“Jamie, please,” Zahra murmured against his mouth. Her core was pulsing with each beat of her heart and she was desperate to be filled by him, to share that final connection. “I need you inside me, please?” It was like a physical ache that had nothing to do with her injuries.

“Hold onto me,” he told her and made sure she had her legs and arms firmly wrapped around him before he wrapped one strong arm behind her back, then braced the other on the edge of the bedframe and raised himself to stand. He raised one knee up onto the mattress, climbing up onto it, then braced his weight on his arm before he lowered her carefully to her back. His mouth was on hers again, stealing greedy, hungry kisses, but he made sure to keep his weight off of her, to not crush her, knowing she was injured.

Zahra was ignoring her pain, knowing she would probably regret it in the morning, but she didn’t care right now. All she knew was she needed him inside her yesterday. She returned his kisses with needy ones of her own while her hands worked to undo the belt securing his kilt, then pulled it free and tossed it aside. “You were wearing--Fraser colors today,” she breathed out while he helped her pull his kilt free.

“Aye,” he responded with a smirk then he tossed the Fraser tartan as carelessly aside as his belt. “I only plan to be married but once.” He whispered against her lips, sharing her breath. “Couldnae do it in any colors but my own.” Zahra moaned softly and they shared another sensual, languid kiss before Jamie slowly trailed his lips down her body. He eventually leaned back on his heels and watched her face as he reached a hand back to pull his shirt off over his head.

Zahra’s pupils dilated so wide, and she let out a soft moan as she watched him fully reveal himself to her. She worried on her bottom lip as he leaned over her and her hands reached forward to touch his newly exposed torso. She’d seen him shirtless countless times, but now he was here with her like this, and all his. She could finally take the time to touch and explore, so she did; letting her fingers and nails move over his skin, scratching through the short tuft of ginger on his chest, following it down the happy trail over washboard abs, down to the apex of his hips. She moaned again when she saw his cock, fully hard and weeping for her. She’d seen it before, but not like this; not with him kneeling between her spread legs; not when their hips were so perfectly slotted and aligned together that it was as if they’d been made to fit like two perfect pieces of the same puzzle. It would only take a quick shift or two of their bodies before he was filling her and the thought drove her mad with lust, pulled a heady moan from her throat, even though he hadn’t actually touched her.

Zahra was so responsive, always so responsive to him and it made his chest swell with masculine pride, and his cock twitched with arousal and need. She felt that twitch in her hands, but before she could go through with her imaginings and guide him home like she so desperately wanted, she felt
his strong hands gently circling her wrists and lifting them off of him. She looked up, brows pinched together, and watched him raise her hands to his lips again to lay a kiss on each palm. He was leaning over her next, and moving her arms to pin them above her head a moment later. “My turn,” he whispered before leaning down and capturing her lips again. He didn’t linger as long as she wanted, however, making her chase after him with a whimper when he broke away.

She laid back down, sighing heavily, swallowing and breathing hard as she watched him undo the lace on her corset. They both let out a huffy sort of dry laugh, equally frustrated with how long it took to undo the laces. Once the corset was fully unlaced and open, though, she was left with the full, unconstricted pain in her ribs which made her groan softly in pain. Jamie looked at her face, obviously concerned, but she just reached up and touched his cheek, smiling. "It's ok. I'm fine. Please, don’t stop.”

Jamie nodded and helped pull the corset free then tossed it aside with everything else. His head did this adorable puppy like tilt when he gazed at her chest and saw something he hadn't expected; his sgian-dubh laying against her sternum. He smirked crookedly as he plucked the knife off her bosom, then held it aloft so she could see. He quirked a single ginger brow of question at her and Zahra just shrugged, grinning. “Call it a security blanket?”

Jamie grinned back, chuckling softly at her before he turned and gently dropped the small dagger into one of his boots on the side of the bed. After that, his attention immediately returned to the beautiful goddess beneath him, and he let his eyes sweep over her languorously. The shift she wore left practically nothing to the imagination, but that was part of the arousal, part of the tease. It was like she was naked beneath him but not quite.

His eyes roamed over her hungrily, making Zahra shiver with anticipation. “Hurry,” she pleaded making Jamie chuckle low in his chest.

“Nae, lass. Dinnae rush me in this,” he said as he touched his hands to her knees that were resting over his thighs. He then glided his palms down her thighs, pressing his thumbs firmly into that tendon on the inside, making her gasp. The fabric of her shift hooked over his hands so he was lifting it free as he went. Zahra lifted her bottom so he could push the garment past her hips, which was where he stalled momentarily, his eyes fixated on her newly exposed sex, and the intricate, Indian lace, floral type design that rested just at the top of her mound. His mouth went dry, brows pinched together, and he groaned almost as if in pain. He wanted to touch her badly, and he saw and felt his own cock twitch with desire before settling against her again.

Zahra let out her own moan as her hips subtly moved against him, seeking, questing, needing. “Jamie!” She pleaded wantonly and Jamie found his own patience giving way. She wasn’t the only one who desperately wanted to be inside of her.

Jamie cursed deeply in Gaelic and finished lifting her shift up her body, though he stalled yet again when he’d exposed her ribs and saw the angry, purple, green, and black bruising marring her otherwise perfectly fair skin. He forced himself to move on though, exposing her ample bosom, which earned another awed, but pained sounding gasp. She arched her shoulders for him and he was lifting the material completely off in the next moment, leaving her fully exposed before him.

“Aye, mo ghaol,” he said, followed by a bunch of unintelligible, sweet nothings muttered in his native Gaelic while his eyes roamed over her. He continued praising her beauty in his native tongue; her figure was goddess-like, so perfectly soft, and supple; Aphrodite would be jealous.

The way he was looking at her, as if she were the 8th wonder of the world, well it was doing all kinds of things to her insides. “God, Jamie,” she gasped out as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “You’re looking at me--as if you’ve never--seen a naked woman before.”
“Aye, I havnae… At least, never one so close.” Jamie’s lips tilted up in a crooked sort of smirk as his strong, calloused palms cupped and massaged her breasts, thumbs teasing over the distended peaks of her nipples, causing her to moan and arch off the bed slightly. By God, she was so unbelievably smooth and her curves were sinly, yet Jamie could clearly see and feel the strong, defined muscles beneath her otherwise soft and supple frame. “And never… one that was mine,” he declared possessively before he bent over her to claim her mouth in a brief, but hungry kiss that left her panting and breathless. He was leaning up a moment later to let his eyes devour her some more, then his palms followed, roaming greedily over every inch of newly exposed flesh that was flushed a beautiful rosy color from her arousal. Arousal that he had caused.

“You can look--all you want later,” she promised impatiently, reaching for him and trying to circle her hand around his cock. “I need you inside me now, Jamie, please don’t make me wait anymore! Please!” She was literally begging him now, any patience she had completely gone. His cock twitched in her hand, and Jamie’s brows stitched together with a groan. He gripped her wrist of the hand that was holding him and gently lifted it away as he leaned up and over her. He once more brought her hand to his face to press a kiss on her palm, before he gazed seriously into her eyes. “You tell me--if I’m hurting you,” he said. It was not a question or a request. Zahra swallowed hard and nodded her head, but Jamie wanted a verbal understanding, so he leaned further over her, bracing himself on his fist. “You tell me, Leeloo,” he repeated for emphasis.

“Yes!” she gasped out. “If it’s too much I’ll tell you to stop.” Her hands reached up to grip his shoulders. "I promise!" She ignored the pain she felt when she pulled herself forward to claim his lips with her own. Zahra wondered, not for the first time, if Jamie had any knowledge or idea that he had a Dom voice that was sexy as fuck.

Jamie returned the kiss as he reached down between their bodies, took himself in hand, then slipped his length between her slick folds. He swallowed down her desperate moans as he moved subtly against her, slickening himself up with her own fluids. Zahra, for her part, felt like she was about to hyperventilate at this point or pass out from lack of oxygen. “Jamie?!” she whined in frustration. The man growled low in his chest and surged his hips forward until he was sinking slowly into her wet heat. Zahra’s back bowed off the bed, and she let out a loud, guttural, uninhibited moan from the long-overdue, but wholly welcomed intrusion.

In the taproom below, things suddenly grew quiet and every pair of eyes turned to gaze up at the bridal suite door. Rupert was once more grinning like a loon, along with Angus and almost everyone else before they got back to their festivities. “I believe we just got confirmation that the deed is done,” Rupert muttered to Dougal, who was still stink-eyeing the balcony door.

Her inner walls fluttered around and hugged him so perfectly tight it was like she had been made for him. Jamie withdrew partly before sinking right back into her heat with a heady groan, which also brought another pleasured moan from the woman beneath him. He leaned back on his heels once more, gripping her hips tightly in both hands to hold her steady as he gently rutted into her. He was staring, transfixed at where their bodies connected, watching as his cock disappeared into her velvety heat with each steady thrust. He’d never felt anything so amazing and wonderful in his life.

Testingly, to see her reaction, he withdrew almost all the way out, only to sink even deeper into her warm, wet heat. “Oh my god, Jamie,” she moaned out his name as Jamie’s head fell back in ecstasy. He muttered something in Gaelic as Zahra gripped and pushed at his knees which were all she could reach from this position. “Come on,” she said and tried moving her hips against him to urge him faster, but he was controlling his thrusts with the vice-grip on her hips. “Won’t break me, Jamie, I
promise. Come on!"

Jamie gripped her hips tighter in his hands, withdrew almost entirely, then thrust into her in one hard, quick motion. “Oh, fuck, yes!” She cried out, back arching off the bed again as her hands gripped the comforter on either side of her head. Jamie thoroughly enjoyed that response, so he did it again... "Oh! Fuck!" and again... "Oh my god!" and again. Zahra cried out her pleasure to him every time. The expression on her face was like pure, euphoric bliss, so he did not relent. He trusted her when she promised she would tell him if it was too much, if it hurt. So he leaned over her, bracing one hand on the headboard above her, while the other gripped her bottom, just holding her as he took her just as hard as she asked for, which caused the bed frame to hit the wall a few times. Oops.

He was already so close, though, which was the problem. He didn’t know how long he could keep this up. Too many weeks and hours upon hours of foreplay. “Leeloo,” he warned.

“Me too,” she breathed out. “Almost there, baby, just... Oh, fuck... Fuck...” She bit her bottom lip and Jamie watched her move one hand down her own body, completely mesmerized as she began to touch and play with herself. “Yes! Yes! Nnngh, don’t stop, baby, I’m so close! Fuck, so close... Oh, fuck... Fffuuuck...” He could feel her thighs squeezing his waist and he was having to struggle to push harder past her tightening inner walls. Her vocalizations seemed to die off right when she was on that cusp, and then suddenly, “Oh, fuck, yes, Jamie!” Her free hand had a white-knuckled grip in the blanket above her head, her fingers rubbed rapidly across her sex, her back bowed impossibly taut against him, and she shivered uncontrollably while she came undone.

"Jesus Christ!" He felt her tremble beneath him and around him and that was his final undoing. “Leeloo!” her name fell from his lips in wonder and praise as his hips thrust hard into her a final time, then stilled with his cock buried to the hilt inside of her. He spilled inside of her, groaning and gasping as her walls milked his own orgasm from him. "Nnnngh-ah!" His head fell back and his hand was probably gonna leave bruises on her hip, he was gripping her so hard.

Once more, the taproom below grew eerily silent as the passionate cries from upstairs managed to break through the din of the small crowd of stragglers remaining. They all seemed to stare transfixed at the bridal suite door, as they each felt a blush creep up their faces for varying reasons. For some it was an embarrassment, for others it was their own arousal peaking, and for the rest it was maybe a combination of both?

“I take it back,” Rupert began to say to Dougal with a shit eating grin. “That--” He pointed at the balcony. “--was confirmation it’s done.” He then lifted his mug to his lips to take a drink.

Their mutual climax had hit them both with such a powerful force, it was making their ears ring, and their bodies twitch and spasm with gentle aftershocks. Jamie's arm trembled slightly from the strain of holding himself up for so long. His instinct was to settle on top of her, pillow himself on her breast as she'd seemed to enjoy that first time they dry-rutted with their clothes on, but he was still mindful of her injuries. So, with a heavy sigh and a guttural moan from each of them, Jamie reluctantly slipped his still-half-hard cock free from her body, then moved to lay next to her on his back. They were both glistening with sweat, breathing hard and heavy, and their hearts racing. Zahra felt a hollowness that was not just physical when his cock left her body empty.

They each turned to look at the other as dual, matching grins broke out on both their faces. Zahra giggled softly to herself and worried on her bottom lip. Jamie returned her smile and rolled to his side, propping his head up on his hand as he leaned closer. His free hand pinched her chin between his fingers to hold her still as he stole a lazy, but sensual kiss. He then let his fingers trace gently down over her skin, teasing fingertips around her nipple, then outlining the decorative markings of
the tattoo under her breasts. “Ye know, before I met you I didnae even know a lady could--finish, too.”

“Well, I mean, some women can’t,” she said, watching his face. “At least, not with penetration alone.” She reached her hand up to card her fingers through his sweat damp curls.

“Is that why you--” he blushed slightly unable to finish the question, but he reached for the hand she’d used to play with herself and sucked the two fingers he’d seen her use into his mouth, moaning softly when they tasted like her.

“Mmhmm,” she hummed in agreement, understanding what he meant. She worried on her bottom lip, feeling a bolt of heat shoot straight down between her thighs once more because of his actions. “I was close, though,” she admitted, feeling breathless. “I probably could have gotten there on just your cock alone,” she said, smirking when Jamie’s mouth dropped open and he blushed from arousal at her dirty pillow talk. “But being your first time--I didn’t wanna chance it.” She rested her hand on his cheek, cupping his jaw. “I wanted to finish with you.”

“That was ruddy amazing,” he said as his fingers traced up and down her arm. "I think my ears are still ringin'.”

Zahra grinned, chuckling softly. “Mine, too.” She returned his kiss when he leaned in to take one. "What else did you think… before you met me?” She asked, grinning.

Jamie smirked and glided his palm up to gently cup her breast, rubbing his thumb against that distended nub, making her moan softly and bite down on her bottom lip. "Ye're gon to laugh at me,” he said, blushing.

Zahra opened her eyes to look at him, smirking. "Ok, now you have to tell me.” She didn't promise him she wouldn't laugh.

"Well--I didnae know ye could do it face to face." His hand trailed to the other side of her hip, gripping gently. "I used to think that--ye had to do it back ways, like horses, ye ken?"

Zahra's lips disappeared as she pursed them between her teeth trying desperately not to laugh, but a moment later she was giggling uncontrollably, which jostled her injured ribs, making her side ache. Her brows pinched together in pain, and she whined, "Oh, don't make me laugh." Jamie was laughing a hit himself, that handsome boyish grin firmly on his face. "Sorry," he said, though his smile would denote he wasn't even the least bit apologetic.

Zahra inhaled and exhaled deeply, then reached up to touch his face. “Was it--everything you thought it would be?”

“Nae,” he shook his head, still grinning. "It was better," he said. “So much better.” He snuggled closer to her, still mindful of her injuries but needing to feel her against him, gently tangling their legs together. “Did ye know you curse a lot?”

She worried on her bottom lip, blushing. “Sorry.”

“Oh, nae, I’m no’ complainin’,” he shook his head, trying to assure you. “Was just--wonderin' if ye realized.” Jamie had heard her curse before, but not like that. Nothing even close to that. He kind of liked that he could make her act outside her normal behavior like that. "Was it--everything you thought it would be?” He asked, feeling a bit bashful.

A huge grin spread across her lips and she nodded enthusiastically. She reached her other hand to
hold his face in both of hers. "Jamie you made me feel so good. I mean--you made me come so hard, I could barely breathe," she said before leaning up to steal a heated kiss. "I think I almost blacked out."

"Is that--a good thing?" he asked curiously, brow furrowed in confusion. He’d never heard of a woman blacking out during coitus before.

She nodded again, dropping one hand to rest against her injured side, and the other she resumed carding her fingers through his hair again. “I think the French call it la petite mort.”

“The little death?” He asked, brows pinching together. “Sounds a bit morbid, does it no’?.”

“A bit. I think it just refers to like--a loss of consciousness some people experience post orgasm. It’s kind of like a spiritual release as well as physical,” she explained.

“And ye’re sayin’--I almost made you feel that?” he asked.

Zahra smirked, bit down on her bottom lip coyly, then nodded her head. “Almost…”

“I s’pose,” he spoke in a soft, husky tone. “I’ll have to work on turning that almost into a definitely next time.”

She smirked sultrily up at him as he reached for her face and leaned in for another languid kiss that she eagerly returned. “Can this next time be after sustenance and hydration, though?” she asked quietly.

Jamie smirked and leaned back, giving her a nod. “Aye. Couldnae agree more.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Wait here.” He rolled to the edge of the bed to stand, then went in search of where he’d tossed his shirt. “They’re not likely to’ve gone just yet. Not til they’ve had their fun… Ah!” he bent to grab his sark, then pulled it back on over his head, where it hung low to his knees like an oversized night shirt so he didn’t bother pulling on any other clothing. It would take him some time to try to pleat his kilt again.

She was turned ever so slightly in his direction, though still mostly on her back, but watching him with a joyful, peaceful, blitzed out smile on her face. He was, not for the first time, completely arrested by her beauty. He had a loving, affectionate smile on his face as he perched on the side of the bed then leaned over her, brushing his fingers down her arm, before taking and lifting her hand to his mouth. “Mo nighean peantadh,” he whispered before laying a kiss on her knuckles.

She smiled affectionately at him, then asked, “What does that one mean?”

He returned her smile, gazing down at the tattoo on her arm as he let the fingers of his other hand trail down her skin. “My painted lass,” he responded before laying another kiss on the elephant on the back of her wrist. They both gazed lovingly into each others eyes for a moment before Jamie sighed.

"Where’d my ring come from?" Zahra asked, curious.

"An old key I had in my sporran," Jamie answered, turning her hand over in his and inspecting the simple iron band affectionately.

"A key?" She asked, brow furrowing softly. "What did it unlock?"

Jamie shook his head. "Ah, it was just something I had in my sporran."
Everything he had done today had purpose and meaning. She highly doubted some junk, nonsense key he had in his sporran was really true. "Jamie," she said, giving him a disbelieving look.

He inhaled through his nose, and let his thumb play with the iron band on her finger. "It was the key to Lallybroch, my family home. I had Rupert and Angus get the blacksmith turn it into a ring for ye."

Zahra smiled adoringly up at him, and moved her right hand to hold his face. "Tell me about it?" She requested.

Jamie's smile turned into a grin and he nodded. "Aye. Lemme go grab us some food and some'in' to drink and I'll regale ye all about it while we eat." Zahra nodded as he leaned in to kiss her softly, then gently laid her wrist back on her stomach. "Auch, I better go 'efore I get myself in a predicament."

Zahra chuckled, which caused her face to pinch in pain from the ache in her side. "Oh, I said don't make me laugh," she whined good-naturedly.

"I'm sorry," he said again, though still his grin would suggest he wasn’t apologetic in the least. He stole one last kiss before getting up and grabbing his kilt off the floor which he draped over her like a blanket; he'd noticed she'd begun to shiver. "I'll be right back, mo ghaol," he said, then turned, padding on bare feet to the bedroom door. When he opened it Zahra heard a chorus of cheers and jeers, then he stepped through it and just like that was out of sight.

Zahra listened to their teasing and bantering. She could only make out some of it, but she could tell it was crude. Jamie was taking it in stride, though, defending her honor as best he could against their crudeness.

She closed her eyes and just relaxed for a moment before she decided she better use this time to take care of business while Jamie was out. With a heavy groan, she summoned the strength to push herself to a seated position then turned to scoot off the edge of the bed, onto shaky legs. She wrapped Jamie's plaid around her like a robe, and did her best to ignore the evidence of their mutual release dripping down her inner thigh. She slowly hobbled her way behind the privacy screen to use the chamberpot, sighing in relief as she did. Her nethers were pleasantly tingling and aching just a bit. A good ache, though. The best. Even just the memory was enough to get her blood pumping again.

When she was finished peeing, she shuffled back out to the main room and made her way to her medical bag to grab a clean cloth. She then shuffled over to the vanity, set the cloth into the empty washing basin, lifted the pitcher and poured some water into the bowl. She washed her hands with soap first, then reached in for the cloth to wring it out. She used that to wash and wipe her privates and her thighs clean. She was in no rush since it was actually taking more effort than it should due to the pain in her side.

She dipped the cloth in the water again to freshen it up, then watched as a drop of red stained the surface. Her brow furrowed deeply together, then a second drop hit the water again. Zahra lifted her hand to her nose and her fingers came away with blood. No sooner had she pressed the damp cloth to her nose, then that same overwhelming, piercingly high screech threatened to split her skull apart. She dropped the cloth as she reached for her head with one hand, then fell forward to catch herself with the other, causing the porcelain washing bowl to go crashing to the ground. The sound did not cease this time, it just seemed to get worse. She turned, dizzy and nauseous, took one step towards the door, then two. "Jamie?" She called weakly, but then the floor was swiftly coming up to meet her and she was out cold.

Chapter End Notes
DUN DUN DUUUUUUNNNN!!!

Cliffhanger? What? How dare she! I know, right? Don't worry I will have part deux up here soon. Stay tuned, lads and lassies.

As always, love your kudos, comments, and recs. Thanks!
Collide

Chapter Summary

The dawn is breaking, a light shining through.
You're barely waking, and I'm tangled up in you

I'm open, you're closed.
Where I follow, you'll go.
I worry I won't see your face light up again

Even the best fall down sometimes.
Even the wrong words seem to rhyme.
Out of the doubt that fills my mind, you finally find you and I collide.

Chapter Notes

I hate summaries, sorry bout it. Anyway here is part deux of Jamie and Zahra's wedding night. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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"Bit of a curse, and give us peace!" Jamie called to the downstairs dining hall before he made sure the door was closed behind him.

"Oi, Jamie?! Were ye swivin’ or murderin’ ‘er up there, eh?" Rupert called out crudely and the
remaining partiers all laughed.

“Aye, if she’s worn ye out already, Jamie, I’ll be happy to take yer place!” Angus gestured just as crudely with several thrusting motions, which caused even more uproarious laughter.

It took every ounce of willpower Jamie possessed not to go down there and throttle the man for even suggesting such a thing. Even if he was stone-faced drunk. “I’ll ask ye kindly, not to speak of my wife as if she were some common whore,” Jamie properly chastised his friends, but he knew they were all piss drunk, and the crude comments were not likely to cease.

“Not that I need bother askin’ as I’m sure they could hear ye in the next village over, but… how was yer first time, Jamie?” Rupert asked, still grinning like a loon. “Did ye bleed?”

Jamie chuckled at his cousin’s teasing, then clapped his hand on Rupert’s shoulder. “Nae, but you will, ya bugger, if ye dinnae haud yer wheesht.” The redhead collected a large silver platter and began piling it with food.

“’ey–” Angus again. “While ye’re fillin’ yer face, maybe I’ll go upstairs and fill mine, ‘ey?”

Jamie tried to remember that Angus was piss drunk, and this was just good-natured ribbing, that his friends had more respect for not just him but for Zahra as well, but it was mighty hard to not actually punch the man’s lights out. “Maybe,” Jamie tried to banter back casually. “Maybe I’ll fill it with my fist, huh?” He actually feigned as if he were about to punch the man, which made Angus flinch a little before he bust out laughing.

Jamie moved along what was left of the buffet, selecting items as he went. He looked up and smiled when he saw Murtagh, who was also grinning like a mad fool. His godfather clapped Jamie on the shoulder several times, looking almost prideful at his godson. He didn’t say anything, but then Jamie didn’t need him to. The man was happy for him, that was all that mattered. “Alright lads, show’s over,” Jamie called over his shoulder. “Dinnae need to stay up any longer.”

“Aye, but let’s hope you do,” Rupert heckled obnoxiously, which brought even more laughter from the stragglers.

“Why don’t you buy yerself a wedding night like Ned did?” Jamie shot back.

“It’s the only way he’ll ever get one,” Angus teased.

Jamie recognized the woman Zahra called Paisley approach and she added a couple handfuls of fresh fruits and berries to his plate. Jamie smiled politely, and whispered his thanks before he turned to head back upstairs.

“Don’t think ye’ve thanked me properly,” Dougal’s voice stopped him, causing Jamie to turn and look at his uncle. “Fer findin’ you somewhere better to stick yer cock than the fillies in the stable.”

Jamie’s jaw clenched. His uncle had always been an angry drunk. Jamie was not looking forward to having to deal with his shite. “Thank you,” Jamie said. “Truly.” A tense moment passed between them where Dougal nodded his head. Thinking that was the end of it Jamie began to turn to finish his trek back upstairs.

“Come on, sit yerself down awhile.” Dougal stopped him again, patting the space on the bench next to him. “Ye don’t want to appear too keen to return to your… yer bride.”

Jamie’s jaw clenched again, and his gaze bore into the balcony door. He was keen, so very, very keen to get back to her. With a heavy breath, he exhaled a sigh and turned around to go back down
the steps. He obligingly sat with his uncle and politely suffered through his words of ‘advice’. “Aye, you never want to let a woman see you’re too eager to please her,” Dougal said. “Gives her too much power, ye ken?”

Jamie huffed, not amused, and shook his head. “Perhaps that’s been your experience, Uncle. I, on the other hand, am completely under Zahra’s power and couldnae be happier to be there.” Dougal looked murderous to be talked back to but Jamie held his ground, standing up and staring his uncle down “Now, I am grateful to you for this. I am. Ye did a great service to me today, and I’ll admit I am indebted to you for it... but Leeloo has been mine since the first time I met her. You didnae gift her to me. Nae, she has never yours to give.”

Dougal stood up and leaned angrily into Jamie’s space. “That’s what kills you, doesn’ it?” The two men stared each other down, fists clenching, threatening to possibly come to blows. Dougal definitely looked ready to punch Jamie’s lights out. The taproom was dead silent and tense, everyone staring silently… you could hear a pin drop… So when there came a series of thuds and a crash from the upstairs room, Jamie’s head turned, and a moment later he was racing up the stairs, two, sometimes three steps at a time.

“Leeloo!” he cried as he burst into the room. His heart sank when he saw her on the floor, wrapped in his tartan, collapsed by the vanity where she’d knocked the washing basin and pitcher to the ground, almost as if she had been trying to make her way to the door. “Leeloo!” He cried as he fell to his knees beside her and gently rolled her into his arms. There was blood dripping from her nose, but she was breathing, and he could feel her heart beating in her chest, slow, but steady. “Leeloo, please,” he had tears in his eyes as he gently stroked her face, trying to rouse her.

“What’s happened?” Dougal demanded from the doorway.

Jamie made sure she was covered before he looked at his uncle, shaking his head, tears still in his eyes. “I dunno. I cannae rouse her.” Jamie lifted her further into his arms, cradling her and rocking her against his chest, still stroking her face, trying to get her to wake. “Wake up, Leeloo. Please wake up, mo ghaol.” He pressed his forehead to hers whispering a prayer in Gaelic, Latin, French, Greek, every language he knew, begging God or anyone who would listen...

“Get the surgeon!” Dougal ordered, and never had he seen Rupert and Angus run so fast in their lives. Maybe all those morning jogs with Zahra were paying off? Helpless to do anything but watch the heartbreaking scene before them, Dougal and Murtagh kept a stoic guard as they waited for Rupert and Angus to return with the doctor.

They didn’t have long to wait it seemed, until they heard, “Dougal!” Then, Rupert and Angus suddenly came rampaging back in almost just as quick as they’d left, only now they had Willie on their heels.

“What is it? Where’s the bloody surgeon?” Dougal angrily gripped Rupert by the lapels. “Where’s the surgeon ye fat bastard?”

Rupert was still catching his breath, so Angus answered for him. “Redcoats!” The man declared breathlessly.

“They were asking… ’bout Mistress Zahra!” Willie clarified, also out of breath. He was the one who’d run into Angus and Rupert on the road to warn them of what he’d overheard on his way back to camp.

“Jamie!” Murtagh called as he grabbed the lad’s shoulder. They needed to bail and now.
“Dinnae touch her,” the redhead shrugged off Murtagh’s hand.

“Go!” Paisley ordered. “I’ll hold off the redcoats, go!”

Dougal clapped the lady on the shoulder. "Ye sure, lassie? If they find out ye helped us--"

"I'm not afraid o' those coofs," she said.

Dougal nodded and patted her shoulder. “Thank ye, lass.”

Murtagh slapped his hand on Jamie’s shoulder again, but Jamie violently threw his hand away. “I’m no’ leaving her, Murtagh!” Jamie cried, and they couldn’t rightly travel with her in this condition. She needed a doctor.

“Auch, ye daft idjit. They’ll kill ye both if’n they find ye here,” the older man tried to talk some sense into his godson.

"Jamie, Murtagh!" Dougal called impatiently.

Jamie stared his godfather down, something silent passing between them. An understanding. What would Murtagh do in his place? If it had been Ellen? “I’m not--leaving,” Jamie said, knowing full well what would happen if redcoats caught him.

Murtagh had tears in his eyes. If Jamie was staying, then so was he. “Damn ye, lad.” Murtagh stood and headed for the door, but to Dougal's surprise, instead of following, the man slammed the door in Dougal's face, then locked it. Dougal pounded on the door, shouting and cursing in Gaelic. “Get them away, Dougal,” Murtagh ordered. "We'll find a way and meet ye at Culloden Moor."

The pounding stopped and Murtagh heard quick steps down the stairs, Dougal was gone. Murtagh sighed then moved to push the vanity over to barricade the door. The legs scraped angrily in protest against the floorboards, and Murtagh strained to move it. “A little help--would be nice.”

Jamie sniffled and gently lifted Zahra into his arms, moving to lay her on the bed. He swaddled her in his tartan to make sure she was decently covered, then stroked his hand down her cheek a final time. He reluctantly left her side to help Murtagh maneuver the vanity in front of the door. Next they moved the large trunk, followed by the chairs. Anything they could to block and barricade the way in. “That should hold for a while,” Murtagh brushed his hands together and inspected their work. "Get dressed,” Murtagh ordered.

Three redcoats were standing in the dimly lit square, the sun hadn’t quite fully set yet. One of them was a Captain judging by the decorations on his shoulders. The other two officers appeared to be the Captain’s personal guard as they did not engage with the locals, but kept a vigilant lookout. The Captain was speaking to a small group of villagers when the shortest officer suddenly cringed in pain and reached for his head.

The tallest, African colored gentleman turned to his companion “Laurie?” he whispered in mild concern.

“I’m fine,” Laurie whispered back. It hadn’t been his pain. “She’s definitely here,” Laurie whispered back as he reached up to touch the blood dripping from his nose. She was here, but he couldn’t pull on her line, it was still frayed and broken.

Jim had been the only one among them able to believably pull off a British accent, and he was the
Captain so it was easy to let him take the lead. While Jim used his usual charm to try to sweet talk the locals, Laurie couldn’t stop staring at the young man moving across the square. The boy kept looking over his shoulder at them suspiciously, trying to act overly casual. “Captain?” Laurie said, trying to get the man’s attention. Laurie focused his senses and could definitely pick up fear, and worry coming from the boy. Concern, even. Two other highlanders in tartan were suddenly running from around a building and the young boy quickly joined them. Laurie stretched his mind even further and distinctly picked up on them thinking and talking about Zahra. She was hurt, they were trying to fetch a doctor. “Captain!”

“Yes, Mr. Keelan, what is it?” Jim turned.

Laurie nodded at the three men, causing both Kai and Jim to turn and look in their direction. The boy was telling the older two about the redcoats looking for Zahra. All three highlanders suddenly raised their heads, took one look at the Redcoats who were looking at them, then turned to dash off back the direction the older two had come from. “They know,” Laurie said.

Jim didn’t have to be told twice… They moved to follow. Laurie kept a psychic bead on the trio. Fortunately they weren’t all that great at cardio so they were easy enough to follow and track. The three ‘redcoats’ moved quietly through the small village, trying to keep to the shadows as much as possible. One never knew who was friend or foe in this town. They had tracked the three highlanders to a small Inn on the outskirts of the village.

“I don’t like this,” Kai whispered next to Jim’s ear.

“Your complaints have been noted, Mr. Kai,” Jim responded back just as quietly. It was still eerie for Jim to see Kai without his green skin. It might be a temporary cosmetic injection that had turned his skin to a dark chocolate more human looking color, but it was still eerie. Kind of sexy, but eerie all the same.

“Sshh,” Laurie shushed them as they saw the door to the Inn open. An older woman poked her head out, then waved her hand in a shooing motion, and four Scots of varying ages and build exited the building one by one, heading for the stables. Laurie recognized the littlest one as the boy who had lead them to Zahra in the first place. After hearing them asking one of the villagers about Zahra, and now they were all running… Well, not all.

“I think perhaps we chose the wrong faction for this,” Kai declared, looking uncomfortably at his uniform.

They observed the four riding away on horseback a short time later. “How many of them are left?” Jim directed the question to Laurie.

“Only two, now,” Laurie answered after a moment in thought, staring intently at the second story window that was still lit by candlelight. Laurie wiped the blood from his nose on his sleeve. “Three if you count the landlady… They’ve barricaded the upstairs door, Jim.”

"Find us a way in, Mr. Kai," Jim ordered and Kai nodded before leaving them to do some stealthy recon.

Laurie reached out his hand to grab Jim's shoulder. “They’re scared, Jim. They think we’re here to hurt her and they’re both willing to die to protect her.”

Jim reached over and took his friend’s shoulder as well. “No one’s going to die here, Laurie.”

“Zahra—” Laurie began to say.
“No one is going to die here, Laurie,” Jim cut him off with a firm squeeze of the shoulder.

“No, you shouldn’t.”

“Can you read their minds or intentions?” Laurie asked, Kai shook his head. “Do you know how to fix a broken psychic bond?” Again Kai shook his head. “Then, I should be the one to go, while you two distract the landlady. Let her think she’s helping the cause.”


Laurie nodded then watched them go before he removed his weapon belt, followed by his coat, and tricorn hat, setting all three on the lowest crate. He looked at the climb, knowing it was gonna hurt something fierce because of his bum leg, but for Zahra… He determinedly began the climb up the crates, then onto the roof. I’m coming, Fre’ja… Hold on.

Jamie was sporting full gear once again, his MacKenzie kilt, weapons, sporran, and coat. He was sat on the edge of the bed with Zahra in his arms once more, securely bound in his Fraser tartan. Looked like they wouldn’t be returning it to the widow tomorrow after all. He had been holding and stroking her face gently as Murtagh searched through her emergency medical bag for some smelling salts or something to try to rouse her from this confounded sleep.

Zahra’s brow pinched together and she groaned softly, “Fade…”

Jamie gazed into her face. “Leeloo, love, can ye hear me?” He pressed his lips to her forehead and closed his eyes against his threatening tears. “Come back to me, mo ghaol. Please…”

Murtagh sighed in frustration at the confusing mix of bobbles and potions in Zahra's bag, not knowing what any of them did. "How does she bloody keep track of them all?" He complained rhetorically.

Then there came a rhythmic tapping on the window... rat tatta rat tat... Both highlanders suddenly had pistols drawn and aimed at the glass where they could make out a shadow of a man, who had his arms raised in surrender. “Think one of you fine gentlemen could maybe let me in? Be a pal? It’s fuckin’ freezing out here and I’m thinking I might be a little terrified of heights. Who knew, right?” Jamie and Murtagh stared at each other. The man spoke just like Zahra did, even using her favorite curse word. “On Zahra's life,” the man behind the glass continued. "I'm here to help, I promise… Please…”

Laurie and Jamie locked gazes through the window for an intense moment before Jamie lowered his weapon and rested it back in his belt. At Jamie’s nod, Murtagh moved to open the window. “Slowly, now, or I’ll put this bullet right ‘tween yer eyes.”

Laurie nodded, arms still raised in surrender as he swung one leg over the sill, then the other, and stepped fully into the room. Murtagh closed the window behind him, pistol still aimed.
"Who are you?" Jamie demanded.

“Name’s Lawrence Keelan, or maybe you might know me as Laurie, or Fade? I’m a friend, see—” he made his movements clear, smooth, deliberate as he unbuttoned the cuff of his sleeve and rolled it back to show them his left arm that was just as tatted up as Zahra’s, but right there on the back of his left wrist was an obvious, artistically rendered stem of rye. “This was for her. The goddess Fre’ja, watcher of the rye… I got this the same day she got the elephant on her left hand, y’see… She got that for me. Means family. Protector.” Jamie knew the elephant tattoo well, its meaning, however, he hadn’t gotten around to finding out yet. “I would sooner cut off this hand than hurt her,” Laurie continued. “I mean, I would prefer to keep my hand, but I think you get my meaning.”

Yeah, this man spoke almost exactly like Leeloo. Similar mannerisms, prone to rambling. Jamie looked closely at the man’s tattoo and thought he could vaguely recall Zahra mentioning her former master calling her Fre’ja… And a boy named Fade... Jamie looked at Murtagh and both men started conversing in rapid Gaelic, thinking they were talking in private, not knowing they were in the presence of a telepath who could understand every word despite their foreign tongue. Apparently, Murtagh remembered Zahra mentioning something about wishing someone named “Laurie” could have been at their wedding. Jamie told Murtagh about a boy named Fade who had been a slave with her.

Laurie listened, trying to piece this ever more complicated puzzle together but things kept getting even more bungled by the second. They had come here with the fear that Zahra had been captured by highlanders or worse and was being held against her will, but the more Laurie was around these two, hearing their thoughts, feeling their feelings, he couldn’t help but think that they’d been all wrong. Zahra wasn’t being held against her will at all.

Murtagh finally lowered his weapon and stuck it in his belt and Laurie immediately moved. “Are ye a healer, too?” Jamie asked, looking desperate and afraid.

Laurie nodded and crouched next to Jamie, then lifted Zahra’s eyelids to check their responsiveness, but they had rolled to the back of her head. Bad sign. He felt for her pulse and pulled the picket watch out of his vest pocket to count. Her pulse and her breathing were sluggish. Her nose was bleeding. This couldn’t be just because of their broken connection. This was something else. Or was it? “How long has she been like this?”

“She was fine less than half an hour ago,” Jamie said, blushing hard, and Laurie was unapologetically privy to the man’s thoughts as Jamie vividly remembered the two of them making love. Beautiful.

Laurie couldn’t mend their broken connection without Zahra’s consciousness but he couldn’t quite reach her either. “What have been her symptoms or other injuries?”

“She was beaten badly by Black Jack Randall day before yesterday,” Murtagh said. “Some o’ his redcoat bastards are downstairs right now.”

“Those aren’t redcoats,” Laurie said. “They’re friends. In disguise. We’ve been looking for her for weeks but just barely managed to pick up her trail this morning.”

"She thought she had a couple broken ribs from Randall's beating," Jamie answered and Laurie could feel the man's unadulterated anger and murderous intent towards this Randall person. If he'd done this to Zahra, Laurie was inclined to agree with him

"Did she have a concussion or anything of that nature?" Laurie probed.
"Nae. I dinnae think so. She was complainin' mightily o' somethin' she called a--a migraine this mornin'?" Jamie glanced at Murtagh, seeking his confirmation that Jamie had used the right word, and Murtagh nodded. "I'd never seen her in so much pain."

"Anything else?"

Jamie started to shake his head but then he remembered, "Right after the ceremony, she gripped her skull in pain. It had ended as quickly as it began, though and when I asked her what happened she said it was like she heard a painful screech and pain just for a moment."

Laurie was deeply concerned. From what Jamie was describing, Laurie feared the worst. This definitely had nothing to do with their broken connection… or who knows, maybe it did… maybe it manifested differently for humans, Laurie didn't know. This was unfounded, unfamiliar, undocumented territory. Never in the history of anything had a psychic bond ever been damaged by the other person having been dropped through time and not killed. "I'm afraid this is beyond my skills here. I need to get her to our ship’s doctor." Laurie tried to take her into his arms but Jamie protested. "I need to get her to our doctor," the Betazoid tried to urge the man calmly.

"Where she goes, I go," Jamie said as he stood with his wife protectively in his arms.

"And where they go, I go," Murtagh repeated the vow. Laurie was definitely picking up the obvious fatherly love there, but Murtagh’s feelings did not just extend to Jamie alone. The scruffy man had similar affections for Zahra as well.

“Laurie?” Jim’s voice suddenly called from the other side of the door followed by some loud banging.

“We’re alright, Jim," Laurie answered, once again raising his arms in supplication, his mind exuding calm, happy vibes to help put the Highlanders at ease. "We’re coming out," Laurie called, looking at both Jamie and Murtagh as he moved towards the barricade.

Jamie recognized the name Jim. Zahra’d regaled them with many stories about him over the past six weeks, and another man called Kai. Murtagh was staring very intently at Jamie, and when the redhead gave him a nod, he and Laurie moved to clear the furniture from the door. “They’re not redcoats,” Laurie reminded them. “It’s just a disguise, ok? I promise, no one here is trying to hurt or capture anyone, ok?” Murtagh and Jamie nodded, but when Laurie opened the door, Murtagh still drew his pistol, just to be safe, though he wasn’t aiming it at anyone, just holding it at the ready.

Jim did not barge into the room, and he even managed to stop Kai who took one look at Leeloo in the arms of that stranger and wanted to charge in. “Situation report, Dr. Keelan?” Jim asked from the doorway, looking into the room and trying not to react at the sight of Zahra unconscious in a stranger’s arms.

“Situation report, McCoy, Jim,” Laurie said pointedly giving the Captain a stern look. Bones was on standby with a starfleet medical and security team on the other side of the stones… Back in the 23rd… with no way to contact him… That could only mean one thing… Zahra’s wounds must be beyond what Laurie was capable of healing here, even with the emergency medical supplies they had back at camp.

“Then we need to take her straight away,” Jim tried to enter the room, but Laurie’s hand on his chest and a shake of the Betazoid’s head stopped him.

“We’re all going,” Laurie said, turning to look at their Highlander friends. “Aren’t we?”
“Aye,” Jamie confirmed and he held Zahra closer in his arms.

“Very well, then,” Jim nodded at Laurie. “Follow us.”

They made their way down the stairs and out the front door of the inn. They’re first detour was to pick up Laurie’s belongings from where he’d left them near the crates behind the inn. He checked to make sure everything was intact and accounted for as he put it all back on, then they were off again. Three redcoats escorting two highland fugitives and their companion.

Laurie could feel Jim’s worry, his fears, his concerns, trying to devise a plan to get Zahra out of here with the least amount of damage possible. Stunning the remaining highlanders and taking off with Zahra was the primary option at the forefront of Jim’s brain. Leaving the two Highlanders, unconscious, with some supplies at some random place in the highlands…

_They’re married, Jim._ Laurie spoke in the Captain’s mind, causing Jim to pause briefly, gaze at Laurie, then beyond him to the redhead who was carrying Zahra.

_How do you know that?_ Jim asked with his thoughts, then turned to continue walking to their horses.

_His surface memories, and the shiny new ring on Zahra’s left finger.

_What are you trying to say, Laurie?_

Laurie continued to speak directly into Jim’s mind as they walked around the tavern, and through the main square. _I’m saying, I don’t care who or what you are, no one would have been able to force Zahra to do something like that without her express, willful consent. There’s no level of threat or coercion that would have made her surrender her will in such a way. She would have fought to the death if she’d had to._

_I’m still not quite sure what you’re getting at, Laurie._ Jim thought, and Laurie could feel the man's frustration.

_I’m saying he’s apparently an outlaw from the British and was willing to risk everything, even his own capture and death to stay with her, to protect her. I’m saying, I don’t think she’s being held against her will. I’m saying, this is far more complicated than we predicted or planned._

Jim inhaled deeply and exhaled just as deeply trying to keep his calm as they rounded another building. _Against her will or not, you said yourself she needs Bones, which I assume means that her injuries need 23rd century medicine. We can’t leave her here._

_I’m not suggesting that, Captain. I’m merely pointing out the fact that while we don’t have all the facts, I can assure you that he’s willing to die, and kill for her, and there is no way he is going to let us take her without him._ Laurie tried to clarify his meaning.

Jim stopped and met Laurie’s eyes once more. _This isn’t some foreign distant planet we’re just observing here, Laurie._

_Laurie gave Jim a mental sigh. I know that, Jim._

_This is the direct history of Earth itself._ Jim argued in his mind.

_I know that, too._

_We have no idea the repercussions that would cause to the universe as we know it. Hell our very presence here could be having catastrophic ripples through time as we speak._
“I know!” Laurie shouted out loud, his emotions getting the better of him. He looked at their stunned companions, and smiled. “I know--what we need. A carriage.” Because no way would Zahra be able to ride in her condition, even if someone were able to carry her. It was too risky. “I think I saw an empty one by the stables on our way in. We should commandeer it.” Laurie clapped and pointed towards the stables. “Jim and Kai can bring our horses, yeah?”

Jim breathed steadily for a moment, then nodded at Kai. “We’ll meet you at the stables.”

“Right!” Laurie clapped again. “Follow me my roguish friends,” the Betazoid said as he limped towards the stables.

No sooner had they separated into two groups, then Jamie’s curiosity got the better of him. “What was that all about?” Jamie asked, adjusting Zahra slightly in his arms. She wasn’t heavy by any means, but he’d been carrying her since the tavern.

“What, that?” Laurie waved his hand in the air as if to wave away the question. “Just a silly little game Jim and I play where I step on the back of his bootheel, then he stops to glare at me for a spell ’cause I know he has blisters. It’s childish I know, but it amuses me and that makes the time go by so much quicker, don’tcha think? Help me with this would you, Murtagh?” Laurie asked as he limped over to the lead of the cart, trying to maneuver it out in the open more.

Murtagh, however, didn’t move. “I dinnae recall givin’ ye my name.”

“That’s because you didn’t, but--” Laurie gave up trying to do it on his own, then pointed at the redhead. “--Jamie here’s addressed you by it dozens of times since we’ve met, as you’ve addressed him.”

“Ye speak Gaelic?” Jamie asked.

Laurie made a pfft sound with his mouth and shook his head. “Moi? Speak Gaelic? Gods, no. Not even remotely... Mildly comprehend, however, that--that I can do.” He didn’t really understand any of it, but again, he could read their thoughts. Murtagh seemed satisfied with that answer and so moved to help Laurie get the cart in position to hitch up to a couple horses.

While Laurie snagged a blanket he saw draped over some hay bales, Murtagh turned to Jamie, and said something in Gaelic along the lines of Laurie being as crazy as Zahra, which made Laurie snicker. “Considering how fucking awesome Zahra is, I’ll take that as a compliment. I assure you, however, I am much more sane than she.” Murtagh and Jamie shared another look where something unspoken passed between them. Laurie tossed the blanket in the back of the wagon, and invited Jamie up into it by extending his arms all Vanna White. “Your chariot, my lord.”

Jamie nodded, then handed Zahra off to Murtagh briefly so he could climb into the back of the wagon, then he gently took Zahra back into his arms. He hated that she was still naked under his tartan but he’d hardly had his wits to think about grabbing at least her shift from the floor. Murtagh had at least been able to remember her medical bag. Jamie bundled her up tightly like swaddling a large child.

Murtagh checked the stables where he saw the others had already escaped with their cargo and horses, but Brimstone, Donas, and Murtagh’s horse Tornac were still in their pens, along with their saddles and side bags so it wasn't a total loss. Murtagh led Donas out first, and Jamie smiled softly at the sight of his best animal companion. Jamie pressed a kiss to Zahra’s head then gently laid her to rest in the back of the wagon. He wrapped the stable blanket Laurie had found securely around her
before he slipped out of the cart to help Murtagh with the horses.

Tornac and Donas were attached to the leads of the cart and Jamie actually fished around in Brimstone’s side pouch for a minute, pleased to see it was Zahra’s personal satchel. He found one of the oversized tunics inside that Fitz had given her, and he took it out before he went back around to climb into the back of the wagon.

Laurie watched Jamie closely, shamelessly probing his mind and surface thoughts while the man took great care and caution to dress Zahra, preserving as much of her modesty as he could while he painstakingly maneuvered her into the garment. He was speaking nonsensical sweet nothings in Gaelic to her as he did, calling her things such as his ‘greatest love’, his ‘brown-haired lass’, his ‘painted lady’, and all other manner of pet names and endearments.

Murtagh was loading the wagon with any of their belongings left behind while Jamie finished dressing Zahra in the simple piece of clothing. He was just bundling Zahra back up into his Fraser tartan for extra warmth when they heard the sound of hoofbeats approaching. Jim and Kai came into view, pulling another horse behind them a moment later.

“Ready to go!” Laurie called as he started to climb up into the driving seat of the cart, but it seemed Murtagh had the same thought and beat him to it. “Right. Where they go, you go,” Laurie recited with a nod and stepped back down. “Welp,” Laurie turned to Jim and Kai. “If it’s all the same to you, Captain, with my bum leg, I think I’ll have a better time of it back here.”

Jim nodded. Laurie hobbled to the back of the cart and with a heavy grunt of exertion he managed to pull himself up into it, taking a seat along the side and extending his leg out with a soft sigh. Tornac and Laurie’s horses were secured by their leads to the back of the wagon to follow along behind. Once they were ready, Laurie patted the side of the wagon in confirmation they were good, and a moment later they were heading out on the road.

It was about half an hour into their bumpy ride when Zahra started to gently stir. The first real sign of life she’d had since back in the bridal suite. “Leeloo!” Jamie said as he touched her cheek.

Her brows stitched together and she leaned into his touch, responding to his voice. “Jamie?” She mumbled, then reached a hand up to grip at the side of her head like Murtagh had found her that morning. “Oh, my head.”

Laurie felt Jamie’s emotions positively burst with elation and relief, but still concerned, and the Betazoid watched the man press a kiss to her forehead. “Ai, mo ghaol. You have to stop scaring me like this.”

“What happened?” She lifted her head, looking wearily at her surroundings but her vision was blurred. She couldn't make anything out, especially in the dark, but she knew they must be traveling.

“You’ve been unconscious 'bout an hour now,” Jamie explained. "We’re takin' ye to yer ship’s doctor.”

“My what?” She couldn't have heard him right.

“Hey, FJ,” Laurie said as he pressed a gentle, familiar, insanely comforting caress to her mind.

Zahra gasped and lifted her head. “Fade!” She called, then tried to sit up, but the pain in both her abdomen and her head had her groaning loudly and Jamie's arms had her staying right where she laid.

"Easy, love," Jamie said
"Take it easy, sweetheart," Laurie said at the same time in fluent Orion.

"How did you find me?" she asked in English.

"When you were shot back in time it fucked up our bond," he clarified further, still speaking in Orion. "It's like it's been bleeding and broken, but not severed as if you had actually died, so... I knew something was wrong." Jamie recognized the language as the same one Zahra used when she sang that song to him that night she showed him the foxfire. So Laurie was speaking Arabic now? Was it his native tongue, or was he trying to talk to Zahra without letting Jamie and Murtagh be privy to the conversation? Was this how Zahra felt every time they started speaking Gaelic around her?

“And you followed me here?” she whispered softly, her eyes still closed against the pain in her head that was lessened only slightly by the balm of Laurie's mental caress. It was wonky. Didn’t feel the same.

“I'm sorry it took us so long, FJ, but we had to come up with a plan and then wait for the portal to open again... I still need to fix our bond, but first we need to get you to the Enterprise.” Because mending their bond might take a lot out of her because it was basically like brain surgery just not in the physical sense, everything was metaphysical. She would need to be in good health.

“No!” Zahra said forcefully, opening her eyes through the pain to look up into Jamie’s face. Her brows were stitched together in pain, but Laurie could very clearly feel the almost overwhelming love, joy, need she had for the man as she reached for him, touched his face, but also the utter fear and terror she felt at even the idea of leaving him.

“I can’t be certain without the proper equipment, FJ, but I think you might have an aneurysm,” Laurie admitted softly, speaking in plain English once more. “If we don’t get you to McCoy…” Zahra gasped, and her eyes burned with tears. In that moment, Laurie could actually feel her heart breaking and it was utterly devastating.

“It’s alright, mo ghaol,” Jamie whispered softly, stroking her cheek then leaning in to kiss her tears away. “If this--Doctor McCoy can help ye, we’ll go to him. It’ll be a'right.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. She began to sob, deep body wracking sobs that caused her ribs to ache and burn, which then caused her to groan from the pain. She forced herself up through the pain to wrap her arms fiercely around Jamie’s shoulders.

Jamie gripped her just as close, his hand going to her hair, pressing his cheek to the side of her head. “Leeloo!” Jamie’s concern and worry were evident as he brushed his fingers through her hair, which was still sporting pins and heather from their wedding that morning. “Please, tell me what’s wrong, mo ghaol? You’re scaring me.”

“I don’t want to go,” she mumbled against his shoulder. “Not without you!”

“Now, what would ever make ye think there was anywhere ye could go I wouldnae follow, eh?” Her face distorted even further in pain and her sobs continued, great, heaving, ugly sobs that pulled mercilessly at his heartstrings. Jamie leaned back, brushing his hands down the sides of her hair, her face, then he pressed his forehead to hers, trying to comfort her. Her obvious pain, however, was affecting him greatly, making tears swim in his own eyes. “Yer mine remember? Ye dinnae just bear my name now, love... Ye have my clan. Ye’ve always had my heart… And ye have the protection of my body as well. I’m nae gon to let anything happen to ye. I swear it.” He was trying to comfort her but her painfilled cries seemed to only get worse with each admission. “Oh, Leeloo... Ye’re breaking my heart, mo ghaol. It's gonna be ok, now! Please, don’t cry.” It made Jamie feel helpless the way she had her arms desperately wrapped around his neck again and was weeping into his
shoulder.

“Stop!” Laurie called forcefully.

Murtagh pulled on the reigns with a softly spoken ‘woah’. Ahead of them Jim and Kai slowed their horses as well, only to turn and trot back to the wagon. “What’s happened?” Jim asked. “What’s going on?”

“Leeloo?” Kai said, concerned, then looked up at Jim. None of them had ever seen her so broken down like this before, it was devastating to watch.

“She won’t come, Jim.” Laurie met the Captain’s baby blues with an unwavering firmness in his own black depths.

Jim climbed off his horse and moved to the cart, reaching to touch Zahra’s shoulder. “Zahra.”

“No,” she repeated. “I don’t care, Jim. I don’t care. I’m not going.”

Jamie and Murtagh exchanged glances as they both seemed to catch on that there was something else going on here. Something they didn’t understand, but definitely didn’t like.

“Jim,” Laurie tried to caution the Captain that this situation was about to go down fast, but Jim didn’t hear him or was choosing to ignore him.

“You can’t stay here, Zahra,” the Captain tried to reason with her. “You know that.”

“No,” she repeated between fitfuls of sobs. “I’m not leaving. I’d rather die.”

"You can’t mean that," Jim said trying to reach for her again but she shrugged away from him.

Jamie and Murtagh were suddenly both standing in the wagon with pistols raised and pointed at both Kai and Jim. Jamie still had Zahra in his arms. “What--the bloody hell is goin’ on?” the redhead demanded angrily, holding his wife protectively against him.

Zahra saw Kai reaching for a weapon and there came the sound of steel against leather, then suddenly Zahra had Jamie’s longsword drawn and was standing defensively between her highlander and her 23rd family, guarding him with her own body. “Hurt him and I’ll hurt you,” she spat angrily, and Kai immediately backed off, shocked and hurt. This was Zahra, she was like a sister to him. Obviously this man meant more to Zahra even than their blood bond if she was willing to draw a blade on him.

“Enough!” Laurie shouted. “No one is getting hurt or dying here today, remember?” Laurie reminded Jim and Kai. “There’s no other way this ends without bloodshed or worse, Jim, and you know it.”

Jim looked pained and conflicted, as did Kai. “We can’t--” Jim started to say.

“Bring them with us,” Kai cut him off, stern, no room for argument.

“You know we can’t do that, Kai” Jim was still trying to be the voice of reason, here, the voice of Starfleet. They had rules and laws and the Prime Directive to think about. Fancy that, Jim Kirk being the reasonable one. Go figure.

“I am not leaving her here, Jim.” Jim. Not Captain. Kai rarely if ever broke rank on a mission which is exactly what this was supposed to be. Still was. Jim was still the lead ranking officer here. Still the
Captain… but this was Zahra… He may not have all the facts but he had never seen her like this before… Kai, Laurie, and himself were probably the three most prominent pseudo-family figures in her life, outside her father of course, probably even more than her father. That’s one of the reasons they had gone completely out of their way to investigate her disappearance and come up with a plan for rescue… a plan that was quickly going to shit...

“Jim… Captain…” Laurie spoke calmly.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Jim said quietly.

“And you don’t know what you’re asking,” Zahra spoke firmly, tears still streaming slowly down her face, her chest still heaving with hot, heavy breaths. She still had Jamie’s sword in her right hand, but she was clinging to Jamie now with her left. “I’m not going anywhere… without him.” Jamie and her locked gazes.

“Even if it means you’ll die?” Jim asked in a slightly broken tone.

“I’d rather die here, with him—” Her sword arm fell to her side, and she gripped his tunic with her free hand and his own pistol lowered as he gazed at her. “—with his arms around me, feeling the way he makes me feel… then go back there… and live a hundred more years… feeling cold, and hollow, and numb.”

“Take them with us, or leave her,” Laurie said. Those were their only options. He knew where he and Kai stood on the matter. He knew how Murtagh, Jamie, and Zahra felt about it, even if Murtagh and Jamie weren’t operating with all the facts. Laurie was not actively reading past Jim and Kai’s surface emotions at the moment, Starfleet and Federation bylaws and all that, but even without probing his mind Laurie could feel that Jim was conflicted, having a crisis of morals and conscience. His word was the only one they were waiting for.

It was an unfair choice to put on anyone’s shoulders; Potentially fuck up Earth’s history, or leave one of your best friends to die, which could still have an impact on Earth’s history.(It was Zahra they were talking about after all. There’s no way she wouldn’t leave some sort of footprint here in the past.) Definitely not a fair choice for one person to have to make. Not at all.

“FUCK!” Jim swore loudly, pulling off his tricorn and smashing it in his hands, then turning and pacing away. Jim wondered what Spock would say.

“It’s a Kobayashi Maru, Captain,” Laurie said the most helpfully. Damned if they did. Damned if they didn’t.

Jamie and Murtagh were speechless, dumbstruck, flabbergasted. There was a lot going on here and neither of them quite understood. “I dinnae ken what ye’re all fashin’ ‘bout.” Jamie said as he wrapped his arm around Zahra’s shoulders, pulling her against him. “Murtagh an’ I are some o’ the best trackers in our clan. We can find our way back once your doctor does Leeloo, right.”

“Oh, sweet Jamie. You’re so adorable,” Laurie said with a playful grin. "But, the adults are talking, mmkay?” Laurie placed his finger against his lips in a shushing motion.

Jamie looked like he wanted to retaliate but Zahra’s sudden grip on his coat and the pained noise he heard her make killed whatever retort he had been about to make. The adrenaline was wearing off and Zahra was yet again feeling every ache and pain in her body, plus the increased pressure in her head was somehow even worse thanks to the crying. She groaned against Jamie’s shoulders and the man rubbed the back of her neck. “It’s alright, mo ghaol. Ye’ll be alright.” Jamie looked at her companions who were still in some sort of stalemate. “Can we please go?” Jamie implored. "I dinnae
ken exactly what an aneurysm is but I’d rather not stick around here to find out.”

“Jim?” Kai asked. “Captain?” he corrected himself a moment later.

Jim scrubbed his hands over his face then pulled them back through his hair before bending to pick up his hat. “Fine... but if I get court-martialed, you’re all speaking at my tribunal that I was forced into making this decision under insanity levels of duress.” They all breathed sighs of relief as Jim and Kai both climbed back onto their horses. “Gods help us,” Jim whispered to the heavens as he closed his eyes for a moment to reflect about what he’d just done. He took in a deep breath and exhaled a sigh before he slipped his reformed tricorn hat back onto his head, then urged his horse into a steady canter back onto the road. Kai followed him, then Murtagh whipped the reigns of the cart and they were once again rumbling onward.

Laurie sat back in the wagon, stoic, and deep in thought. He was thoroughly grateful Jim had made the right decision. Laurie had hoped he would, but the Betazoid had been fully prepared to take matters into his own hands if things had gone the other way. There was no way he would have let Zahra remain behind to die. Even if it meant he would have faced prison back in their time for mutinous actions. Even if it meant he would only be able to watch Hale and their son grow up behind tempered glass, he would never have been able to leave Zahra behind to die. He was pretty sure Kai would have agreed with him, but that didn't make it better… So yeah, he was insanely grateful Jim had made the tough choice and not forced Laurie to go there… Thank you, Jim. Laurie pressed gently to his mind.

Don’t thank me, Laurie. Jim sighed in his mind and out loud, anxiety roiling in his gut. This isn’t over yet.

Jim was right. It was half a day’s ride back to the stones at Craig na Dun, longer if they had to take it slower because of Zahra and the wagon. That was a long time between stops… A long time for something to go wrong...

Chapter End Notes

Is that foreshadowing I'm detecting? Hahahahah Check your cuts and hold your butts...It's gonna be a bumpy ride...

Thanks for reading!
Inception

Chapter Summary

Jamie's devotion is tested, as is Zahra's will.

Chapter Notes

Another little blip. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They rode long into the night with only the moon to guide their way. Zahra was thankfully passed out in Jamie’s arms. She needed the rest, even if it was fitful, even if the pained crease she wore on her brow was breaking Jamie’s heart. “How much longer?” Jamie asked.

“Captain?” Laurie asked. The moon was so full and bright it was like someone was shining a spotlight on the small band.

They saw Jim at the lead pull something like a pocketwatch out of his coat pocket, flip it open and look at it. “We should reach base camp in about three hours,” Jim answered Jamie’s question.

“How much longer?” Jamie asked and adjusted himself a little trying to make himself more comfortable without jarring Zahra about too much.

“So, how did you all even meet anyway?” Laurie asked casually, his mind still shamelessly probing Jamie and Murtagh’s surface feelings and memories.

The subtlest of smirk’s graced Jamie’s face and he brushed a finger down Zahra’s cheek. “Murtagh’s actually the one what found her... Randall had been—” Jamie’s jaw clenched and Laurie got a clear picture of the memory from Murtagh himself.

“Eat shit, asshole!”

“You have a whore’s mouth... Shall we see what else is befitting of such a title?”

“Let’s just say it didnae surprise me to hear of what he’d been tryin’ to do to her,” Jamie finished his thought.

“Tryin’ bein’ the operative word there, though,” Murtagh added, and Laurie could see the faintest movement of the man’s mustache from this vantage. He wasn’t smirking about what happened, he was smirking at the fact that his first ever impression of meeting Zahra was that she was a spitfire hellcat, and that impression had only grown the more he’d gotten to know her.

Jamie huffed in dry amusement. “Aye... Murtagh brought her to our cabin where she saved me from a few overzealous friends who were apparently about to break my arm.”

“You’ll break his arm trying to force it back in like that...” He looked up and his eyes
landed on the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen. He believed in that moment he could search the entirety of the rest of his life and he didn’t think he would ever meet a more beautiful lass.

“Aye, but she patched me up right… Wouldn’t be the first nor the last time, though.”

"Stupid, fucking, stubborn, son of a bitch!” Jamie vaguely remembered hearing her voice through the hazy fog of his brain… He’d never heard a woman use such language before in his life… "Son of a bitch. I need to clean the wound and stop the bleeding. I need my fucking bag.” The pain from the alcohol in his wounds had roused him immediately, and her face was the first thing he saw. He had been dumbstruck by the vision before him as the light from the moon gave her an ethereal glow, which made him actually believe for a moment he had died and gone to heaven and she was an angel.

Laurie pulled himself from Jamie’s memories to see him gazing down into Zahra’s face once more. His hand was gently stroking her cheek. “Love at first sight, huh?” Laurie remarked, and Jamie lifted his head to look at the other man. He was blushing and slightly embarrassed. “It’s alright,” Laurie said comfortingly, easing his worry. “I’m a bit of a romantic myself, honestly.” As in, serial romantic, though Laurie liked to consider himself much more tame these days, happily settled with Hale and their son in their little multi-family unit on New Vulcan.

Jamie cleared his throat, but smiled. “Aye... I’ll admit I wanted her from the first time I saw her, especially when I caught her fighting off that redcoat in the woods, but…” Jamie looked into her face again. “I knew I loved her that first day we got back to Leoch.” When she’d mended his shoulder, shared his yearning for home, and they swapped stories about scars and tattoos. They’d had an almost intimate moment after breakfast, and he had been gone. So gone on her it was crazy. It had been that look in her eyes, that yearning for home that he knew so well, that joyful smile on her face as she told them all a story about turning Kai’s piss blue, that had been his end. He’d loved her in her strength, her vulnerability, and in her joy.

That line of thinking reminded him of something, though. “So, Mr. Kai,” Jamie said as he lifted his head. Kai just grunted loudly from his horse. “Are you the same Kai whom Leeloo turned his piss blue?”

Kai tensed up on his horse, and his head turned around to look at Jamie, his eyes were wide as saucers, then were suddenly, humorously squinted down to murderous slits. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he said, turning back around to look at the road ahead. Jim started laughing as Kak mumbled about how he was going to retaliate against her when they got back, all while the others shared in a friendly chuckle.

“What else did she tell you?” Laurie asked casually, smiling.

“Uh, well… no’ much, I'm afraid. I know that ye’re all on a ship together, her father’s ship. Merchant sailors.”

“Well, that’s us,” Laurie said without skipping a beat, and Kai and Jim exchanged glances.

“And that Jim is apparently a picky eater...”

“I am not!” Jim got an ‘are you kidding me’ look from Kai.

“And there was an incident with some sort of rodent named Tribble? That Jim brought on board and it bread so fast it infested yer ship?”
Jim turned back around, his own eyes as wide as saucers, then he looked at Laurie and Kai and all three started laughing at the memory. “Oh my god. She told you about that?” Jim turned his head to look at Jamie, whose own head was barely poking out over the driving seat on the cart.

“Aye. Our reaction was pretty much the same. She’s quite the engaging storyteller, my wife.” Jamie spoke fondly, brushing his thumb across her forehead. His wife. How long had he been waiting to call her that? It had only been a little more than a month, but it felt like ages since they’d met. Zahra stirred and snuggled further into his warmth. Jamie yawned and covered it with his hand.

“You should get some rest,” Laurie prompted with a nod of his head. Jamie and Murtagh locked eyes for a moment and Murtagh nodded.

Jamie looked back at Laurie and nodded as well. “Aye, I think I will.” He slowly maneuvered himself down until he was laying next to Zahra, with his head propped up on one of their satchels, grateful he hadn’t woken her, she needed to sleep. He pulled her into his arms and draped his plaid over them both, smiling and sighing in relief when Zahra snuggled into him. He rested his cheek against the top of her head, and grazed his fingers gently down her arm.

Laurie watched them both intently. To anyone else it might have looked borderline creepy the way he was staring at Jamie, holding Zahra, but it wasn’t predatory or sexual by any means, god no. Laurie was just waiting. The moment he knew Jamie was asleep, really asleep, Laurie reached out to gently touch first Jamie’s wrist then Zahra’s and he closed his eyes.

Jamie felt the cold hardness against his cheek, and for a moment he panicked, bolting awake, thinking he was back on the floor of that dank cell at Fort William. He was breathing hard as he looked around. He was definitely in a small room that looked like a cell but it was not one he recognized. The walls were not stone or iron, but an incredibly smooth steel. He’d never seen anything like it, most prisons he’d seen were stone. He was just reaching out to touch the wall when he was startled by a small voice behind him.

When he turned, he saw an unusual sort of loft bed with space enough underneath for a small desk and chair, and a bunk bed on top. On top of the mattress on the bunk sat a tiny blonde girl who was singing softly to herself. “Somewhere… out there… beneath the pale moonlight…” It wasn’t anything Jamie recognized, but the lullaby was sweet, hopeful, yet at the same time a little sad, almost melancholic...

“Hey there, little one,” Jamie said as he approached the bed slowly, but she showed no reaction to his presence. He moved closer and could clearly see that her clothes were but rags, and her face and arms were smattered with cuts and bruises, but the worst was an ugly, deep cut that ran the entire length of her inner left forearm that she was attempting to bandage “Jesus Christ, lass,” Jamie said, shocked at the severity of the wound. “Here, let me--” Jamie tried to reach out to touch her but his hands passed straight through her. “--help… you...” He stepped back, staring at his hands. What was going on? He turned towards what looked like the door and tried the handle, only for his hand to pass through that as well. He cursed in Gaelic. “What is this?” he asked as he stared at his hands more.

“Psst!” The sound startled both him and the small bairn on the bed, and when Jamie turned he saw her shrunken back against the corner of her bunk, frightened, gripping her kit to her chest as if her life depended on it.

“Wh-who are--” the little girl started to speak in a language Jamie didn’t recognize but somehow he could fully understand what she said, which should seem weird but in dreams did anything ever seem truly weird? "What do you want?” She had asked as she hid her face behind the fall of her hair so Jamie couldn’t tell that she wasn’t looking at him.
“My name’s Jamie. I’m not here to--” Jamie was interrupted by the sound of metal grating above his head and he turned to look up as a brown haired boy in similarly ragged clothing poked his head out from the ceiling and waved.

“You’re bleeding,” the boy said in a completely altogether different language than the girl had spoken, but Jamie was still somehow able to understand it. He watched the boy touch his chin indicating the same spot where the little girl was bleeding from a cut. “You need help,” the boy said in that same language.

Jamie stood back swiftly when the boy dropped a rope line that was secured to the rafters in the space above him, then he was suddenly swinging from the grate and dropping himself on bare feet onto the floor. Jamie reached for the rope to stop it swinging but it slipped through his hands just like everything else so far. He tried to leave but the walls it seemed were the only solid real thing in this space. He was stuck.

He watched from one corner as the boy pressed a hand to his chest and said, “Fade.” He then pointed at the frightened little rabbit on the bed. Fade? Isn’t that what Zahra had called Laurie? Jamie moved around to try to get a closer look and the boy did have those same, eerie, solid black irises like Laurie.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Jamie turned when the little girl spoke. “Jargen would be mad.” It sounded similar to the ‘Arabic’ language Zahra and Laurie had used, and that name Jargen. Why was that so familiar?

“Fuck him,” the boy said in his own language. “Let me help you, ok?” The boy climbed the metal ladder up onto the top of the bunk next to her, causing the little girl to shrink even further back away from him. The boy sat on the far end away from her, then reached inside his bag and pulled out a small, rectangular, metal box that had blinking, multi-colored lights and words and symbols scrolling across a white square on its surface. Jamie watched, fascinated, transfixed, mesmerized, curious as the boy waved the unusual contraption over the girls wounds. The girls eyes gazed cautiously at the boy and his device that was emanating a steady but not unpleasant tone. What the hell was it?

When the boy was done, the tone ceased, and he stared at the white square on the front of the box as more unintelligible words and symbols moved across it. “That gash needs stitches,” the boy said. “Do you want to bleed out?”

The little honey blonde girl was still huddled in her corner, unmoving, but she looked interested. “What do you want?” she asked.

The boy grinned. “I like that song you were singing. Sing?” He hummed a little bit and gestured to his throat--although his humming was terribly out of tune. For her part, the girl stared at him as if he had just grown another head. The look was so very reminiscent and familiar to a look he had seen Zahra give him before it was uncanny.

The boy reached out calmly, and gently guided her to extend her wounded arm. The girl was frightened at first, but then she suddenly lowered her eyes so she wasn't looking at him, and letting the boy take her injured arm. She began to sing again as the boy undid her attempted field dressing. Both Jamie and the boy flinched, hissing softly as the injury was exposed. It was nasty, and deep, and still bleeding. “Who did this to you, lassie?” Jamie asked as he leaned over the loft bunk. Neither of the children answered him, though, which he may be getting used to by now but it was still frustrating. All Jamie could do was watch as the boy who’d called himself Fade gently and meticulously worked to stop the bleeding, then prepped a needle and thread.

When the boy began to stitch the wound Jamie was impressed by the way the little girl reacted, or
maybe by how she didn’t react he should say. Any bairn he knew, and even some grown men perhaps, would be groaning and aching in pain or sobbing from such an injury, especially to be stitched back up without an aid for the pain… All The little lass did was shut her eyes, clench her teeth, and fist her hand in the sheet on her bed. Once again, Jamie was reminded very much of another lass he knew who had a greater pain tolerance than anyone Jamie had ever met. “Leeloo?” Jamie asked softly as he looked into the girl’s pinched face. Is that what this was? Was this… Leeloo?... and Laurie?

“Hole in one,” an adult male’s voice suddenly spoke behind him. Jamie turned, startled, and gripped at his chest as he saw the adult Laurie leaning against the wall of this--cell? Room? “Oh, it’s definitely a prison cell, don’t be misled by the humble, roomy decor.”

Jamie’s brows pinched together as it was like Laurie had just read his mind. “That’s because I did,” Laurie spoke again and Jamie backed up a little, afraid. Laurie held out his hands in supplication, trying to be calming. “Now, now. Don’t get your kilt in a twist. I know it’s a lot to take in but--considering where we’re about to go I kind of thought tearing off the band-aid would be the best approach.”

Jamie’s brows stitched even tighter together in confusion. Where were they going? What was a band-aid? “Oh, they’re these sterile, single-use, self-adhesive bandages. Come in all shapes, textures, and sizes. Super convenient. All the rage in the future.”

“The future?” Jamie asked.

“Mnhmm,” Laurie replied with a smile. “Did you honestly believe our girl here--” he hitched his thumb in the direction of the little scene that was still going on behind them. “--could have possibly ever spawned or survived in the time where you come from?” Laurie had a point. Jamie himself had often pondered, and wondered about how Zahra had gotten to be who and what she was, where she could have possibly come from, or where she could have been raised to be so strong, and independent, and amazing as she was. How many times had he wondered if she were real? It didn’t matter how doting a father was, Jamie didn’t really believe a man would let their daughter behave in such a way and get away with it. He had even wondered, several times, if she might be a pirate of some sort, but she was too selfless, and kind, and giving to ever fall in with such brigunds and thieves. There had to be another explanation for it all.

"So--you're saying Leeloo is--what? From the future?" Jamie asked.

Laurie smirked. "You catch on quick."

Jamie should be more disbelieving and concerned about this but, again, in dreams it was easier to take unbelievable things at face value. Zahra being from an altogether different time did make sense, didn't it? The scene behind them warped and changed, memories flooding through in rapid succession. Zahra as a child of no more than eight, fighting in an arena with half a dozen other children of similar ages attacking her and beating them all off with combat skills Jamie had barely seen in many men his age, let alone a female child.

A tall man with green skin, that’s right, green skin who tormented and dogged every step and move she made. Praised her when she pleased him, tortured and punished her when she didn’t. He saw Laurie as the boy Fade make several more appearances in her dark memories, the only time she ever seemed to smile. The only time she ever looked like the beautiful little girl she was supposed to be… They’re relationship was sweet, nothing salacious or anything of that nature. It was almost symbiotic. They’d found each other in this dark, low, awful place. They didn’t have to be slaves when they were together, they could just be together.
“Why am I here? How--are you--why am I seeing all this?” Jamie asked as he watched the boy teach the girl a tapping rhythm with his feet.

“Because I need you to understand,” Laurie said vaguely.

“Understand what?”

The door behind them opened up and the large, angry, green man entered the room, and Jamie watched the horror cross child!Leeloo’s face as teenage!Laurie pushed her behind him defensively. The boy was a scrap compared to this man but the boy faced him down as if he could take on fifty of them. Jamie was transfixed as he watched the green man loom over the boy and there was suddenly a change in the air. It was like Jamie could feel adrenaline surge through him, crackling and filling the room like thunder and lightning. “Your mother cried after you fell out of her ugly cunt, you waste of a cocksucking shit-stained cumrag. You should've been swallowed.”

“Fade stop, please!” little Leeloo tugged on his arm.

The green man’s hand went around the little boy’s throat and he lifted him off the ground. The foreboding twisting energy in the room got worse, and the boy just stared the man down as he threatened to strangle the life from him.

“Master please!” Leeloo cried. “It was my fault, please!” She then moved to grip his elbow, and the man immediately reached out and pummeled her across the face hard, knocking her to the ground like a ragdoll, unconscious.

The room around them faded once more, and they suddenly found themselves in a larger space. Much Larger. Colder. All steel, and bars, and chains. There were tables practically filled with all manner of tools. Some jJamie recognized, but others, so many the likes of which Jamie had never seen before. Did not know what they were for but they could only be used for evil. He heard chains rattling and when he looked he saw little Leeloo lit by some sort of ceiling light, standing in the center of the room between two metal posts. He watched her struggle against the shackles on her wrists, until the sound of heavy bootsteps had her hackles raised like a scared cat. Jamie looked up where there was a metal balcony and that same green man was staring down at her.

“Master, please. I’m so sorry, please!”

“I know you are, Fre’ja,”

Jamie saw her crying. “I won’t disobey again, please!” She screamed when the chains were suddenly pulled taught and another orion stepped up behind her, dragging a whip behind him.

“Stop this!” Jamie demanded.

“Wish I could buddy,” Laurie said.

Jamie turned and with a roar he ran to try to tackle the green man with the whip, but he passed right through him to go skidding along the floor. Jamie heard the first whip crack and little Leeloo’s scream, but as he turned to look the image faded and more memories flashed before them.

Laurie walked over to him in the nothing and extended his hand to help Jamie up. “She was just a child!” Jamie said, tears in his eyes, as he took Laurie’s hand and let the man help him up.

“And you yourself were just a boy when you met your tormentor and earned your own stripes,” Laurie said, poking at the material on Jamie’s back.
For the briefest moments the memory faded to one of Jamie’s own. That night at Fort William, before Jamie was flogged the second time, when Randall had offered to free Jamie if the boy would become, in essence, his sex slave. Then, because he’d declined, Jamie had been given a second set of 100 lashes before the first had even fully healed. That had been just the beginning of Randall’s presence in his life. The man had dogged and tormented his steps ever since, for years, even to this day.

Jamie stared at Laurie in horror, and alarm. “How did you--”

“Later,” Laurie brushed off the question before he could even ask it. “What I’m getting at here is that you have an insight and an understanding of each other, that before myself, no one Leeloo had ever met had ever really been able to look past, or understand. Not truly.”

They were suddenly in another memory. This time it was at night. They were on an outdoor wooden balcony overlooking a vast desert forest. Jamie gazed in wonder at the bright, bulbous lights streamed all over the huge house. There was some sort of statue of a man in a red suit and white beard, holding a huge leather sack on his back, that was brightly lit from the inside. Festive sounding music was coming from inside the huge house and through the balcony windows one could see a large family celebrating around a dinner table decorated with more festive holly and greenery. The largest Christmas tree Jamie had ever seen was standing in the family room beyond, decorated in more if those flashing, twinkling bright lights. It was beautiful, but Jamie was left to wonder if it was Christmas, why was it so bloody hot? Seriously, he felt like he could melt.

Jamie saw Zahra leaning over the railing on the balcony, overlooking the desert below. It was hot, and the even hotter breeze was causing the simple green dress she was wearing to billow slightly around her legs. Such a dress would cause a scandal back home, but this wasn’t Jamie’s home he realized... Her hair was different. Much shorter than it was even when he’d first met her, and it was a stark platinum blonde as opposed to brown. Her legs were bare from the knee down and he noticed the Captain America tattoo on her calf was missing. He might have assumed she was someone else, but he would recognize her curves from anywhere.

Jamie moved to stand next to her and desperately wished to kiss away the sadness he saw on her face. Just as he was about to reach out to touch her, though, he heard a door sliding open and shut behind them. When Jamie looked he watched a tall, blonde man in a red t-shirt that said “Ho-Ho-Ho” come up behind her and wrap his arms around her middle, pressing his face against her shoulder. Jamie seethed with jealousy as he stood back and watched.

“It’s official. My family loves you.” The man's accent, as Zahra would say, was weird as fuck. It wasn’t British, nor any other accent he could place. It did, however, sound similar to the one Zahra had said she sounded like when she was a small child. Was this--her home country, then? Where were they?

“Mum’s invited us to stay through the New Year,” the man continued. "And I have already taken the liberty of extending both of our holiday leave… You’re welcome.” He placed a kiss on her shoulder and Jamie’s fists clenched at his sides, calming only when he felt Laurie touch his wrist.

The man moved to stand and lean next to his wife and even Jamie could see the smile she gave him was fake, even if the man himself seemed oblivious. “I love seeing you here… Like this.” The man touched her face and stepped into her space and Laurie’s grip on Jamie’s arm prevented him from making an utter clutz of himself again by trying to attack someone that wasn’t really there. The man was kissing his wife, it was hard for Jamie to watch, but he somehow endured.

As the kiss lingered too long, however, Jamie was forced to look away where he saw the man reach inside the pocket of his pants, and pull a small red box from within. The kiss ended, thankfully, and
the man spoke in that grating accent once more, “I’d love to see you here like this--with me--every--”

“I can’t have children,” Leeloo suddenly burst out. The man had been about to take a knee but immediately stopped and looked into her face.

“What do you mean?” he asked in that weirdly accented voice of his.

“I’m sorry is there--some alternative Earth-culture meaning behind ‘I can’t have children’ that I do not understand?” Even Jamie could recognize the sarcasm in her tone, and he had to smirk.

“Like, none? Ever? At all, ever?” The man asked as he dropped his hands, including the one holding the box.

“Not unless they somehow discover a way to regrow a uterus,” Zahra responded back.

“Oh.” The man’s smile fell into something that wasn’t a frown exactly, but close enough. “You’re so young though--why would you--”

“It wasn’t exactly my choice.” Jamie watched Zahra swallow and her face fell and he wished to reach and hold her. Did this clout not realize how he was making her feel? The man’s brows pinched together and he took a step back. He may not have realized he was pulling away from her, but Jamie, and Zahra too, seemed to recognize it for what it was.

Jamie watched as the beautiful, vulnerable woman stood up straighter and turned into something cold, hard, and closed off, like a stone. “You have a lovely family, Richard,” she said. “And I am thankful you brought me here, truly, but whatever your intentions might have been, you did not have the whole picture. Now you do.” She nodded, turned, and started walking towards the balcony stairs.

Zahra was already down the stairs when the man shoved the small box into his pocket, and ran to catch up to her. “Zahra, wait.” But she didn’t stop. “Will you wait a minute--” He caught up to her and grabbed her arm forcefully making her stop and look at him.

“Please, let go of me,” she asked calmly and once again Jamie wished to punch this man's lights out.

“Will you just--why do you have to be so--” The man made a frustrated noise and still hadn’t released her arm. Jamie wanted to throttle him. “I need some time to--process this, I--”

“What is there to process, Richard? Was this not some sort of--trial of my potential as your romantic partner? Meet your family, see how well I respond to your parents, your younger siblings. Will I be a capable matronly figure for your future children, of which you believe four or five would be a nice round number?” He looked shocked. “It’s a nice thought, but the problem is I will never be able to check off all your boxes.”

“Well, we can--I dunno--we can--maybe adopt or--get a surrogate or--”

“If that were the only problem, Rick, then maybe… But you’re also ashamed about how we met and everything I was, or am.”

“That’s not true,” he argued defensively.

Zahra exhaled out her nose hotly and schooled her features. “When your mother asked me how we met, I would have happily told her the tale about the starfleet officer who saved the damsel from slavery… I would have explained how it was one of the biggest turning points in my life when a stranger, who owed me nothing, a man who was my enemy, who had every right and reason to just leave me to die… Saved me... I used to think that must mean that, maybe I might have been worth
saving.” Her words were calm and concise, but Jamie was transfixed on her face where he could see she had tears in her eyes, but they stubbornly refused to fall. She looked unbreakable, but knowing her like he did now he could tell she was hurting inside. Bad.

“Do you remember what you told her when she asked that question?” The man fish mouthed for a little, then exhaled heavily and scrubbed his fingers through his hair. “I’ll remind you, then… When your mother asked how you met me, you told her that I was just one of the cadets from your sparring class.”

He tossed his hands out and exhaled exasperatedly as if she were being unreasonable. “You were one of the cadets in my sparring class, though.”

“I could have literally been anyone at that point… You deliberately turned me into fiction because you’re ashamed of who I am, so all night--”

“I’m not ashamed--”

“All night,” she didn’t let him interrupt her. “I have had to be the silly cadet from your sparring class, because that is who you made me into; who you wanted me to be… That is the woman your family love… That is the type of woman you wanted to bring home, the type of woman you wish I was, but that is not me. Because I wouldn’t--” Jamie watched as her icy exterior began to crack and she struggled to put it back in place. “--because I am not allowed to be myself here...”

“Zahra.” God, did he not even call her by her real name?

The man reached for her again but she subtly moved out of his reach. “Don’t, Rick. Please. It was a lovely dream, and I am grateful to have lived it for a while, but we are both fooling ourselves...”

“Zahra...”

“Please tell your family thank you, and goodbye for me, and I’m sorry.” With that, Zahra finally turned to go and this time the blonde did not follow her. Did not see when her heart broke and she finally let the tears fall.

“And he just… watches her walk away…” Laurie said, hands in his pockets as he looked at the memory of Rick, just standing there. “Like a big dumb idiot.”

“Was that--”

“Rick? Yeah, that was Rick. What a guy, right?” Laurie didn't mean to harp on the man so much. He really had been a good guy, many fine human qualities, saved Zahra’s life, helped her reacclimate to normalcy outside of slavedom, but the man had done just as much damage to Zahra’s emotions, as well as good in Laurie’s opinion. So, like the big brother he was, Laurie just didn't approve of the way Rick had made Zahra feel inferior or less than.

“She was--in love with him?” It seemed Jamie didn't much approve, either.

“You have to realize, at the time she was still all twisted up inside, still afraid of Jargen and in many ways of herself. So yeah, at that point in her life, and in her way, she loved him as much as she knew how to love, but… well, you see what I’m getting at here?”

Jamie believed he was starting to maybe understand, a little. There was so much he didn’t understand though. “I still don’t understand what all of--” Jamie gestured around at the now weird sort of empty room they were standing in. It wasn’t even really a room. “--this is about. Why am I here?”
“Hmm, think of it as—kind of like a passing of the torch, if you will. See, even when we were torn apart due to unavoidable circumstances, I’ve always been her family, her protector, but— I’ve never been able to give her more than that.”

“Why not?” Jamie’s brow furrowed, not like he was complaining, just morbidly curious. “You obviously love each other?”

“So, so adorable.” Laurie grinned and patted Jamie on the cheek before giving said cheek a squeeze forcing Jamie to shove his hand away. “Let’s just say I go more for the arrogant, brooding, dark, sophisticated, dominant male types,” Laurie said with a sort of dreamy look.

Jamie blinked at him for a moment. “You mean—”

“I like men, yes,” Laurie confirmed. “But back in the 23rd century, everybody loves everybody. Love is love is love man.”

“Did you say—twenty third century?” Jamie asked, disbelieving.

“I don’t think I stuttered,” Laurie said, brow furrowing, looking uncertain as if he wasn’t really sure. “Did I?... But yeah, that’s why we’re having this little heart to heart, because I need you to understand.”

He’d said that before. “Understand, what, exactly?”

“I need you to understand that while you may be a part of this super secret circle of Zahra’s family and protectors now, probably now the most important and vital member, but you are not the only one… She may be willing to give up everything, even her life to stay here with you, but we’re not. I-am not.” Laurie gazed at Jamie with those intense black eyes. “She does not belong here, and I will not leave her… Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He thought maybe he understood, but this was still a little confusing and hard to take. “Where Leeloo goes, I go,” Jamie repeated his same sentiments from earlier.

Laurie’s gaze became more intense and stern if that were possible and Jamie actually felt a chill run up his spine from the ice cold, dangerous intent in those black depths. “Even if you have to leave everything you know and love behind?” Laurie asked. “Your home, your friends, your clan, your kin... Your time?”

Yeah, Jamie was still trying to wrap his head around that one. Time travel. Was it really possible? In the long run did the date really matter? If what Laurie was telling him was true, Zahra had fallen back over 500 years into a time that had to be drastically different from her own. A time that would not hesitate to persecute and murder women for less than some of the things Zahra had done. She obviously had more freedom and independence where she came from. Was she a soldier like these men who had come for her? Is that how they were so close? Were they comrades in arms? It wasn’t too far a stretch considering everything he knew about her. Just look at what she had done in the time since she’d been here.

Zahra was an immensely remarkable, strong, outspoken rarity of a woman… The time she came from couldn’t be nearly as oppressive as this… To keep her here, constantly under the thumb and scrutiny of men who saw her as little more than chattel would be torture… Jamie may not see her that way, but most every other man around them would. Even Dougal, as Jamie had learned that evening in the dining hall, still saw Leeloo as a tool, a possession, a bargaining chip, had even had the audacity to suggest that he’d been the one to give her to Jamie. Randall was after her something fierce as well… She wouldn’t be safe here… But perhaps, in her time, she would. They would.
They’d have Randall off their scent, no more outlaw running for his life… o more price on his head… but then he’d lose Lallybroch, his home, Murtagh, his family… But… all of those things were out of his reach even now… He would never have peace with Randall tormenting his every step...

“How could I be unwilling to give for her, what she had been more than willing to give for me?” Jamie asked, it was supposed to be rhetorical but Laurie answered anyway.

“It’s easier than you’d think, actually,” the man said with a teasing smirk.

“Well, not for me it isn’t,” Jamie insisted. “None of it matters without her.” Leeloo was his everything. “My name, my clan, my home… She is all those things and more.” There was this light floaty feeling as the icy intensity gave way and he felt warm again. He could feel Zahra in his arms again. He was back in the wagon with her, holding her against his chest. He sighed contentedly. “All of it, right here in my arms.” He lifted his head to look down into her face, and raised his hand to touch her cheek. “As long as I’m with her… I’m home. I’m free.”

“Good answer,” Laurie suddenly said next to him.

A heavy shake to his shoulder had Jamie snuffling awake. “Wha--” It was Murtagh. Jamie rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked to see Laurie was gone. He sat up, causing Zahra to stir next to him. He gazed down into her face and wondered if it had all been some insane dream… Jamie’s hand idly lifted her left arm and he started to push back the fabric of her sleeve...

“Something’s going on,” Murtagh said, demanding his attention. “They’ve been gone too long.” The older man climbed down off the ‘driver’ seat and Jamie lifted his head to look. Laurie’s horse had been unbound from the rear of the wagon, and Jim and Kai weren’t in sight either.

“What’s going on?” Zahra spoke softly next to him, her voice still strained from pain and sleep.

Jamie brushed her hair off her forehead, hair that he seemed to finally just now notice in the bright moonlight, that since the roots had been growing out, her natural color was actually more of a honey golden brownish-blond than the dark chestnut on the ends. He smiled when he couldn’t help but think that his honey lass was so much better than his brown-haired lass. “We don’t know for sure, but we’re gonna go check.” She gripped his hand, afraid to let him go. “I’ll be right back, mo ghaol.”

“Promise?” she asked, still afraid.

Jamie leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. “I promise. Stay here.” He pressed another kiss to her lips and moved to hop out of the wagon. Jamie then walked with Murtagh up the hill. It was still dark outside with only the light from the full moon to guide their way.

Zahra rolled over, and gripped the side of the wagon to pull herself up so she could watch. When the two men broached the hill, she watched them both hit the ground then army crawl up to the peak of the hill to peer down below. She didn’t know what they were looking at, nor what had spooked them. Had they made it to the stones? What was going on? Where were Laure, Kai, and Jim?

Zahra’s eyes suddenly caught movement and she saw two actual redcoats sneaking up on Jamie and Murtagh. She tried to call out to them to warn them, but no sooner had she opened her mouth to yell than her body had begun to seize uncontrollably. The seizure was mild, only lasted a minute, but it had been a truly terrifying minute. When it was over, her head was throbbing, she felt like she was gonna puke, and she ached everywhere, not just her ribs. When she pulled herself to peer out over the side of the wagon again, both men and the soldiers were gone. "No," she muttered weakly to herself.
With a pained groan, Zahra pulled herself up to a sitting position. Gripping the side still she kind of shuffled herself to the end of the wagon, then stepped down out of it onto shaky feet. “Jamie,” she whispered as she wrapped his tartan about herself and gripped her arm against her side. She closed her eyes and took several steadying breaths. “Fear is the mind-killer,” she began to quote under her breath. Her favorite passage from one of her favorite books. “I must not fear,” she said as she opened her eyes and began walking up the hill. “Fear is the mind-killer…” She pushed herself on through her pain as she marched. “Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration…” She stumbled and landed on her hands and knees, hissing and whimpering in pain as she reached for her side.

“I will face my fear,” she grit out harshly between clenched teeth as she pushed herself back up, picking up her pace in a light jog. “I will permit it to pass over me and through me…” It had started to drizzle lightly, but she moved on uncaring. “And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path…” She fell once more, stumbling on the slickening ground, and the pain was so severe both in head and body that she cried out again, and bit back an actual sob. She whipped her head up and saw that she was so close, so she just crawled the rest of the way up the hill. “Where the fear has gone… there will be nothing… Only I will remain.” She breached the top of the hill, completely out of breath, only to see Jim, Kai, and Laurie leading Jamie and Murtagh behind their horses with ropes bound around their wrists. Four other armed redcoats took up the rear behind them.

In the distance, far past Craig na Dun, Zahra could make out a fort. That must be the infamous Fort Williams… That must be where the redcoats were taking them… Where Randall would be waiting… “No,” Zahra cried weakly and tears burned her eyes as she rolled to her back. She cried out in pain as she gripped her head and her ribs. “Please, God, no.” She couldn’t do this alone. Not without help.

She suddenly heard a horse bray above her and felt Brimstone snuffling at her neck a moment later. Zahra must have accidentally loosed the horse’s rope when she had slipped from the cart. “Brimstone?” Zahra felt like crying. “Oh, I need your help girl…” Zahra reached out and gripped at the horse’s mane. By some miracle, Brimstone seemed to understand and the beast moved to crouch down next to her lady rider. Zahra felt like crying tears of joy as she weakly gripped the saddle, and pulled herself up onto the horse. She grit her teeth to bite back the pain as the filly got back to her feet, then Zahra clicked her teeth three times and the horse was cantering off down the hill to the stones.

Zahra reigned Brimstone to a stop at their base camp by the stones, and she slipped down from the horse with another pain filled groan. Zahra knew every mission, no matter what, even when observing pre-FTL species, it was standard for every away team to bring a basic emergency medical kit, meaning vaccines, antibiotics, painkillers. Standard hypos. The cache was usually well-hidden, but one just had to know where to look. One just had to know what Captain James T. Kirk typically used as his marker… It took her a while of searching on hands and knees, but eventually she had found it: Nine seemingly random stones that just so happened to be arranged in the exact shape of the constellation Leo. “Oh, I love you, Jim,” she whispered as she began to dig up the already loosened dirt, eventually taking one of the bigger rocks to help her. It was buried a few feet deep, so it took her awhile to do with her bare hands, especially because the rain was turning the dirt into a mudslide that kept slipping back in the hole.

She eventually managed to dig the edges free, then with a pain-filled roar, she lifted the crate free from the hole and out onto the ground. To anyone none the wiser it may just look like a large, rectangular, metal slab. To those who knew better though… She touched the surface and a digital lockscreen appeared. Thumbprint lock, not a code. “Ah, shit, Len. Really?” Because she knew Bones had undoubtedly been the one to pack and secure it. Zahra sighed and pushed her thumb to the scanner… It scanned her print, then flashed red and beeped angrily at her. “Access denied.” She wiped the mud from her thumb and tried again. “Access Denied.”
“Fuck!” She swore. It must be the fucking rain. “Just ‘cause my finger’s a little wet you piece of shit, cunt, fuck!” She hit the crate with her wrist before she stood, lifted the box, and carried it into the short tent that was still standing. It wasn’t much as cover, but it was momentary shelter from the rain. Zahra used her mostly still dry tunic to wipe the screen and her thumb, then slowly pressed her thumb to the reader. There was the sound of hydraulic pressure releasing, then the light flashed green and the pressurized bolt locks on the crate popped open.

“Fuck, yes! Thank you, Bones!” Zahra cheered triumphantly and pulled the lid open. It was filled with emergency medical supplies just like she said. Gauze, sutures, tourniquets, scissors, clamps, a portable ECG emitter, and vials and ampoules of nearly every type of emergency medicine she could possibly think of. She searched quickly down the labels until she found what she was looking for: Triptacederine, a powerful painkiller, and Epinephrine. 30ccs of Triptacederine was enough to anesthetize an Algorian mammoth so she would need to be careful.

She pulled out a hypo injector and slipped the tube into the slot. She programmed 10ccs into the dial then pressed the hypo to her neck, pushed the injection button, and with a short hiss of air she was feeling almost instantly better. The pain in her head and her side just sort of drained away like the water running down her face. It was dangerous, she knew, because it meant she wouldn’t really be able to feel if she seriously injured herself. She once knew someone on triptacederine who’d gotten a nail through their foot and was running on it for five miles before they noticed.

The storm beyond her little shelter was getting worse, but a little rain never bothered her. Choosing to play it safe rather than sorry, and just in case the Trip wore off too soon, Zahra peeled herself out of her soiled tunic, grabbed a roll of medical tape and started taping up her ribs as best she could. Over the tape, she wrapped her middle tightly with a wide ace bandage, then secured that with bandage hooks. Now she needed clothes. Fortunately, inside the tent she’d found a trunk with several changes of period specific clothes inside. Apparently, they had been prepared for being here for a while. Zahra pulled off her soiled tunic to pull on a black one she’d found in the trunk. This was followed with a pair of dark brown breeches, socks, and boots. Everything was a little bit too big, especially the boots, but she couldn’t exactly be choosy with the Enterprise costumer right now could she? She found a dark brown leather duster coat with a hood in the trunk, as well as a short sword, scabbard, and belt in the bottom, so it wasn’t a total loss. No pistol though.

After dressing, she closed the trunk, then turned back around to the medical cache. She loaded one hypo with the triptecederine, and a second one with epinephrine. She gazed at the sealed packets of sterilized scalpels for a long time, thinking. Zahra had always been a wiz when it came to throwing weapons or projectiles. It was kind of her thing… She had no rifle or pistol, so throwing blades would be the next best thing. With a soft, but determined sigh she grabbed at least a dozen of the packets and tore them open one by one, setting the blades aside for now. She pulled out a roll of sticky medical tape and peeled off a strip which she laid, non-adhesive side down, on the trunk. A second strip was torn and laid above the first, but overlapping slightly. Zahra then pressed each scalpel flat, blade side down to the adhesive, leaving a little space between each one. She removed her belt and lined it up with the blades, then pressed the belt firmly to the adhesive, and voila. A MacGuyver’d ammo belt full of deadly projectiles.

She wrapped the belt around herself so the blades were mostly at her back so she could reach with either hand. Her scabbard with short sword was hung on her right hip for easiest draw. She was ambidextrous when it came to dual wielding, but she was better with her left hand. She pulled the hooded duster on, then went back to the medical crate one last time because an idea had struck her at the last minute. She got a third hypo injector and loaded it with an ampoule of the strongest sedative she could find. That went into her jacket’s right pocket for ease of access. She then closed the medical crate, and locked it. She didn’t have the time or energy to bury it so the lock would have to do. Again, even if someone did find it, the case it looked like nothing more than a metal slab, unless
one knew where to press to activate the screen.

She looked out at the raging storm as she picked up the last two hypos loaded with meds. She slipped the triptacederine hypo into her inside breast pocket, leaving the epinephrine in her hand. She stared at the hypo for a moment before she took in a deep breath, pressed it to her neck and depressed the injector. After another hiss of air, she exhaled deeply as she felt the artificial adrenaline immediately move through her veins. She tossed the adrenaline into her breast pocket with gbe triotacederine, pulled the hood of her coat up over her head, then marched determinedly out of the tent into the rain… With painkiller and adrenaline coursing strongly in her veins, she was a determined force to be reckoned with.

After she marched to her horse, she grabbed Brimstone’s lead, put her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself up onto her horse in successive, quick movements. She turned her turned Brimstone around in the direction she’d seen her boys go, and watched the flashes of lightning silhouette the shadow of the British fort looming in the distance.

“You ready for this girl?” She gave the beast a gentle rub and a pat on the neck. The horse brayed and whinnied slightly and tossed her head almost in a shake. "Yeah, I know the feeling." Zahra had faced impossible odds before, this wasn't new to her, but that didn't make it any less nerve-wracking, especially with her injuries, especially with the knowledge that she was working against the clock here. She knew she was on borrowed time, the seizure she’d experienced back in the wagon was testament to ghag, which was why she was more determined now than ever. She would get them back… And may God have mercy on Randall if he's hurt Jamie or any of her family… he would get none from her.

With a stoic, determined set to her features, Zahra grabbed a tight hold of the reigns and prodded her heels against Brimstone’s flanks. “Hyah!” she called and Brimstone let out a loud bellow as the horse reared back just as a crack of thunder and lightning lit the night, then they were off, galloping down the road to Fort William as if the very whips of hell were behind them…

Chapter End Notes

High ho silver! Away! Hahahah

thanks for reading! :D
"Good answer…"

Laurie slowly removed his presence from Jamie and Zahra’s minds just as Jim was calling to him.

“Laurie?” Jim called out to him. Laurie slowly blinked out of his trance and turned to look at Jim, who was still astride his horse but they had stopped at the top of the hill. Laurie recognized the area, they were near Craig na Dun. Near camp.

“Stay here,” Laurie told Murtagh as he nodded at the sleeping couple.

Murtagh nodded back in confirmation. “Aye.”

Laurie stood and limped to the edge of the cart before untying his horse’s lead and climbing up onto the saddle. He was meeting up with Jim and Kai a moment later and could see what had given his friends pause. Down by the circle of rocks below, a pair of redcoats with torches were searching their camp.

“Orders, Captain?” Kai asked, gripping his reins, and itching for his pistol.

“We planned for this,” Jim said as his hand felt the breast of his jacket where he had a perfectly forged letter sealed with a royal stamp in his inner breast pocket, along with a royal signet ring. “We have our orders. We just explain to them we’re on a high priority, covert mission for his majesty.” Jim looked at both of his companions and they all nodded at each other, made sure they looked presentable, then let Jim lead the way.

They rode up on the camp slowly. “Hail, officers,” Jim called as they neared the men with torches, one drawing a rifle on them. “May I ask what you’re doing in our camp?” Jim asked in perfectly accented British.

Once they came into light, and the man could clearly see the gentleman’s rank, he lowered his rifle. “Apologies, sir. We didn’t know there was a patrol in this sector.”
“That’s because we’re not on patrol, gentleman,” Jim announced. “We’re here on his majesty’s orders.”

The officers looked at each other. “What orders are those exactly, sir?”

Jim huffed. “Do you always presume to question your superior officers?”

“Sorry, sir. I meant no disrespect, it’s just we’ve orders from Captain Randall to question any unknown persons in this vicinity.”

Jamie and Murtagh had walked up the hill with only the light from the full moon to guide their way, but when they caught sight of torches below, they’d immediately dropped to their bellies to crawl the rest of the way. At the cusp of the hill Murtagh and Jamie could see that they had made it to Craig na Dun. Jim, Kai, and Laurie were below on horseback, and they were exchanging words with two redcoats with lanterns down below. Looks like they had been searching the camp. Jim was having words with them.

“What do you think’s goin’ on?” Jamie whispered.

They suddenly heard the sound of two flintlock pins arming behind them and both men froze with their hands raised. When they turned, two redcoats had pistols aimed directly at their faces. “Let’s go and find out, shall we?” One of the men said. The highlanders slowly got to their feet and were shoved harshly in the backs to force their march down the hill to join the others. Jamie looked back over his shoulder in the direction of the wagon, and was met with another harsh shove to his shoulder. “Eyes front, savage.”

Jim sighed as if annoyed. “Well, may I presume your Captain Randall’s orders do not supercede those given by the king himself.” Jim was reaching into his breast pocket for his ring, when he heard Laurie’s voice in his head.

Jim, we have a problem, Laurie pressed into his mind, and when Jim turned to look where Laurie was mentally urging him to, so did Kai. They watched as two more redcoats led their highland friends down to them at rifle point. Zahra wasn’t with them and they weren’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

Jim removed his hand from his pocket. “What’s the meaning of this?” Jim asked the two newcomers.

One officer jabbed Jamie in his shoulder. “We found these two heathens on the ridge, no doubts looking for a point of attack, sir.”

“On the contrary, gentlemen,” Jim tried to cover on the fly. “These men have been appointed as our guides while we travel on a king’s errand.”

“I recognize this one,” one of the torchbearers said, and Jamie locked eyes with him. It was the same soldier from that village several weeks ago, the one who’d dragged Zahra to Branton Inn and into Randall’s clutches. “Captain, sir, do you realize you’re guide is none other than Jamie the Red?”

“No mistake, Leftenant,” Jim tried to dismiss his concern. “You must be mistaken.”

“No mistake, sir. This man is Red Jamie, wanted for treason, murder, and theft.”
Trumped up charges from this Captain Randall, Jim. I promise you. Laurie spoke quickly in Jim’s mind. He had sensed Jim’s concern and immediately nipped those doubts in the bud. *The man is a sadistic sociopath, obsessed with Jamie.*

Jim’s jaw clenched. He trusted Laurie, he trusted Zahra, they trusted Jamie. That meant Jim could trust Jamie, too. “And who exactly has declared these grievous charges, Leftenant?”

“By order of Captain Randall, sir,” Lieutenant Foster answered him.

Jim cleared his throat, then pulled the signet ring from his breast pocket to show the Lieutenant. “Charges or no, I am an agent of the king and we are on a royal mission. These men have been entrusted as my personal guides.”

Foster brought his torch to gaze at the ring. “And what orders might those be, Captain, where his majesty would entrust a treacherous criminal such as this?”

Jim also pulled the wax sealed letter from his pocket. “I am afraid that is privileged information, Leftenant.” Laurie could just see this situation rapidly going downhill. Jamie and Murtagh were a hair’s breadth from drawing guns, or swords, or both, and then they would have a bloodbath on their hands.

*Jim, we’re about five seconds from loss of control, and a handful of dead people here,* Laurie cautioned him.

“However, I would be happy to explain our business to your Captain Randall myself,” Jim said as he placed the ring and the letter back into his pocket. “If it will appease your conscience to do so.”

“It would, sir, yes. Greatly,” Foster said, hand relaxing from where it had been hovering over his sword. “Bind them,” Foster ordered and his fellow officers moved to bind Murtagh and Jamie’s wrists.

*You need to relax, my friend, before you get us all killed,* Laurie spoke into Jamie’s mind and the redhead gazed with wide eyes up at Laurie.

*It wasnae a dream?* Jamie thought back at him in shock and fear.

*Not even remotely.* Laurie confirmed. *Now calm your tits and let us handle this.*

*I cannae go back,* Jamie exhaled, shaking his head as he watched his hands being bound by rope and was overcome with the urge to try and break free.

Calm. Peace. Serenity. Laurie pressed into Jamie’s mind like a soothing balm, stroking the fear from his mind. *Relax, sweetheart. Randall is not going to touch you…I promise.* Jamie and Laurie locked gazes for a long time, and Jamie remembered the power Laurie’s presence had in his mind from his dream. It was almost frightening. *Trust me.* It took another tension-filled moment or two, but Jamie nodded his head.

“Leeloo,” Jamie whispered, which earned him a slap across the face.

“Silence, cur,” the officer who struck him spat.

*She’ll be fine until we get back,* Laurie tried to calm Jamie down, and mask his own uncertainty. He couldn’t feel her, but that didn’t surprise him. Their connection had been fucked for going on almost seven weeks now. He’d had to physically touch her in order to access her memories back there, where normally he should have just been able to go wireless, so to speak.
Jamie’s and Murtagh’s bound wrists were attached to a lead of rope, which were then attached to Kai and Laurie’s mounts. Lieutenant Foster and his fellow officers mounted their own horses. Three of the four redcoats took up the flank, pistols at the ready, while Lieutenant Foster joined Jim and the others at the lead, to guide them to Fort William. They rode at a steady pace that put strain on the highlanders who were forced to walk or jog along with them without being dragged.

No sooner had they left the stones, than it had begun to drizzle, which then turned into a downpour. “What a miserable country,” Foster said next to Jim.


“Lieutenant Foster,” the soldier declared as he nodded at each man in turn. “They’re awfully quiet aren’t they?”

Jim smirked. “Well, I rescued Mr. Kai from a pirate slaver some years back. He does not speak the best English, but he understands it perfectly, I assure you. Mr. Keelan, on the other hand, is simply a mute.” Laurie waved his hand to the Lieutenant. “Had his throat sliced once. The man somehow survived, but his voice did not.”

“Quite the trio,” Foster stated. “What brings you to this dreadful country?”

Jim huffed dryly. “Nice try, Lieutenant, but I am still not permitted to discuss our orders. Unless you are trying to turn me into a traitor to the crown?”

Foster shook his head. “Apologies, sir. That is not my intention at all. I have simply never met a king’s agent before.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, isn’t there?” Jim said.

The rain was miserable, and they were all of them cold and drenched and it was enough to turn any mood sour. By the time they got to Fort William, they were all soaked to the bone, weary, cranky. Once they entered the courtyard of Fort William, the riders all dismounted, and Jamie and Murtagh’s rope binds were replaced with shackles, but this time they were secured behind their backs.

Just as they were about to be lead away, though, Jim intervened. “While I may permit the shackles for now, Lieutenant, these men are still under my charge, and as such they will remain in my charge, am I understood?”

Lieutenant Foster nodded his head and his officers backed away. “If you’ll follow me, Captain,” the young man said and turned to guide Jim and his companions into the main building, Jim and Foster in the front, Murtagh and Jamie in the middle, and Kai and Laurie taking up the rear. They were led down a series of hallways and corridors, up a few flights of stairs, before stopping at a large door. Foster opened the door to a large study with a six-seater dining table on one side, and what appeared to be a strategy table with maps and such, and a large work desk covered with books, letters, and more maps on the other.

“Wait here, please,” Foster asked before he turned to leave.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Jim nodded as the man exited the room. The moment Foster was gone, Jim, Kai and Laurie seemed to all animate at once. Laurie took vigil by the door, closing his eyes, and it was like he was listening for something, but Jamie wondered if he were listening, or if he were using his mind powers?

“Kai, their shackles,” Jim said as he moved to the window to check the distance. They were a solid
four stories up and there was nothing but rocks and ocean beneath them. Shit.

"I dinnae know why ya didn't just kill the bastards in the first place, then we wouldn't even be here," Murtagh said as the dark one tried to break his manacles. "You know that was the same bastard what delivered Zahra to Randall's hands the first time?"

"We swore an oath," Jim said, meeting Murtagh's gaze, hoping that the sentiment of honor and oathtaking would not be lost on their Scottish companion. "No blood will be spilt by our hands."

Murtagh sighed and fell quiet as Kai attempted to break his shackles. They were solid, though, well made, and unbreakable even for Kai’s superior Orion strength. “No good, Captain," the man said.

Jim grit his teeth and spoke under his breath, “Where’s Zahra when we fucking need her?”

“We just--left her.” Jamie said in a stricken, shocked sort of way. Like he couldn't believe they had done that.

“Hey,” Kai grabbed Jamie’s shoulders, making the man turn to look at him. “I know this may be hard for you to believe but Zahra is one of the strongest, most resourceful warriors I have ever known.” It was the most words they’d heard Kai speak since they met him.

“But, we just--left her…” Jamie didn’t seem able to move past that part.

“I know and I'm sorry,” Jim agreed. “But, Kai is right. Zahra is incredibly strong and resourceful... I wouldn’t be surprised if she came banging the door down any minute to save all our butts.”

Murtagh looked like he might have something to say about that, but Laurie cut him off. “He’s coming,” Laurie said, eyes popping open.

Jamie and Murtagh stood together near the bookshelf, while Kai and Laurie stood ‘guard’ on opposite sides and Jim took up a casual stance near the fire. The chamber door opened loudly a few moments later, and Jim looked up to see a man in a fine red coat and a long brown ponytail enter the room, along with Lieutenant Foster. The man who must be Randall gave Jim but a momentary glance, before his eyes immediately sought and found Jamie. Laurie’s fists clenched and he moved to stand in Randall’s line of sight.

“Captain Randall, may I introduce Captain James Kirk,” Foster said by way of introduction.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Jim extended his hand to the man to shake.

“Captain Jonathan Randall,” the other man said as he took Jim’s hand and shook it. “On behalf of my entire garrison, Captain,” Randall moved over to his desk where he opened a small chest and pulled out a bottle of port and two glasses. Foster stood guard by the open door. “I thank you for bringing this criminal to justice.” He poured two glasses and moved to hand one to Jim. “We have been searching for this man for quite some time.”

Jamie muttered something in Gaelic, and Laurie pressed that same calming balm to his mind. Easy. We’ve got you.

Jim smiled politely but declined the wine. “Apologies Captain, but--I am afraid you misunderstand my intentions in coming here.”

Randall’s teeth clenched and he set the glass aside. “And what other purpose could you possibly have except handing this murdering, treacherous thief over for proper English justice?”
“I am afraid I am not at liberty to discuss our business with you, Captain,” Jim said as he once more reached into his inside breast pocket to fish the signet ring from within, which he then showed to Captain Randall. “I am on His Majesty’s orders, and my presence here is a mere formality, an attempt to foster good relations on behalf of your Leftenant, who feared I was operating under false pretenses. Namely he was concerned I did not know who I was working with.”

Randall reached for the ring, his tongue briefly gliding out to press against his right bicuspid as he inspected the ring closely. “You—” he looked up at Jim and then at both of his companions, and their ‘captives’, namely his gaze lingered on Jamie yet again. “—are secret agents of the crown?”

Laurie’s fists clenched at his sides and they could all feel heat prickling in the room. *He doesn’t believe us, Jim.* Laurie spoke in Jim’s mind, staring murderously at Randall. Apparently, this bastard himself is an agent for someone called the Duke of Sandringham whom he thinks would have warned him if one of the king’s agents was in town.

Jim took the ring back with another polite smile. “What? Did your friend the Duke not warn you of our arrival?”

Randall had just been taking a sip from his glass when mention of the Duke caused him to spit up some of his wine onto his neckerchief. He glanced at Foster, then nodded his head, indicating he wanted the man to wait outside, so Foster turned and left, closing the door behind him. “I am sure—” Randall started to say as he moved over to his desk. “—that I don’t know to what you’re referring.” He set his glass down, then began untying his scarf to clean it.

Jim nodded. “Of course you don’t, and I would be happy to leave things at that.”

“But, seeing as you mentioned it, what do you know of this Duke?” Randall asked as he tried to dab his scarf clean.

_The Duke is Randall’s patron. Protects Randall from his own crimes in exchange for his loyalty. Apparently, he has been ordering Randall to stir-up false Jacobite activities. Randall even murdered one of his own men to frame Jamie, that is—one of the reasons Randall wants him._ God Jim loved having a psychic on his side. Best plan ever. _Told you you’d regret not bringing me along._

“Well,” Jim crossed his hands behind his back. “I know that—Jacobite activity in this part of the highlands has somehow gone up since your arrival,” he stated casually. “Which is ironic, considering one would hope that the presence of an entire English garrison would _deter_ such things, should it not?” Randall seemed to be getting more agitated by the minute as he redid his tie. Jim, however, persisted. “One may even be so bold as to say it’s almost as if someone were being paid to do the Jacobites job for them… Would you agree?”

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“Jim!” Laurie called, just as Randall pulled a hidden pistol from his desk, then one from his waist and turned them both on Jim, and Kai. Murtagh and Jamie being unarmed and bound both ducked under the table for cover.

“Woah!” Jim said as he held up his hands in supplication. “Kai, no! Laurie!” He stared Laurie down, knowing that look on the Betazoid’s face and feeling the icy hot, psychic energy and anger suddenly swirling through the room.

“What’s goin’ on?” Murtagh said, and Jamie looked at him. He remembered this feeling from his dream, apparently Murtagh was feeling it, too. They all were. It was like a hot breeze was somehow whipping through the room.

“Stand down, Laurie!” Laurie wanted badly to break Jack’s mind and he was a stone’s throw from
doing just that but so far all he was doing was raising Randall’s hackles and that was making his trigger fingers itchy. “Laurie!” Jim tried to shout at him again. “Stand the fuck down!”

Something out of Randall's peripheral vision caught the man's attention. When he turned to look out the window what he saw had him changing the aim of his pistols at the window just as something came crashing violently through the glass. There was a raging warcry as two booted feet slammed right into the man's chest, launching him with a powerful force into the stone wall of the fireplace with a loud, painful crack. The hooded figure then quickly launched to their feet, causing their hood to drop and expose a short mop of brown hair and feminine features.

“Zahra?” Jim said, disbelieving. He had mostly been joking about her showing up and saving their butts. Holy shit.

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Zahra had never pushed Brimstone so hard, and the filly was definitely not used to it, but they managed to make good time. It was still raining a little, just a light drizzle now, and the sun had finally begun to rise, but just barely. Because she had taken a hard gallop, she had actually managed to partially catch up to her friends and the redcoat, as in she had seen Jim and the others enter the fort. So, she chose to abandon Brimstone about half a mile from the fortress and take the rest of the journey on foot.

“Good girl. Good girl!” she praised her horse, who was winded and panting hard. Zahra pressed her forehead affectionately to Brimstone's muzzle. “Away home, now,” she said with tears stinging her eyes. She gave the mare a few last pets before she was moving on, keeping low and taking cover wherever she could find, but moving as swiftly as she could. She made it to the fort about fifteen minutes later, sneaking around the outskirts to search for a way up and inside. Below one of the ramparts, she believed she found her best way up as she could clearly see several distended crags in the stones, windows, and other features she could use to climb. It would be slippery, no doubt from the rain, but that’s what the gloves were for. She pulled said gloves onto her hands as she took several steps back. She gave herself a running start before she jumped, ran a few steps up the wall, then pushed up with her toes to leap and grip onto the brick jutting out from the wall. She breathed hard, lined up her next jump, brought her legs up, then pushed herself up to the next brick… Then the next… Then a window sill… She climbed to the top of the window, then jumped for the next brick. Before long she had reached the top of the rampart where she saw a redcoat patrolling along the wall.

Zahra breathed slowly and waited for him to pass before she pulled herself up to look over the wall, checking the area. It was barely daybreak so still a little dark, most of the garrison were likely still asleep and these were just the nightwatchman. She could see this lone soldier was the only soldier on this part of the wall. She dropped back for cover, waited for the soldier to pass again, then quietly pulled herself up and over the wall. She silently stepped onto the ground on the other side, then reached her hand into her pocket, grabbing the hypo there as she snuck up behind him. When she was close enough, she suddenly wrapped him in a headlock, covering his mouth with one hand, before she pressed the hypo to his neck with the other. She pressed the injector and after a soft hiss of air the man was out cold.

Zahra dragged his body behind a nearby crate and left him there out of sight. It was still early, she still had shadows and darkness on her side as she stealthily made her way from cover to cover, moving down into the fort itself and off the outer wall. There weren’t that many guards to deal with inside, so she was able to move rather freely and remain undetected. She managed to sedate four other guards and hide their bodies in closets, or behind supply crates as she went.
She searched down several corridors and rooms looking for her companions, until she turned one corner after a flight of stairs and saw a familiar face standing guard outside of a room somewhere on the fourth level. Zahra’s brow furrowed deeply and she hid herself in an alcove. She cupped her hands over her mouth to throw her voice, then let out a shrill whistle. She watched the boy Hawkin’s brow furrow and he drew his sword. The whistle had had been able to make sound like it had come from down the hall the other way, so when he turned to investigate Zahra waited until he had turned the corner before she moved. She hid herself behind a storage shelf next to the door Hawkins had been guarding, then drew her hypo again at the ready. She pressed herself as far to the corner as she could as she waited.

She heard his boot steps as he came back around the corner and moved to return to his post. The moment she saw his boots in view, she lunged, covering his mouth and depressing the hypo into his neck at the same time. He had barely managed to touch the hilt of his sword, and their eyes had locked in recognition before he was passing out in her arms. She searched him for keys, of which she could not find any, then dragged him to stuff him inside a nearby linen closet. “Sorry, Hawkins,” she said softly then closed the door on him.

Zahra had found a length of rope in the storage closet she stuffed the boy in. The rope was a solid fifteen feet long or so once she got it fully unbound. She wrapped it in a circular bundle, looped it over the handle of her short sword, then turned to open the window. She climbed out onto the ledge where she could see the window to Randall’s office about eight feet to her left, but another window that was covered with iron bars about five feet above that. Zahra stepped as far off of the window sill as she could, which was when she stepped on a loose stone and lost her footing. She gripped the window ledge as she slipped, managing to catch herself just barely. Her heart was beating a tattoo against her ribcage as she turned to look down at the crags below. There would be zero chance of surviving a fall from this height. She needed to be more careful.

She turned her gaze away and took several steadying breaths before pulling herself back up onto the ledge. Much more careful this time, she made sure she had solid footing before she removed the rope from her belt and tied a slipknot lasso on the end. She gave herself enough slack before she began twirling the lasso, then tossed it at the iron railing above. She really was quite adept at throwing things so she managed to snag the noose on the bar first try. She pulled it tight with a triumphant, ‘Yes!’ hissed mostly to herself. She tied this end to her belt, then gripped the rope as she used her feet to shuffle herself along the wall until she was right next to Randall's window. She peered her head just over the side to look, where she could see Randall suddenly pull two pistols on her comrades. She didn't have much time. Zahra climbed up the wall until she was a couple feet above his window where she could hear Jim shouting. She took several deep, calming breaths in then out, gripped the rope in her hands, then pushed herself as far away off the wall as she could. She gripped the rope tight as the momentum pulled her back towards the wall, only now she was swinging right for Randall's window. She stretched her legs, feet first before she crashed through the window, slamming her feet hard into the man’s chest before letting go of the rope and falling to her hands and knees.

"Zahra?" She heard Jim say as her hood fell off and she pushed herself to stand.

She didn't acknowledge him at first, focusing on the fallen man as she approached the stunned Randall with a wicked look in her eyes. “Heya Jacky boy,” she greeted saccharinely. “Dja miss me?”

“Wha--you--how?” He seemed lost for words as he looked at her, and anger and pain flashed across his features.

She saw the anger and the rage mingled with pain as he glared at her, and then his hand was
suddenly wrapped tightly around her throat trying to strangle her. "Yeah. Me." She grabbed his wrist at the same time she grabbed the hypo from her pocket then pressed it to his neck. "Sweet dreams, Jack," she said in that same saccharine tone, then watched as his eyes closed and his grip loosened then dropped away completely.

When she stood, she suddenly felt Kai’s arms around her and she breathed a sigh of relief, returning his hug with a firm embrace of her own, patting his back comfortably. “It’s ok, big buy. I missed you, too.”

“Leeloo?” She heard his voice and immediately looked up and tears sprang to her eyes. Jamie stood as she went to him. When she wrapped her arms around him he nuzzled his face against her, unable to embrace her as his hands were still shackled. “I’m so sorry, mo ghaol. I didnae wanna leave you. I’m so sorry.”

“Sshh. Shh,” she hushed him gently, leaning back to hold his face. “I know, baby, I know. It’s alright.”

“How--” he said, gazing at her features in awe and wonder.

“I found the emergency medical cache,” she answered simply looking briefly at Laurie, Kai, then Jim. “But I will tell you the whole story once we’re safe. Right now we need to get these off you.” She jingled his manacles.

“Check Randall or the guards outside, see if anyone has keys,” Jim ordered Kai. Kai searched Randal's body, and Jim searched Randall's desk looking for keys. Laurie was still standing near the door with his eyes closed again, once more looking as if he were listening for something.

"None of the guards outside had keys, I looked," she said as she carded fingers through her hair in search for any straggling hair pins that might be leftover from her wedding 'do that she still hadn't fully taken down. She found a couple that would work, pulling them from her tangled locks and bending and twisting them to her will. Once she got them how she wanted, she dropped to her knees behind Jamie and started picking the lock on his manacles.

"What are ye doin’?" Jamie asked curiously as he twisted his head to glance down at her over his shoulder.

"Exactly what it looks like, I'm getting you out of these shackles," she said as she concentrated on picking the lock. Both Highlanders now understood why Jim had belabored Zahra's presence earlier when Kai couldn't break their shackles. A few clicks and ticks later, she whispered, "Got it." Then with a twist of her fingers Jamie's shackles were falling open and the man was freed to rub the feeling back into his wrists.

Jamie turned and was pulling her into his arms a moment later, kissing her as if his life depended on it. "You shoulnae be here. You should be resting. How--"

"Later," she muttered against his mouth and managed to pull herself away. "We can talk later."

Jamie reluctantly let her go as she moved to kneel behind Murtagh now and worked on his cuffs. "Where the bloody hell did you learn how to pick a lock, lass?" Murtagh asked in wonder.

Zahra just smirked and shook her head. "A lady's gotta have some secrets, Murtagh."

Giving up their quest for a key, Jim and Kai lifted Randall into his desk chair, rid him of all his weapons, then began to bind him with the rope Jim had found in his desk, though why a man had a rope in his desk Jim dared not think about too much. They also used his own neckerchief to gag him.
as well.

Zahra got Murtagh's shackles free, and the man pulled her into his own fond embrace. "I'm sorry we left ye, lass."

Zahra returned the hug, then broke away shaking her head. "Don't be. Imagine the predicament we'd be in now if I had been taken with you guys."

"Speaking of, how the bloody hell are you even here?" She had practically been on death's door last they left her.

"Triptacederine and Epinephrine," she answered plainly but Murtagh and Jamie still had no clue. "It's a long story," she said with a shake of her head. "Óne I will be all too happy to tell once we get out of here."

They all moved to the door, and Zahra put her hand on Laurie's arm and the man opened his eyes to look at her, his expression a mix of concern and pride. They gave each other a short hug before Jim moved to open the door.

"I sedated most of the guards, so we should have a clear run to the stables from here," Zahra whispered.

"Ready?" Jim asked, glancing at each of their faces in turn, but one was suddenly missing. "Where the hell did Laurie go?"

Zahra shrugged, and when they turned around they could see Laurie checking Randall's bonds, making sure they were tight, inescapable. The man would have to be cut free. Laurie didn't leave it there though. "Laurie come on," Jim whispered hurriedly from the doorway. Laurie found Randall’s quill, finding the tip to be sharp enough to cut flesh. Laurie dipped it in ink, then started actually carving the word ‘Rapist’ into Randall’s forehead, then ‘Murderer’ right below that, dipping more ink as he went. It was like some crude form of tattooing, and was likely the wound would leave a permanent print in his skin even after it healed, a permanent reminder, a permanent declaration of only a couple of the man's depravities.

When he was finished, Laurie dropped the quill, then joined Jim and the others at the door. “Was that really necessary?” Jim asked. He didn’t know what Laurie had been writing on the man’s forehead but he knew it couldn’t be good.

Laurie gave Jim a look. "If you had seen what I did while I was probing around in there, Jim, you wouldn’t be asking me that question. Just be grateful I didn't kill him with my brain."

Murtagh’s brow furrowed deeply, concerned and a bit confused. What was Laurie talking about? He glanced at Jamie who met his gaze. “Dinnae ask,” Jamie said, putting his hand on his godfather’s shoulder. “I dinnae think I could explain it if I tried."

Jim frowned and patted Laurie on the shoulder in sympathy and understanding. “I’m sorry,” Jim admitted.

“So am I,” the Betazoid said, then nodded ahead. “Can we just blow this popsicle stand already?”

Jim nodded back. “Definitely.” He clapped Laurie on the shoulder once. “Let’s go,” Jim said nodding for Kai to lead the way out.

“What’s a popsicle?” Jamie asked quietly as he followed Zahra out into the hall.
Zahra smirked, chuckling softly to herself, then turned and placed a brief kiss on his lips. “It’s a frozen sweet,” she replied whispering in his ear. "We’ll get you one back in the 23rd."

Kai lead the way, taking cover and then ushering them on as they moved through the corridors. They passed several unconscious soldiers on their way, and Jamie likened it to that part in the Sleeping Beauty/Briar Rose fairytale when the fairies put the kingdom under a sleep enchantment. Jamie and Murtagh both looked questioningly at Zahra. “Did you do all that?” Jamie whispered close to her ear as they moved from cover to cover.

Zahra just worried on her bottom lip and shrugged, then held up the hypo-tube in her hand. “It’s just a sedative. They should all wake up in a couple hours which is why we need to get the fuck out of here, like now.”

When they made it out to the main courtyard, they stayed grouped behind cover, and peered out at the grounds towards the stables. They didn’t see anyone around but that didn’t mean soldiers weren’t lurking. “Laurie?” Jim asked.

Laurie closed his eyes and everything was silent for a moment. “We’re clear,” the man said and they all kept low as they ran for the stables and their horses within. Jim, Laurie, and Kai found their horses, and they would have to commandeer the other two.

"I didn't take out the guards at the gatehouse," Zahra said as she lingered near the doorway.

"What are you suggesting?" Jim asked, noticing how she wasn't as eagerly preparing any of the horses like they were.

"I'm suggesting," she waved her hand holding the hypo with the sedative. "I go out there and finish what I started." Her and Jim locked gazes for a long moment.

"No," Jamie said, moving to her and taking her face in his hands. "Ye've done enough, Leeloo."

She sighed and gripped his wrists. "We're not gonna make it far if they've got their best snipers trained on us. I can do this, Jamie."

He pressed his forehead to hers. He knew she could. She'd already proven that by taking out half the garrison and quite literally breaking them out of Randall's custody. "I know ye can, but ye shouldnae have to."

"Jamie's right, FJ." Laurie said, making Zahra lift her head to stare at him. "Just because you're hopped up on triptacederine and epinephrine doesn't make you supergirl. It's actually even more dangerous because no one, not even you know what your body is going through right now."

Kai was suddenly there with his hand on her shoulder, and holding his other hand out expectantly. "You've done more than enough, Leeloo. You saved the day. Let us finish the small stuff?"

Zahra wanted to argue, wanted to say she was fine and she could do this and she didn't need their help, but deep down, she knew. Zahra knew they were right, knew she was being a stubborn bitch, knew that she had already been pushing her luck with everything she'd already done. Knew she had probably exacerbated her injuries a hundred fold and just couldn't feel it. They were right, she knew, but damn if she didn't want to be angry about it.

"Please, Leeloo?" Jamie said as he touched her face. It was Jamie's please that finally did her in. He wasn't trying to suppress her or pull a man card. His desire to keep her here had nothing to do with her sex, and everything to do with the fact that he knew she was sick.
With a heavy sigh she handed the hypo with the sedative off to Kai. "I hate it when you guys get all Vulcan on me." As in, when they started talking logic.

"What does the God of Fire have to do with anythin'"?" Jamie asked, and Zahra smirked and shook her head.

"We'll wait for your signal," Jim said to Kai as he placed his hand on his lieutenant's shoulder and the two locked gazes for a moment. "Good luck, and be safe."

Kai grunted and nodded in response, and then was out the door. The remaining companions got their horses ready. Zahra ended up having to share a horse with Jamie as there were only enough for five riders. She was sitting with Jamie on their horse, waiting for Kai's signal, when her ears started a very dull ringing, and her vision blurred, making her have to blink several times before she reached up a hand to rub her eyes. Maybe it had been a good idea after all to let Kai take point on this one. Jamie watched her closely, concerned. "Leeloo?"

"I'm alright," she said, her own voice sounding far away to her. "Just dizzy… I'm… alright."

Jamie gripped his hands tight to the reins, holding her close. He turned to look at Laurie who seemed just as antsy to get out of there. "Hold on, mo ghaol… Hold on."

They waited with bated breath until finally they heard it, a loud shrill whistle that sounded like some weird bird call. Suddenly, five riders were bursting through the stable doors, galloping through the courtyard toward the gatehouse and beyond.

"Go!" Jim called as he pulled his own horse and the spare one he was leading to a stop under the gate. Laurie, Murtagh, and Jamie didn't stop with him, though, they kept riding through the now open gate. Jim looked up as he saw Kai running down the stairs. Jim heard a voice call out to halt, then the sound of rifle fire was preceded by dirt exploding next to their horses feet. Jim watched as Kai leapt deftly onto the waiting horse, then he and Jim were off, riding like the wind over the plains back toward Craig na Dun.

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Zahra's nose was bleeding, she was dizzy, and her vision had gone blurry by the time they reached the camp at the base of the stones. "What are we doin' back here?" Murtagh demanded impatiently. "We need to get Zahra to yer doctor!" The man shouted as he saw Laurie climb down off his horse, then move to help Zahra off of Jamie's.

"No time to explain in full," Laurie said as he cradled Zahra against his side, then handed her back to Jamie once the man had climbed off his own horse.

"Leeloo?" Jamie said as he held her face.

She was gripping onto him but her head was lolling back slightly because it felt like it weighed a billion pounds. "I'm--still--with you," she said weakly, gripping onto his tunic and resting her head forward onto his shoulder.

Jim and Kai rode up right behind them leaping down off their horses as well. "How's she doing?" Jim asked Laurie, and the Betazoid had a grim expression on his face which was answer enough.

"Did we make it in time?" Kai asked, equally concerned.

"In time for what?" Murtagh asked angrily. Why were they all getting off their horses? what the blazes was going on?
Jim pulled his pocket watch out of his vest pocket, flipped it open in his palm, and Murtagh and Jamie both watched, utterly flabbergasted and transfixed as the watch projected a holographic timer, counting down from six minutes, and 45 seconds. 44. 43. " Barely, " Jim said as he closed the watch.

" Will someone tell me what the bloody hell is goin' on? " Murtagh shouted, near panicking As he climbed down off his own horse.

" I ' m sorry, friend. I wasn ' t able to give you the same crash course I gave young Jamie, here, but the quick and ugly version is simply this. " Laurie put his hand on Murtagh ' s shoulder. " We -- " He gestured his hand at his companions. " --as in Jim, Kai, Zahra, and myself--are from the future. "

Murtagh looked terrified and as if he might be sick. " The… future? Wha'? "

Laurie nodded. " The year 2263 to be specific… and in about five minutes this circle of stones-- " he once more gestured with his hands at the circle around them. " --is gonna tear open a direct gateway back to our time, and we ' re all going to walk through it. "

Murtagh had taken several steps back, shocked, scared. He stared at Jamie, then at the woman in his arms, then at Laurie, Jim, Kai… " Tha ' s not-- "

" I assure you it ' s quite possible, and very real, " Jim said. Murtagh stared at him and the pocket of the man ' s vest where his magic time counting watch had disappeared to.

Jamie passed Zahra off to Kai briefly and the man nodded as he tucked the woman against his side. " I know it ' s scary, Murtagh, " Jamie said as he approached his godfather. " I ' m scared out of my wits, but I ' ve seen it with my own eyes… I still cannae believe it myself, but I know Zahra will die here without the proper care from her own time… I know we ' ll be free there, ye Ken? No more Randall. No more price on my head. " Murtagh had tears in his eyes as he stared at Jamie and fish-mouthed a little. " Look, I ' m goin’ with them, " Jamie continued, taking Murtagh ' s hand in both of his. " But that doesnae mean you have to. "

" Jamie, " Murtagh finally found his voice. " I promised yer mother… " the older man said, but seemed unable to finish the sentence.

" I know, " Jamie replied. " And ye ' ve always done right by her, by me. Ye ' ve kept yer word, Murtagh. Ye ' ve honoured us both… Now maybe it ' s time to honor yerself. "

" Jamie… Dinnae go where I cannae follow, " Murtagh pleaded with tears in his eyes.

Zahra had gently extracted herself from Kai ' s side and followed the voices in the direction of the blurry shapes of her husband and his godfather. She reached for Jamie and gently tucked herself against his side. Jamie looked over at her and wrapped his arm about her shoulders. " Where she goes I go, " he said softly looking at his wife, who looked so pale, and still had a little blood dripping from her nose.

" What about Jenny? " Zahra asked softly.

Jamie ' s smile he gave her was bittersweet. Jenny. His sister. " Aye, that ' s what I need you to do, Murtagh! " Jamie turned to Murtagh, placing his hand on the man ' s shoulder. " I need you to look after Jenny now, " Jamie said, giving Murtagh new orders and purpose. " She ' s gonna need you, now, more than I ever did. Yer loyalty, yer wisdom an' advice, yer strength. She ' s yer responsibility now. I need you to take care of her, look after her in my stead. Lallybroch belongs to her now. "

Murtagh gripped Jamie ' s fist tightly in his, and they locked gazes for a long time before Murtagh finally nodded. " Aye. Aye, lad. I can do tha'. "
"Murtagh," Zahra reached for his arm. "You should know that Dougal and the Jacobites, it's--they're--" she inhaled and exhaled deeply through her nose. "Don't follow them, please... I don't want you to--die for nothing."

Murtagh stared at her for a long time. If she really was from the future, surely she knew what was going to happen? Would there be a war between George and Stuart? Would they win or lose? If his death would be for 'nothing' he had to wonder if that meant they were going to lose... He continued to watch her for a moment and finally nodded. "Aye, lassie. I--I believe you." Zahra moved in to give him a hug, which he returned just as he felt the wind suddenly picking up in speed and intensity around them. "Now, you listen to me, lassie," he suddenly said, gripping her tight and speaking close to her ear. "You better take care of my boy, or no matter how far or how long time stands between us, I will dog ye til yer dyin' day, ye ken?"

Zahra actually smirked at Murtagh's unique version of a shovel speech, and she gave him a few pats on the back "I promise," she said softly.

"And you take care of her, damn ye," Murtagh shouted at Jamie as he released her and had to shield his face from the force of the winds that were blowing leaves, dust, and debris everywhere.

Jamie pulled Murtagh into an equally firm hug in the next instant. He said something in Gaelic that was equivalent to a son telling their father he loved him, Jamie even had tears stinging his eyes.

It took Murtagh a long time to respond and he had to swallow hard through the lump in his throat before he was able to actually say it back, Gaelic vow of love spoken as if from a father to son.

"Listen, sorry to break up the lovefest," Laurie interrupted loudly. "--but we gotta go!" They had a very short window here. Zahra and Jamie stood back and Laurie looked at Murtagh. "If you're staying you need to get the hell outta here! Redcoats are gonna be swarming this hill any minute. You're not safe here." Murtagh nodded. "And don't worry about these two," Laurie said as he put his arms around Jamie and Zahra's shoulders. "They're in good hands." Laurie reached out to shake Murtagh's hand and clapped him on the shoulder. "For what it's worth, you're one of the best humans I've ever had the pleasure of acquainting, and my only regret is I won't get the chance to know you better." Murtagh didn't fully understand what he meant, but this entire thing was nuts and he didn't know if he would ever fully be able to wrap his head around it all. With a final smile Laurie turned and led both Zahra and Jamie back towards the 'portal'.

Jim was there to say a final farewell to the honourable Scotsman as well. "I'm sure this goes without saying, but you probably wanna keep all this time travel business to yourself, yeah?" Jim said with a smirk, which made Murtagh sigh but he nodded his head regardless "Take care of yourself, Murtagh."

"Aye. And you take care o' them for me," Murtagh asked.

"We will!" Jim said, then extended his hand to shake, which Murtagh took. "Farewell." They shook hands and Jim turned to walk back towards the stones as well.

Murtagh met Kai's eyes from the distance and both men just nodded at each other, had nothing to say what needed saying. They were both of them stoic warriors who knew they had a firm understanding of the other. No goodbyes were needed.

The gale force of the winds was threatening to knock Murtagh over as he stepped back and watched as the center stone began to warp and distort. He continued to watch as Kai disappeared first, followed by Laurie who was holding a large metal slab for some reason. Jamie and Zahra were next, and they both gave Murtagh a last, longing look before they stepped through together at the same
time. Jim gave the campsite a final look over before meeting Murtagh's gaze. The man gave Murtagh a small salute before stepping through the stone himself, and just like that they were all gone. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes he never would have believed it…

The winds started to die down until everything was calm and normal again. Murtagh swallowed hard as he slowly approached the center stone through which he had just seen them all disappear. He lifted both hands and moved forward to place them on the cold stone. With a choking sort of inhale, he began to cry softly. "G'bye…" he whispered before sniffing, schooling his features and backing away from the stone.

The hard mask was back in place as he turned and ran back up the hill. He scattered the horses they rode in on, shooing them off every which way in the hopes to confuse any trackers the Brits might have. He then found Tornac and Donas were still miserably attached to the cart from the night before. Murtagh quickly unbound them from the wagon, then climbed onto Tornac's back, taking Donas's reigns to pull along with him.

He gave the stones one final look before he turned and rode off as far away and as fast as he could. He needed to meet up with Dougal and the others and tell them the bad news; that Jamie and Zahra had both been taken by redcoats and were most likely dead… The MacKenzie chief was not going to be happy, but Murtagh couldn't find it in himself to care.

Jamie was safe. Zahra was safe. They may be gone to a place Murtagh would never be able to follow, but they had each other. Murtagh's new responsibility and purpose was to Jenny and he would give her the same fealty and care as he'd given Jamie. Everything was going to be fine. He was going to be fine.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not crying, you're crying! Shut up!
Anatomy

Chapter Summary

Jamie gets a crash course in 23rd century life and medicine.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this one took so long to get out. I have been swamped at work.

I hope this 'warning' is entirely unnecessary, but in today's society you never know. Anyway, this is a possible trigger warning for any anti-vaxxers who might read this... Please do not come at me with your illogical, uneducated rhetoric. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Starfleet had turned Craig na Dun into a quarantined/restricted area, and a science team had been tasked to monitor conditions while Jim and his small away team had gone through to retrieve Lieutenant Zahra.

In the six weeks Zahra had been gone, they had managed to determine that the phenomenon that created the portal was magnetic in nature, reacting to a very specific set of circumstances surrounding the Earth’s gravitational alignment, as well as the moon, the sun, and a few other celestial occurrences that caused this focal stone, which they had discovered was made up mostly of lodestone and malachite, and the specific place in the earth it had been erected had only exacerbated the effects. Occurring naturally on its own it had sucked Lieutenant Zahra through time.

Within the first four weeks of her disappearance, the phenomenon had occurred three more times. No one had ever really noticed it before because the signal had been so small, focused solely to the center stone and capable of only transporting someone by physical touch, which is why none of Earth’s satellites or scanners had ever picked up on it, especially when it was usually over just after it began. Zahra must have touched the stones at precisely the exact moment the portal had happened to open. It was the mother of all coincidences.

Some of the best minds in Starfleet had been tasked with observation, planning, gathering large quantities of data. After all of their combined efforts, they had been able to create a focal rod of sorts, that permitted them to enlarge the gateway and keep it open for a brief period of time, roughly five minutes was the longest they’d been able to safely maintain it. They’d first tested it with a probe, and had come back with all the information they needed about the time the portal was connected to, which was about 520 years in the past. A rescue mission was planned after that. The space time continuum, the prime directive, and one of their most valued officer’s lives were all at stake.

Jim had personally elected to lead the mission, choosing his chief security officer Kai as his second, and Dr. Keelan as his third, seeing as the Betazoid had been the one responsible for leading them all here, and the only one among them who had a solid connection to the woman they were searching for. They’d had orders: If they couldn’t find her within a week, they were to return through the stones regardless, at this very specific point in time. They’d had one week to find her, and then the
portal would be opened again and they were supposed to come back, regardless if they had found her or not. They’d been given one shot, one try, one opportunity to bring her home.

“Where the hell are they?” Bones shouted at Spock over the force of the winds that were blowing leaves, rocks, and debris all around them. The portal had been open for two minutes already. They only had three left before it would become unstable and they would be forced to close it again.

“The Captain will be here, Doctor,” Spock assured him calmly as they both gazed at the focal stone in the center.

“Sir, we’re reading activity in the portal,” one of the ensigns declared loudly as her fingers rapidly moved across her terminal, checking signs of instability and such, to make sure the portal didn’t collapse unexpectedly on them.

Bones and Spock both watched with bated breath as a large, dark-skinned man stepped through, carrying one handle of a large silver case. Dr. Keelan stepped through right behind him carrying the other handle of the case. Both men collapsed shortly after clearing the portal, but Dr. McCoy and his emergency medical team moved in immediately, loading the men onto stretchers and clearing them away from the circle and into a triage tent where their vitals and lifesigns were checked.

“Another spike, sir,” the same science ensign called once more, and Spock waited with bated breath, hoping it would be his friend, his Captain Jim… But it wasn’t. Spock’s slanted brows pinched together in the center when an unfamiliar, curly-haired, redheaded man in period specific clothing that of the local Highlanders from the time they’d come, stepped through the portal with Lieutenant Zahra held firmly to his side. She was similarly garbed and armed.

“Please, my wife—” the man tried to say, but he was pitching forward and falling lifeless to the ground a moment later, with the woman still held in his arms.

Laurie and Kai were awake and responsive by that time, sitting up in their medical cots and being plied with bottled water full of vitamins and electrolytes. “Zahra!” Laurie tried to stand up.

Bones pushed him back to stay seated. “We’ve got her, Keelan, rel—”

“No!” Laurie cut him off by grabbing two fistfuls of McCoy’s medical scrubs, and shaking his head. “She’s dying, McCoy!”

Bones left one of the EMTs with Laurie and then raced to where they were loading Zahra onto another medical cot, and he moved his tricorder over her. The diagnostic screen immediately began flashing red as it told him all about her symptoms and declared her condition critical. “Shit!” Bones whipped out his communicator and flipped it open in one motion. “McCoy to Enterprise,” he said, not waiting for them to respond. “Two to beam up. I need an emergency medical transport waiting, and an OR prepped for emergency surgery.”

Bones lifted Zahra into his arms, and stared at Spock for a moment. The Vulcan gave him a nod of understanding, just before Hundreds of bright lights started swirling around both Leonard and Zahra, accompanied by a series of harmonized sounds. They were energized out of sight a moment later.

Spock stared at the portal, then at the timer. They had less than a minute left. “Come on, Jim,” Spock muttered under his breath.

“Sir,” the ensign said with caution in her tone. “Sir, the portal.” They’d never kept it open this long. Already the scans were showing it was becoming unstable.

“Just one more moment, Ensign,” Spock said calmly, but inside the human part of himself was
growing anxious by the second. *Come on, Jim,* Spock thought to himself.

“Another spike, sir!” the ensign declared, and when Spock saw Jim’s form take shape and then step through, Spock let out the breath he’d been holding. He went to his captain, his friend, managing to catch Jim before he fell on his face. Once he was clear, they began shutting down the portal and soon everything was calm again.

Jim looked delirious and dizzy, but conscious. Spock was giving him a stern look. “I know, Spock. I know. I got some--splainin’ to do.”

“Indeed, Captain,” Spock said, keeping his expression stern, despite how relieved he felt.

“Right now, though... passing out seems like a good idea,” Jim said before his eyes rolled back into his skull and he was out. Spock helped lift him onto a gurney to be examined by their team of EMTs, then followed behind the gurney as it was pushed into the medical tent.

Spock’s eyes traveled to the cot with the red-headed man that had not been part of the away team, the one who had distinctly addressed Lieutenant Zahra as his ‘wife’ before he had succumbed to the draining effects of the portal himself. Laurie was watching Spock closely, over the rim of his bottle of water. “We had no choice,” Laurie said after a moment, causing Spock to blink out of his thoughts and turn to look at the Betazoid.

“I am certain that was indeed the case, Dr. Keelan. I am just--concerned--of the impact such a decision would have made on Earth’s timeline.” Not that any of them would really know now as the time they existed in would not have noticed or felt the effects, if there were any.

Starfleet had been uncertain of how to proceed with this new discovery, but now, more than ever, Spock was convinced their best course of action was destroying the site. It was too dangerous, especially since it’s official discovery. Too many variables, too many temptations for others to possibly use it for their own gains. It mattered not how miraculous or amazing of a scientific discovery it was; it was simply too dangerous.

“We have to destroy it.” Surprisingly enough, this declaration had come from Mr. Kai himself, and not Laurie nor Spock.

“I was actually just thinking the same thing, Mr. Kai,” Spock responded with an arched brow. “However, I am certain the Admiralty will wish to have a say in the matter.”

“Let’s hope they say the same thing, then,” Kai said again, sipping on his water.

“Nngh, Leeloo?” Jamie muttered in his sleep, brows pinching together deeply. Laurie hopped off his gurney, waving away the attendant as he moved over to the Highlander. He took another bottle of the vitamin filled water from the waiting EMT and approached the younger man. “Leeloo?!” Jamie called again as he sat up too quickly and almost fell off the cot.

Laurie steadied him. “Easy tiger,” the Betazoid said, pressing more sensations of calm and peace into the man’s mind.

“Where’s Leeloo?” Jamie asked as he gripped onto Laurie’s sleeve.

“Dr. McCoy’s getting her fixed up back on the Enterprise right now as we speak,” Laurie said as he unscrewed the cap on the water pouch and handed it to Jamie. “Drink this, ok? It’ll help with the headache and the vertigo you’re feeling right now.”

Jamie took the small pouch of water and began to drink, gulp after gulp, until the pouch was
deflated. He didn’t realize how parched he was. “I want to see my wife,” he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“I’m afraid I cannot allow that,” Spock said, coming up behind Laurie.

Jamie was about to argue why the hell not when he was struck by the newcomer’s appearance. The Highlander was staring, wide-eyed and transfixed on the man’s face, his slanted eyebrows, and pointed ears. “Not an elf or a fairy, just a Vulcan,” Laurie answered Jamie’s unspoken question.

Jamie blinked a few times then looked up at Laurie. “So--nothing to do with the god of fire, then?” he asked.

Laurie shook his head. “This is Commander Spock, Jim’s second in command and right hand man, er, Vulcan.”

Jamie cleared his throat, and swallowed hard, then wiped his palm down the front of his kilt before he held out his hand to the Vulcan to shake. “James Fraser,” he introduced himself.

Spock merely glanced at the man’s outstretched hand, then back up into his face and gave him a polite non-smile. “I apologize, Mr. Fraser, but Vulcans do not participate in the human custom of shaking hands.” Instead, Mr. Spock held his hand up, palm out, fingers spread in a “V” with his thumb out, a standard Vulcan salutation.

Jamie kind of stared at the gesture with a tilt of his head, then looked at Laurie kind of lost. “It’s how they say hello, and goodbye,” Laurie explained.

Jamie nodded. “Right, well, Mr. Spock was it? I swore an oath before the altar of God to love and protect Leeloo… So if ye’re tellin’ me that ye consider yer own authority to be greater than that of the Almighty… then I must inform you that I’m not of that opinion myself.”

“Regardless of what you perceive to have happened in the time you came from, Mr. Fraser, I am afraid you have no standing here in regards to Lieutenant Zahra.”

“Her name--is Fraser, and she is my wife!” Jamie said, jaw and fists clenching. “What right have you in keeping me from my own wife?”

“All right, all right,” Laurie intervened, stepping between the temperamental Jamie and the tactless Vulcan who was not helping the situation. “Everyone let’s just--calm down, ok? Take a breath.”

“I assure you, Dr. Keelan, I am quite calm,” Spock said in that sort of haughty emotionless inflection of his, which only seemed to grind on Jamie’s nerves now.

“Wha’s--goin’ on?” They heard Jim ask as he stirred and sat up in his own cot, reaching for the bladder of water Kai handed him. It seemed their EMT attendants were done with them when they realized none of them needed medical attention. They were, instead, working on breaking down this emergency, outdoor triage unit.

“This--Vulcan is trying to say Zahra’s not my wife and I’ve no right to see her,” Jamie had hesitated on the word Vulcan mostly because he had been about to call him a man, but then remembered he wasn’t human.

“Spock, ease up, will you?” Jim said as he sipped from his bladder of vitamin water. “We’ve just been through hell and back, Mr. Fraser included. He’s coming back to Enterprise with us,” Jim said.

“I must advise against that, Captain, for Mr. Fraser’s well-being as well as the Enterprise. The man is
simply not prepared nor educated enough to possibly comprehend--"

“Spock, Spock!” Jim stood up and placed his hands on the Vulcan’s shoulders. “You know we’re running on a skeleton crew right now cause everyone’s on shore leave while Enterprise is being ‘repaired’.” Jim used finger quotes in the air around the word ‘repaired’. “I’m not saying let him loose on the ship. I’m just saying, he came here for her. He’s not planning on going back, he’ll need to be debriefed eventually just like the rest of us, so I’m not about to hang him up on technicalities. He deserves to see her; we’ll just have to assign him an escort.”

“Captain,” Laurie raised his hand. “I volunteer as tribute,” the Betazoid said.

“Perfect. Thank you, Laurie. See, Spock?” Jim clapped the Vulcan on the shoulder. “You worry too much.”

“Captain--” the Vulcan persisted.

Jim sighed. “Your objections are heard and noted, Mr. Spock,” he said before taking another sip from his water pouch. “I promise we will all sit down with the Admiralty for a full debriefing, after we all get a shower and something to eat.”

“Agreed,” Kai said as he followed Jim out of the tent.

Laurie indicated his head at Jamie, and the man stepped off his cot and followed Laurie as well as everyone else. The group exited the triage tent together and Jim stopped in the middle of the clearing. “Spock, if you will do the honours?”

“What are we doing?” Jamie asked Laurie, and Laurie just patted him on the shoulder.

“Of course, Captain,” Spock said as he pulled his communicator out of his pocket. When he flipped it open it made a quiet chirping noise before Spock spoke into it. “Spock to Enterprise,” the Vulcan said.

“Go for Enterprise,” Jamie’s eyes went wide when he heard a voice coming from the small handheld box, one whose accent matched his own.

“Five to beam up, Mr. Scott,” Spock spoke into the device once more.

Just when Jamie was about to ask what was going on, he felt Laurie squeeze his hand, then say, “Hold onto your butts.” Jamie had very little time to react to that comment before he was encased in a bright light, and a weird, tingling energy coursed over his body and through it, causing every nerve and hair to stand on end. He heard a harmonious tone, and the light got brighter as the world around him disappeared, and then slowly reappeared as the lights dimmed, and the tone faded away. When he opened his eyes he was in a small room, standing on a raised platform with a wide circle of light both above his head, and beneath his feet. Jim, Kai, and Spock moved immediately, stepping down off the platform while Jamie was frozen, terrified in place. His gut roiled with nauseousness and before he knew what was happening, he turned and puked his guts out. Laurie was right there with him, though, rubbing his back gently. “I know, I’m sorry,” the Betazoid said. “The first time is always a bit rough, but you’re gonna be ok.” Laurie lifted his head to meet Jim’s eyes and nodded at the Captain’s unspoken concern. “He’ll be fine, he’s just shaken up.”

“You got him?” Jim asked, to which Laurie nodded, then he exited the transporter room with Spock and Kai.

Scotty, behind the glass, was already calling for a bio clean up as Laurie helped guide Jamie out into the hallway, where the blindingly bright lights stung Jamie’s eyes. “Listen Jamie,” Laurie said
stopping in the hallway. "You’re gonna be bombarded and overwhelmed with unknown and foreign stimuli that your mind may not be able to conceive or believe at the moment, but just try to remember—you’re really here. You’re alive. You’re safe. That’s probably the most important part. No matter what you may see, and I’ll tell you right now you’re going to see some pretty outrageous, fantastical things—" A ten foot tall, walking, talking, highly intelligent, and incredibly pleasant rhinoceros beetle type alien named Blue, immediately came to Laurie’s mind. “—but you’re safe here. No person, being, or thing on this ship will harm you.”

Jamie had his eyes closed as he scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to listen to what Laurie was saying. Outrageous, fantastical things. Things like pointy-eared Vulcans? “Even more fantastical than that, I’m afraid,” Laurie said, still shamelessly skimming Jamie’s surface thoughts and feelings. More fantastical than Vulcans? God, there was so much to unpack in that one statement. Would there be more of those talking boxes? Or those flashing lights and disappearing and reappearing tricks? God, help him. “I just--where’s Leeloo?” Jamie asked, trying to focus on that one thing. On his wife. “She’ll be in sickbay still,” Laurie responded. “If it was in fact an aneurysm as I feared, Dr. McCoy would have to perform emergency surgery, but don’t worry. Other than myself, McCoy is one of the most skilled surgeons in the known galaxy. Zahra really is in the best of care.”

“I want to see her,” Jamie stated flatly, determined.

Laurie nodded. “You will, I promise... But she’ll be in surgery for a while yet. Why don’t we get you a bath, a change of clothes, and something to eat first, huh?” All of that actually sounded so great right now, but the anxiety in his stomach at needing to see Leeloo was strong. “Tell ya what?” Laurie started to compromise. “We can swing by sickbay to get an update and a peek before we go get some food and stuff, all right?”

Jamie looked at Laurie for a long time and nodded. “Aye. Thank you, Laurie.”

Laurie wrapped his arm behind Jamie’s shoulder and turned to guide the man down the hall. “Don’t thank me, buddy. This ride ain’t over yet.”

Laurie guided Jamie down the hall where they came upon a huge window that had a clear view of the magnificent and magnanimous marvel that was Starbase 1. It was one of the largest Federation stations in the Sol system. The Enterprise was currently docked at one of it’s six docking arms. Beyond the huge dome in the center, there was a clear view of the Earth. Jamie had gasped, and gripped at his chest as he gazed in shock, and awe at the sight. Tears sprang to his eyes and he slowly approached the glass until he was pressing his hand up against it. He spoke and cursed quietly in Gaelic as his gaze roamed over every structure. He gasped again when he saw the Earth beyond. “Is tha’--”

"It is," Laurie responded, not needing him to finish the question out loud.

"Then, we're--" the Highlander started again.

"We are," Laurie answered again without needing Jamie to finish.

"But--how?" Jamie asked, sagging softly as the tears in his eyes threatened to overflow from the sheer awesomeness of what he was seeing.

"Five hundred years of scientific and technological advancement, Jamie. I don't think I could explain it all right now anymore than you would be able to understand it." Laurie patted him on the shoulder gently and indicated his head. "Come on. Sickbay’s right this way." Jamie lingered at the window
for a moment longer, before he eventually turned to follow Laurie down the hall.

It was eerie to Laurie to see the halls so dead, especially the halls of G-deck which was one of the central, most active areas on the ship. G-deck hosted the entirety of Sickbay, the Security Information Center, Intelligence Command Center, the mess hall/cafeteria, the ship’s only bar/lounge, a formal dining restaurant called Port 47, an officer’s only private lounge, a large recreation complex equipped with bowling, billiards, and an arcade, and several chief of staff’s offices. Needless to say, G-deck was where it was at, and to see it so devoid of life was bizarre to Laurie who had once served on the ship for a couple years. Undoubtedly, the Enterprise was running on a skeleton crew as Starfleet had declared a ship-wide shore leave, so most likely everyone was visiting Earth, or the unique amenities, shopping, and recreational activities available on Starbase 1 itself.

“Sorry, I know this must all be a little overwhelming,” Laurie said as he led Jamie passed the mess hall and officer’s lounge. “I’ll give you a full tour later,” he promised as they approached a set of doors that were labeled with a glowing, holographic medical Caduceus above a similarly glowing sign that read ‘Sickbay’.

They stepped up to the doors and Jamie startled slightly when they slid open automatically. Laurie led Jamie inside, where there was only one man in a blue uniform shirt manning the nurse’s station. “Dr. Keelan. Welcome back.”

“Thanks, Gibs. I trust you’re doing well?” Laurie asked and the man nodded. “Good. Could you tell me which room they’ve got Lieutenant Zahra in, please?” Laurie asked.

The man typed something into his terminal and read the screen. Dr. Keelan was listed as Zahra’s medical proxy which was the only reason he felt comfortable giving the man Zahra’s information. “They’re in O-R two,” Gibs answered. “But Dr. McCoy is in the middle of an endovascular repair, Dr. Keelan. You won’t be able to go in there.”

“I know, Gibs. Thank you,” Laurie said then headed off in the direction of the private operating rooms, expecting Jamie to follow. They stepped into the theatre opposite the OR room, where they could see the goings on through the large observation window. They could see McCoy with another male doctor with dark chocolate skin, and a female nurse with blonde hair, all in full scrubs, face masks, and hair wraps. Zahra was resting peacefully on the biobed while they fixed her brain. “See… She’s doing fine,” Laurie said. “McCoy really is one of the best.”

Jamie didn’t exactly know what he was looking at, didn’t understand what they were doing, or the tools they were using, or what all the computers and monitors around them were saying, but he could see Zahra who simply looked like as if she were resting peacefully. Jamie wanted desperately to go to her, to touch her, to hold her. He felt Laurie squeeze his shoulder, which was when Jamie only just seemed to realize he had started to cry. “The waiting is the hardest part,” Laurie said, trying to be comforting.

Jamie sniffled and bashed at his face. “Aye.”

“Come on,” Laurie urged him with a gentle tug on his arm. “Let’s get you cleaned up. I’m sure we’ll both feel better with some fresh clothes, and hot food, huh?” Jamie nodded and turned to leave with the man, though his thoughts lingered in sickbay, with Zahra.

He followed Laurie autonomously, kind of blocking the rest of the world out as he recited a mental prayer to God, begging him to not take her from him, to bless Dr. McCoy and his healing abilities, to let her be all right. He implored God to understand how much Jamie needed her, now more than ever. By the time he was finished with his prayer, they were stepping onto something Laurie called a Turbolift. It was a small, circular room, with a grid of circular lights with letters on them located on
the inside wall next to the door. They were currently on “G” level apparently, based on the big G Jamie had seen on the wall just outside the lift. Jamie watched Laurie press the light for “F” which turned blue, then the lift doors closed. "My husband, our son, and I have been given temporary lodging on board so you'll probably get to meet them."

Jamie nodded, still looking and feeling downtrodden because of Zahra. As the lift slowed to stop on F deck, Laurie reached his hand out to touch Jamie's shoulder, and said, "Hey… It's gonna be all right. She's gonna be alright. We caught it in time. You'll be able to see her soon." The Betazoid smiled, brushing peace, and warmth over Jamie's mind.

Jamie took in a deep breath and exhaled a sigh, then nodded. "All right. Sorry."

"Don't apologize for being worried. I'm just saying you shouldn’t fash yourself," Laurie said with a wink, using the man’s own slang.

Jamie smirked at that and followed Laurie off the lift when the doors opened. "So you said temporary lodging. D'you and--your husband--are ye not part of Leeloo's crew?"

Laurie smiled and shook his head. "We used to be. We served together on Enterprise for about two years or so, but after the Battle of Altamid, Hale and I stayed on Yorktown for a while before moving to New Vulcan. That was--almost two years ago now," Laurie finished, looking thoughtful, deeply thoughtful as his thoughts strayed and reflected on Zahra and their current situation...

Laurie hadn't been available or around when Zahra had been told the truth about her mother and her biological father. She'd had Kai, sure, but the level of emotional support she had probably needed after that was likely something the Orion wasn't fully equipped for, especially where Zahra was concerned. The woman had a tendency to mask her feelings, especially when they were difficult feelings for her to process, or she didn't believe she had the right to feel them. So, knowing Zahra like he did, Laurie could safely assume she had probably put on that mask that she was really good at wearing and told Kai she was fine. Kai would've had no reason to not believe her so he'd probably taken that at face value and didn't press. He had no way of reading her mind after all.

Laurie hadn't known about Zahra's undercover assignment until he'd tried to call her after Elynn was born. Jim and Kai had told him she was on an assignment for SFI, then a little poking and prodding at Jim had clued Laurie in on what was up. Undercover operations were hard on everyone, but when Laurie found out that Zahra had been assigned to infiltrate the Orion Syndicate… well, honestly, Laurie'd had a difficult time wrapping his head around it. Sure, he could see where Starfleet might think because of her history she had insight into that life, but at the same time did they not realize what they would essentially be doing to her? Zahra had spent the last fifteen years breaking herself out of her Orion slave conditioning and trying to lead a normal life, then they just go and throw her back into it like it's no big deal? It wasn't just a switch someone could safely flick on and off at will.

How strongly had they guilted or manipulated her into it, he wondered? Had they told her this grand old spiel about honor, duty, and obligation? Had they said that no other officer had her knowledge and expertise? That no other officer had her experience or insight into how that world worked, therefore no other officer would be able to pull it off? They needed her! How could she have possibly said no at that point?

Maybe if Laurie had been around he could have helped talk her out of it, or--something… but he hadn't been around, had he? He had been so focused on settling in on New Vulcan and establishing his new role at the Colony Hospital. Then Hale, Mara, and he had been so busy with baby planning… Then Elynn had been born and his time had been taken up even more… Any thoughts or concerns about his blood-sister had fallen to the wayside. Through all his changes and struggles, though, Laurie had never been alone, not through any of it. He had Hale, Ralian and Mara, Saveri...
and Evaria. His little family pod of friends and sometimes lovers. His close group who loved him unconditionally, and had a deep investment and concern for his mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.

How many people could Zahra say she had that were like that? Sure, she'd had Jim and Kai, except, if Laurie were being honest, Jim and Kai were both pretty self-absorbed and had a lot of their own emotional baggage to deal with. So, perhaps they lacked the full emotional capacity outside of themselves to realize when someone like Zahra was hiding her pain and needed help she was too stubborn or afraid to ask for. Help she never really felt like she deserved. Help that she feared made her an unbearable burden on those around her. Laurie doubted her own father was even aware, as they'd known each other for less than a year, and in that time had spent maybe a total of thirty days with each other. It wasn't like Governor Adam Quigley had this great insight into his daughter's internal struggles, so how could he have known?

Zahra had needed Laurie, her brother, her protector, the only one who knew her inside and out, and he quite simply hadn't been there in any form. How many missed comms had Laurie had from her that he'd vowed to return when he wasn't so busy? Or that he'd shot her a text about, apologizing for being busy then promising to catch up later, but then never doing so? How many times had she been trying to reach out to him and he had inadvertently made her feel like a burden, or imposition not worth his time? It had literally taken her falling through time and unintentionally hurting him to get him to realize something might be wrong... He felt like a complete and utter asshole. Well, more of an asshole than normal. An extraordinary asshole.

Laurie stopped outside the door to his and Hale's temporary quarters, then turned to look at Jamie for a moment before he reached his arms out to place his hands on the man's shoulders. Laurie had tears in his eyes, which made Jamie's brows pinch together in concern. "Laurie?"

"I'm--really glad she found you, you know?" the Betazoid said. "I know this is all kinds of fucked up right now, but--she needed you… Needs you."

Jamie's mouth pursed and lifted up at one end in an awkward kind of smile. He was blushing a little, not used to another man being so openly emotional or vulnerable with him. Laurie suddenly smirked and pulled Jamie into a friendly hug. "Yeah, well, get used to it pal."

Jamie huffed in dry amusement and patted Laurie on the back to let him know he was done. Laurie mercifully withdrew, then turned to put his code into the door, which slid open. "Lucy, I'm home!" Laurie declared as he walked inside, expecting Jamie to follow. A quick scan with his mind told Layire that Hale and Elynn were out. They probably went to the huge park on the station. It was a very popular spot for the stay at home parents with kids; this allowed Elynn to interact with other babies. "Looks like Hale and Elynn are on an outing." Laurie said as he led Jamie through the Spartan living room to the bathroom, where Jamie stared in equal amounts of wonder and uncertainty at first the sink, then the toilet, then the shower stall itself, not knowing what anything was or what it did.

"This is your new chamber pot," Laurie said as he lifted the lid on the toilet. "When you're done--" Laurie pointed at the silver circular knob on the top of the tank that was split down the middle. The left side was labeled with a single drop of water, the other was labeled with three drops of water. "The left side is for flushing liquids only," Laurie said as he pushed the button and a loud whooshing sound had Jamie covering his ears as he watched the water in the bowl be sucked down through the hole. Jamie cursed in Gaelic, and Laurie grinned. "The right is for flushing solids."

"Where does it go?" Jamie asked, staring into the bowl.

Laurie huffed dryly in amusement and shrugged his shoulders. "That is probably a question best
questioned of Mr. Scott down in engineering. He has one of the best stories; I’m sure he would love to tell you about it.”

Jamie nodded his head and watched as Laurie moved to the counter with the sink. “This is the sink.” Laurie turned on the faucet. “Left is cold, right is hot. Since we’re in space and water is limited, we try to ration so don’t let it run, ok?” Jamie nodded. “And this--” Laurie stepped up to the shower stall and slid open the glass door. “This is what we call a sonic shower. It is the fastest, most relaxing way a person can get clean.”

Jamie stared. “How--how does it work?”

“Well, to put it as simply as I can, it uses pulsating vibrations of purified water to clean off all the dirt and grime from your body.” Laurie shrugged again. “It’s--kinda like getting a full body massage with tiny vibrating fingers all over that clean you at the same time. It’s a difficult experience to describe, really; you’ll just have to take it for a spin yourself.”

Jamie swallowed a little and nodded. “But I’ll leave you to that on your own. It’s currently set at a pleasant one hundred degrees, so you just get in, close the door, and say ‘Shower On’. When you’re finished, just say ‘Shower Off’ and get out. Feel free to use one of these towels.” Laurie patted his hand on the stack of towels on the counter next to the sink. “And I’ll get you a change of clothes to wear while we wash yours. Sound ok?”

Jamie swallowed hard again and nodded his head. “Aye.”

Laurie clapped Jamie on the shoulder again and nodded his head. “If you need anything just call. I’ll be right outside getting dinner ready.” Jamie nodded again and Laurie turned to leave, closing the bathroom door behind him.

Jamie watched the door close and turned to look at the shiny bathroom that was brighter and shinier than any room Jamie had ever stepped foot in. He tilted his head as he stared dumbfoundedly at the toilet for a moment> he eventually shrugged, figuring what the hell, then lifted his kilt to do his business. When he was done he leaned over to stare at the silver circle on the top, trying to remember what Laurie had said. Left for liquids, Jamie assumed meant for flushing piss, and right for solids, which probably meant for flushing shit. Jamie pressed the left side with the single drop of water, and jumped back when the loud whooshing noise sounded again and, just like that, his piss was gone. “Huh,” he said with a slightly crooked smirk. That was very neat, and convenient, and a helluva lot cleaner and easier than a chamber pot.

He stood back and stared at what Laurie had called the ‘shower’ next… He didn’t understand how it worked at all. How was he expected to wash or bath in such a thing? Especially without water? Jamie took in a deep breath, and removed his coat, then his weapon belt, and vest. His shirt was lifted off over his head, then he braced his hand on the counter as he pulled off his boots and stockings. Lastly, he began to undo his kilt belt and dropped his tartan before he stepped into the shower stall. He slid the door closed as Laurie instructed and glanced around curiously. “Uh…” What had Laurie said? “Shower--on?” The lights in the shower suddenly dimmed, Jamie gasped, and his eyes closed as he felt the warm, sonic water pulsations wash over him. He exhaled deeply and his body shivered. It wasn’t unpleasant, but he wouldn’t exactly call it pleasant either, just--unusual… relaxing definitely… peaceful… He could definitely feel those tiny massaging fingers Laurie was talking about as the dirt and grime of the past couple weeks just pulsed off of him and away.

It was a very blissful experience, and his mind wondered what it might be like to do this with Leeloo… He dared not let his thoughts stray far down that road though, as he didn’t want to get himself in a predicament and he knew Laurie was right outside… Besides, the thought of Leeloo had his brows stitching together again. How was the surgery going? When could he see her? He missed
Feeling sufficiently cleansed, cleaner than he could ever remember being because life in the highlands was a dirty one, he cleared his throat before saying, “Sonic Shower off.” The pulsations ceased and the lights turned back to normal brightness as Jamie opened his eyes. He slipped the glass door open, then stepped out carefully onto the mat on the floor. He wasn’t soaking wet, but he was definitely wet from the shower. It apparently did use water just a small amount. He reached for one of the towels and dried himself off when he noticed his clothes were gone from the floor. Something that looked like a long robe that he didn’t remember being there before, had been left to hang on the back of the bathroom door.

Jamie set his towel on the counter and reached for the plush robe thinking it was the softest thing he had ever felt in his life, then he shrugged his arms into it before wrapping it about himself and tying it closed. He ran the towel over his wet curls as he opened the door and stepped back out into the living room, where the smell of food had his stomach rumbling.

“There he is!” Laurie said from the small dining table where he was sitting with a tiny baby in his lap. Another man Jamie didn’t know was standing near the kitchen table, and looking at a lit up screen on the wall. “How was the shower?” Laurie asked as he stood up with the baby in his arms and moved closer to Jamie.

“It was--an experience, just like ye said,” Jamie said, smiling at the handsome little bairn in Laurie’s arms. “Is this little Elynn?” Jamie asked with a grin as he reached for the boy’s fingers and the wee one wrapped his hand around Jamie’s digit with a smile and an adorable little coo.

“This is him,” Laurie said with a prideful grin. The boy had solid black eyes just like Laurie’s. “Tall, dark, and dreamy over there is my husband, Hale,” Laurie said, nodding his head towards the man in the kitchen area.

Hale rolled his eyes at Laurie’s description as he moved over to extend his hand to Jamie to shake. “Hale Mazana,” the man greeted in accented English. “Pleased to meet you.”

“James Fraser,” the redhead shook the man’s hand firmly with a smile and a nod. “Likewise.”

“I’m so sorry you’ve had to put up with this one for as long as you have, James. Especially the smell.” Hale side-eyed Laurie, then turned to reach for their son.

“All right, all right!” Laurie said as he handed the boy back to his other dad. “I got the hint.” He gave Hale a quick peck on the lips, then looked at Jamie, smirking. “Looks like it’s my turn.” Laurie clapped Jamie on the shoulder, as he moved past him to go into the bathroom to have his own shower, leaving Jamie and Hale on their own.

Jamie saw Hale making a pinched face, which made Jamie smirk. “When one’s on the road as long as I usually am, the smell is hardly bothersome,” Jamie responded to Hale’s comment about Laurie’s smell. “Nae, it’s hardly distinguishable from my own.”

Hale grinned a bit crookedly and propped Elynn on his hip. “Well, you’re a far more tolerant man than I,” he said, grinning. He moved to place Elynn down in his playpen that had a clear view of both the living room and the kitchen. The tiny boy sat up in the crib and occupied himself by playing with the assortment of stuffies, and rattles, and toys inside the soft mesh pack and play. “Shall we find you something suitable to wear?” Hale asked.

“Aye,” Jamie said with a nod. “That--would be good.”
Hale waved his hand for Jamie to follow as he turned and made his way into one of the two side rooms. “Lights on,” Hale said and the ceiling light turned on, causing Jamie to squint and blink against the sudden brightness. The bedroom was just as sparsely decorated as the living room, and Jamie assumed that was because this wasn’t their home. Laurie had said they were only temporary quarters so it made sense that nothing was personalized. Hale stopped in front of what looked like a dresser and opened a couple drawers. “I’m afraid we’ve nothing like your kilt or anything of that nature, but—” Hale pulled out a pair of Laurie’s boxer-briefs, some black sweatpants, and a dark gray Henley shirt. “—these will hopefully do. Shirt, pants, and these are, umm, men’s undergarments. As the name implies, you wear them under the pants... which I realize isn’t something you’re used to, but I promise it will make the wearing of said pants much more comfortable.”

Hale handed Jamie the clothes, which the Highlander took with a polite nod of his head. “Your belongings are in the basket behind you there,” Hale indicated his head at the wicker basket by the wall. “I’ll have them laundered for you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you,” Jamie said as he held the clothes closer to his chest. Hale walked past him without another word and closed the door behind him, letting the man get changed in private.

When Hale was gone, Jamie set the small bundle of clothes on the bed and examined each one. He’d never felt material so soft in his life. He picked up the briefs and gave them a thorough examination, stuck his hand through the flap in the front, where he realized they were kind of like long winter underwear just without the long and winter part. He assumed the flap went in the front and so managed to put them on correctly, and found them to be surprisingly comfortable. The pants were easy enough to pull on, though he didn’t realize he had them on backward, and the shirt was equally self-explanatory, with only a few buttons on the collar which he assumed went in the front. As far as clothing went, he had to say that the 23rd century definitely got everything right as far as ease and comfort went. The material wasn’t constructing or itchy or stiff. The clothing was beyond comfortable, and he couldn’t help himself; he ran his hand down the sleeve of one arm.

When he was dressed, he turned to face the vanity mirror and combed his fingers through his damp curls a little before turning and exiting the room, just as Laurie was coming out of the bathroom, freshly clean himself, though he was wearing just a towel. “Perfect timing,” the Betazoid said as he squeezed by Jamie into his room and fished around in the drawer for his own clothes. Jamie managed to turn away and exit just as Laurie dropped his towel, so he was spared from seeing the other man’s pasty ass.

Hale was setting the table as Jamie made his way over to little Elynn, who was babbling incoherently at the redhead as he dangled a toy at him from over the rim of the playpen. Jamie grinned just as the boy dropped the stuffed rattle and looked at Jamie expectantly. The redhead bent to pick it up.

“That’s become his new favorite game,” Hale said in a fond tone. “Finds it incredibly amusing to watch how many times the adults will pick it up for him.”

Jamie smiled as he handed the boy back his toy, and, sure enough, the little boy grinned just as he dropped it back on the ground once more. Jamie huffed dryly in amusement then picked up the toy once more and tried to hand it to him, but instead of taking it, the boy just released the wall of the playpen and sat back on his bottom, then held his arms up and opened and closed his fists several times. “That’s his sign for uppies,” Hale clarified. “He thinks you’re going to pick him up, but you don’t have to.”

Jamie said something softly in Gaelic then stood to lean over the crib and lift the small bairn out of the playpen and into his arms. He waved the tiny stuffed rattle at the boy and Elynn’s chubby little hands wrapped around the toy before he shoved it against his mouth, drooling all over it as he made more baby noises and sucked on its nose. Jamie spoke several more silly nonsensical things in Gaelic
as he pulled at the small stuffed bear and wiggled it in Elynn’s face, making him laugh. “You’re quite good at that,” Laurie said from the bedroom doorway where he’d been watching for a spell.

Jamie turned and smiled at Laurie, blushing softly. “Used to have more wee cousins and bairns about than I rightly knew what to do with.”

The small boy leaned towards Laurie and extended his arms and did that same open and close fists gesture like he’d done to Jamie. Laurie moved over to take the boy in his arms and the wee man immediately snuggled against the Betazoid, resting his head on the man’s shoulder and playing with the button on his shirt. “He always gets a little clingy when I’m away for more than a day or two,” Laurie said as he pressed a kiss to the little boy’s scalp.

“Dinner’s ready,” Hale said from the small dining area.

Laurie smiled over at his husband, then nodded his head in that direction and he and Jamie made their way over to sit. Laurie gave Hale a soft, but lingering kiss on the lips, then whispered, “Thank you,” against his husband’s lips before he sat with Elynn still in his arms and maneuvered him to sit on his lap.

It should be weird to Jamie, scandalous even, to see two men so openly engaged in displays of love and affection such as that, but it looked and felt so damn natural that Jamie didn’t really think anything of it. This was definitely a different time than the one he left. Men had been persecuted, tortured, or even murdered for such things in his time. Society had definitely come a long way it seemed. What had Laurie said? Love is love is love? Why did their love have to be any different than that which he felt for Leeloo? It didn’t; that’s what.

Dinner definitely did look like it was some sort of roast beef with potato mash, and some steamed vegetables and gravy. It looked delicious, and Jamie was happy to dig in, after he’d closed his eyes and bowed his head for a blessing first. “This looks ruddy amazing. How’d you cook it so fast?” Jamie asked as he cut off a piece of his beef and took a bite with a pleased humm.

“I didn’t,” Hale answered as he set a glass in front of Jamie. “Wine?”

Jamie nodded. “What d’ye mean?”

Hale poured Jamie a glass of merlot, then Laurie, then himself before he finally sat down. “Well, not to make you lose your appetite or anything, but this is mostly just protein supplement made to resemble and taste like roast beef, potatoes, and gravy. I just put the request into the synthesizer, added a plate to the slot, and the ship did the rest.”

Jamie’s brows pinched together and he kind of tilted his head questioningly at his food, trying to wrap his head around it. “It’s best not to think too much about it,” Laurie said as he took a bite of his own food, then offered a little bit of the mashed potatoes to the baby in his lap who ate the small forkful eagerly. He had just barely started eating solids and was excited about it. “It’s warm, and doesn’t taste like liver paste,” Laurie continued. “I call that a win.” He grinned as he reached for his wine to take a sip.

Jamie did the same, sipping on the wine, finding it to be suitably tasty, but then he returned to his food. He seemed to be just as eager as Elynn to eat his food, not realizing how starving in fact he was. Considering he hadn’t had a bite of anything to eat since the banquet on his wedding night that was--God how many days ago was that? Had it only been a day? It felt like it very well could have been the 500 plus years that now separated him from then. He was definitely tired enough for that to be the case.
Laurie and Hale were still working on their dinners by the time Jamie was done with his. “Would you like seconds?” Hale asked preemptively.

Jamie looked thoughtful for a moment. He almost declined, but he was still hungry. “If it’s not too much to ask,” he said.

Hale smiled and shook his head. “Nonsense. No trouble at all. Would you like to see how it works?” the man asked as he stood and reached for Jamie’s plate.

Jamie’s brows rose towards his hairline, and he nodded his head as he stood up after Hale and followed the man into the kitchen. He watched Hale place the plate into a rectangular slow in the wall, then Hale touched a panel right above it and the screen lit up. “So you just select which menu you’d like to choose from—” He showed Jamie that there were different ethnicities to choose from, like Vulcan, Orion, Andorian, but Hale selected the one that said human, and a new set of tabs appeared that were labeled as Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner. Hale explained what he was doing as he moved through the various screens. He tapped on the dinner tab, where he was given an option to select a protein, vegetables, and carbs. From the protein section he tapped the one labeled Roast Beef, then steamed broccoli and carrots from the vegetables, and mashed potatoes from carbs/starches. Gravy was added as a side, and when the plate was finalized he tapped on the Synthesize button. The light in the slot went dark for a moment, and when it lit back up, the plate was full with a new helping of their dinner.

Hale removed the plate and handed it to Jamie. “See?”

Jamie was staring, absolutely gobsmacked and he swore in Gaelic. “It’s like magic?”

Hale chuckled softly and shook his head. “Not magic, just nano-technology.” Hale extended his hand back towards the table and he and Jamie returned to the dining room where Hale unburdened Laurie by taking Elynn from him so the Betazoid could focus on eating his food and Hale took over trying to feed the infant.

Jamie set his plate down and took a seat, and he quickly ate another eager bite of his roast beef but paused mid-chew, making an unusual face. “Oh, no. What’s wrong?” Hale asked, concerned.

Jamie’s brow furrowed deeply and he took a bite of his roast beef. “It—tastes like the potatoes?” Jamie said with his mouth half full. He took a testing bite of his potatoes next and his brow furrowed deeper in his confusion.

“Lemme guess, the potatoes taste like beef?” Laurie assumed.

Jamie looked at him and nodded his head. “Aye. Exactly.”

Laurie laughed softly and shook his head. “It’s not a perfect technology, unfortunately. Sometimes even the computer makes mistakes.”

Jamie huffed in amusement, looked at his plate, then shrugged. “Doesnae taste bad,” he said as he tucked back into his second helping, which he ate much slower this go around now that he was no longer starving.

They ate in companionable quiet for the most part. Laurie asked Hale and Elynn about the park where Hale told them all about the Andorian infant with a unibrow that was making Elynn crack up. He even pulled out his PADD and showed Laurie and Jamie the video he’d taken of the two infants babbling at each other and having the best time just being silly babies. Jamie had stared transfixed
and in wonder and awe at the small screen that was playing life back to him as if it were really happening. Moving pictures, or ‘movies’ as they were called, were apparently invented sometime in the early 20th century, though they were mostly silent movies until the 1920s or 30s when ‘talkies’ had become all the rage. And now some movies existed as vivid and real as life thanks to holographic technology. There was so much to take in, and so much he couldn’t understand or comprehend.

By the time he’d finished eating, Jamie was feeling a little overwhelmed and exhausted. “I’ve got KP duty,” Laurie said as he started clearing the table. “Why don’t you go get some shut eye?” the Betazoid suggested to their Scottish companion.

Jamie scrubbed his hands over his face and rubbed his eyes. “But--what about Leeloo?” he asked, brows stitching together in concern.

“McCoy knows to call me the moment she’s out of surgery. I’ll come get you when he does,” Laurie promised.

Jamie rubbed his hands over his face again, then pushed his fingers back through his hair. He took in a deep breath and exhaled a sigh. “All right.” He was so tired, but, as tired as he was, he was equally desperate to see Leeloo. “I suppose--” He was cut off by a series of chimes that seemed to come from nowhere.

“Sickbay to Dr. Keelan,” a masculine voice with a Southern lilt came over the comm.

“Speak of the devil,” Laurie said as he moved to the wall next to the food slot in the kitchen and pressed the comm button. “Please only good news, Doctor.”

“Surgery went fine, no complications,” McCoy’s smooth Georgian lilt came over the comm once more. “She’s just resting now, but--”

“But what?” Jamie said a bit forcefully as he stood up, heart rabbiting in his chest. He didn’t like the sound of that but.

“Who the fuck was that?” McCoy asked. “Is Monty with you?”


They heard McCoy clear his throat. “Zahra’s fine. Picture o’ health, honest, it’s just--well, I don’t think this is something you’ll want to hear over the comm, man,” McCoy said a bit ominously. “It’s nothing bad, just--just get down here.”

Jamie stared at Laurie. “We’re on our way,” Laurie said, cutting off the comm before Dr. McCoy could ask who ‘we’ was. Laurie left the dishes in the sink and moved to give Hale an apologetic kiss. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, go,” Hale said, rocking Elynn in his arms gently. “I need to get Elynn down for bed anyway, and you know he never goes down when new people are around for him to play with.”

“I love you,” Laurie said, then gave Elynn a kiss, followed by his husband, then he moved to join his anxious companion at the door. He offered the man a pair of slippers for his feet, and Laurie slipped into some sandals of his own and then they were gone.

Jamie was a ball of anxiety and nervous energy, and Laurie tried to send out more of those calming waves from his mind. Peace. Easy. “I’m sure it’s nothing,” Laurie tried to comfort the man, but it wasn’t really working. Laurie didn’t think anything would work now until Jamie actually saw Zahra
with his own eyes.

The wait and then the ride on the turbolift felt like it was taking ages even though, in reality, it was only a few seconds. Jamie was out the doors on G deck before they’d even managed to fully open, and Laurie was right on his tail, limping after him with a sigh.

The redhead burst through the sickbay doors a few moments later and approached the blonde at the nurse’s station. “Where is she?” he all but demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the nurse behind the desk said, a bit startled. “But where is whom?”

Jamie huffed through his nose. “My wife!”

The blonde exhaled calmly through her nose. “I’d like to help you, sir, but I’m not a psychic. Who is your wife exactly?”

“Lieutenant Leeloo Zahra,” Laurie answered for him as he came up next to the impatient Highlander. The Betazoid spotted McCoy the same time the other doctor looked up when he heard someone mention his patient’s name. Both doctor’s locked eyes for a moment, and Laurie nudged Jamie by his elbow. “It’s all right, Christine, I got him,” Laurie said to the nurse as he nodded his head at the man across the waiting room and made sure Jamie was following him.

McCoy gave both men a thorough appraisal as they approached, but the redheaded stranger got particularly close attention. “Who is this? And why exactly did you bring him with you?” McCoy asked.

“Jamie, this is Dr. Leonard McCoy,” Laurie started introductions. “Dr. McCoy… I’d like to introduce you to James Fraser.” McCoy nodded his head at the man. “Zahra’s husband,” Laurie elaborated and McCoy’s eyes squinted to slits as he stared at Laurie questioningly. “They met back in the 18th.” Laurie assumed McCoy would understand he meant their trip back to the 18th century.

“Good god, man,” McCoy said as he now stared wide-eyed at the Highlander. “You mean--”

“Yes. I assure you, it may not have been Starfleet sanctioned, but, for all intents and purposes, they’re married. Contractual and everything, so… whatever you have to say to me about Zahra’s condition, you can say in front of him as well.”

“Please,” Jamie said imploringly. “I need to see her.”

McCoy gazed seriously at the man for a while before he inhaled and exhaled heavily then rubbed his eyes tiredly. “You can see her all you want after a complete physical examination and a full vaccination suite,” the doctor promised.

If it would let him see Zahra Jamie would do whatever they asked him to. “Yes, anything, just please tell me she’s all right.”

“She’s fine. Zahra’s always been strong as hell. Her injuries were drastic, and the aneurysm in her brain had burst, but she made it in and out of surgery just fine. No more bleeding, no complications from surgery. We put her under a bone mender for her ribs, so those are fine, too, just some light bruising.”

“Sounds great, doc, but what did you want us to come down here for?” Laurie asked, knowing there had to be some sort of but coming.

“You better come with me,” Bones said. “It’ll be easier if I show you.” McCoy led them both into
the now vacant O-R room, Zahra had already been moved to a private in-patient room. McCoy moved over to the terminal on the back wall and his fingers moved across the screen. A moment later, an intricately detailed hologram of Zahra’s entire body appeared in the center of the room. “This is Zahra’s scan from her most recent physical after she got back from her SFI operation.” Jamie would have no clue what he was looking at but Laurie and Bones could see everything. She’d been the perfect picture of health, except for being underweight and malnourished. Her skeletal structure was normal, internal organs and nervous system functioning optimally, brain activity normal, strong heart.

“Now this—was the scan taken during transport back to the Enterprise this afternoon.” A few more swipes of his fingers and an almost identical hologram of Zahra’s body scan replaced the first, only this one had a pretty large red splotch near the left temple of her skull indicating the aneurysm and bleeding in her brain. That had been expected, but there was one pretty major difference that stood out even more starkly than the red on her brain.

Jamie had no idea what he was looking at but he saw Laurie’s eyes go wide and watched the Betazoid approach the hologram to look more closely. “That’s not possible,” Laurie said, brow furrowing together. “The transporter must’ve malfunctioned or something.”

“That’s what I thought, too—So I did another full body scan both before—” a few more swipes, and another identical scan of Zahra’s system replaced the second one. “—and after surgery.” Another swipe or two, and a fourth scan appeared, this one no longer showing the red areas in her brain.

Laurie scrubbed his hands over his face and back through his hair. “How the fuck—that’s not—that doesn’t just fucking happen,” Laurie said, feeling utterly bewildered.

“Will one of you please tell me what’s goin’ on?” Jamie said, feeling frustrated, anxious, and a little scared. He didn’t know how he was seeing what he was seeing, or what exactly it all meant because he’d never studied anatomy or biology or anything like that, but obviously he was missing something. Something that had both Laurie and McCoy stumped and made Laurie pull at his hair.

Laurie took in a deep breath and moved to the terminal McCoy was using. His own fingers moved over the screen until he brought up the first scan, the one McCoy had said was from two months ago when Zahra had gotten back from her mission. Laurie did some more fancy fingering and Jamie watched as several layers of the scan dropped away: he removed the dermis, the muscle, the skeleton, the nervous system, circulatory system, until only internal organs remained. The picture then moved down and zoomed in on the area where the bladder, and reproductive organs should be. “All right Jamie. Here’s your first lesson in female reproductive anatomy 101.”

Laurie moved to the screen on the back wall and brought up a random instructional sketch of the female reproductive system. “This is a normal woman’s reproductive system.” He had a stylus to point things out and guide with as he explained things to Jamie in a way he could understand. “Ovaries, fallopian tubes, uterus, cervix, the works. You follow me?” Jamie nodded and Laurie continued. “The ovaries produce an egg every month that travels down the fallopian tubes and into the uterus. A fertilized egg is implanted in the uterine wall, while an unfertilized egg will just pass through taking all that bloody uterine tissue with it, which is why a woman bleeds for one week a month. So, you see, the uterus is kind of the key component there, and without one a woman cannot possibly ever get pregnant nor have a baby on her own. She won’t even have a normal period.”

“Aye,” Jamie nodded, blushing a little, but listening. He knew about that. “Leeloo told me that—hers had been surgically removed, against her will, when she was only fourteen.”

Laurie blinked, actually a little surprised that Jamie knew that, but then he was Zahra’s person. Of course she’d told him, and of course he’d loved and married her anyway. “All right, so then—maybe
this won’t come as much of a shock to you as I feared. So this was Zahra’s medical scan from two months ago, normal for her, in that she has no uterus, right?” Laurie pointed at the hologram behind them where he had zoomed in on where her uterus should be, but all she had were a pair of ovaries sort of just floating there disconnected from anything.

“Aye,” Jamie said with a nod.

“Now... this is the scan Dr. McCoy verified three times today,” Laurie said as he swiped his fingers over the terminal a few more times and the newest scan replaced the old, only now because he had zoomed in and removed all the layers, Jamie could clearly see that Zahra’s missing uterus… was no longer missing. Her entire reproductive system appeared to be fully intact.

Jamie’s eyes widened to saucers and he covered the bottom half of his face with his hands.

“That’s…”

“I know... It’s not possible. It shouldn’t be possible, but… it’s as clear as the nose on your face, right there.” Laurie took in a deep breath and scratched his hand back through his hair, at a total loss for an explanation.

“That’s not all, though—” McCoy said, making them both turn to look at him, demanding an explanation. McCoy took in a deep breath and exhaled heavily, bringing his hand up once again to rub his eyes. He shoved Laurie aside a moment later and did some fancy swiping and tapping of his own, until the view on the scan began zooming in even further into Zahra’s body, closing in on a cellular, microscopic level, through the uterus itself, and even further still, up the fallopian tube, until it was zoomed all the way in. There it was, floating carefully, slowly, as if caught in the lazy flow of a river, was a single, solitary egg, and the scanner read out describing what they were looking at, was clearly telling both doctors that the egg was fertilized, as the cells had already begun dividing. It was now just casually making its way to Zahra’s uterus.

“No?” Laurie shook his head in disbelief, shoving both hands through his hair now. “You’re kidding me?”

McCoy shook his head. “We took blood samples and a few more bioscans just to be sure, and--all signs point to yes.” Because this was the 23rd century. They had warp-travel, and a Federation of United Planets, and a huge snow-globe in space that mimicked and supported normal everyday life. Knowing when a woman was knocked up before the egg had even implanted itself was like child’s play.

Jamie was gazing at the image. He may not understand or truly comprehend all this spacey, future, computer, holographic stuff, but he had watched the path the scanner had taken as it zoomed in closer. He was an educated man who was able to read context clues and put them together. If he was understanding or seeing all this correctly, they were somehow seeing inside Zahra’s body. That little round bean definitely looked like an egg, as Laurie had shown him on the other screen. It definitely looked like it was on its way down what Laurie had called the flop-ian tube? Did that mean, when it reaches the uterus, it would implant itself and start to grow? Was Zahra already carrying his child? Their child?

“Is that--” Jamie started to say, one hand covering his mouth while the other reached out gently as if he could touch the precious egg itself.

Laurie moved up beside him and placed his hand gently on the man’s shoulder. “Yeah, Jamie... It is.”

Jamie gasped softly, feeling more emotional now than ever. “Then that means that I’m--” he choked
up a little, tears stinging his eyes. “That she’s--”

“Yeah,” Laurie confirmed the man’s unspoken questions. He gave Jamie’s shoulder a comforting squeeze as he listened to the man whisper several praises and prayers to God in his native tongue. Normally, Laurie wasn’t even the least bit religious. Didn’t believe in any omnipotent, mighty, all-powerful being controlling the universe, or anything. Right there in that moment, however, with a real-life, honest-to-God miracle staring at them in their faces, maybe, just maybe, he might could be talked into becoming a believer. Maybe. Probably not, but maybe.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE! Hope you enjoyed it. I love hearing all your guys theories and stuff. Thanks for reading! Love you!
Chapter Summary

A highly anticipated 'reunion' of our newlyweds, post surgery. How will Zahra handle the 'big news'?

Chapter Notes

I am SOOOO sorry this took me so long! I have been dreadfully sick and just real life has been KICKING MY ASS! Here it is. Hopefully I will have the next chapter finished soon as well. Cheers!

“Don’t know about you but--I could use a drink,” Laurie said, clapping Jamie on the shoulder a few times. Jamie kind of just looked at him blankly, and after a while nodded his head. “Come on. We should let McCoy have a look at you and I’ll bring you back something special.”

Jamie nodded and let Laurie lead him into an exam room. Everything after that was kind of a blur. He remembered sitting down on what Laurie had called a biobed. Jamie was then given one of those rectangular tablets, which apparently contained a detailed questionnaire about his medical history. He’d been stumped about how to fill it out at first, just kind of staring at it until the screen went dark. Then, he didn’t know how to bring it back. Fortunately, Laurie soon returned with a bottle of something Jamie couldn’t even begin to pronounce. Laurie had likened it to something he called Betazoid Moonshine. Whatever that was. It was very strong. Stronger maybe even than Seamus’ uisce-beatha.

Jamie felt a little more calm after the first glass, so, with Laurie’s help, he managed to complete the entire questionnaire. McCoy took the tablet back when Jamie was done and passed it off to a nurse to enter into their medical database. Laurie had stepped out of the room with his bottle of spirits after that, to let Dr. McCoy proceed with Jamie's physical examination. It wasn’t nearly as intrusive or awkward as any exam Jamie had ever had, and most of it had been conducted with that handheld scanner he was becoming more familiar with. The exam was followed up with a series of standard inoculations and vaccinations. McCoy explained what each one was and what it was for before injecting each vaccine with what the doctor called a hypospray, which apparently used compressed air to inject the liquid subdermally.

Jamie, once again, had a difficult time wrapping his head around everything, and, if he didn’t trust Laurie as much as he did, he would have been freaking out. Laurie seemed to have an equally calming presence, similar to what Jamie felt around Zahra, just different. Still, Jamie was absolutely gobsmacked because a) there were so many diseases and illnesses to worry about, and b) they had apparently found cures for all of them, wiped them out in essence with something called Herd Immunity, and c) apparently Jamie was now protected against them as well and would never get any of the maladies that plagued people of his time. They called it science, but Jamie called it nothing short of miraculous.
When McCoy was finished with his exam and vaccinations, Jamie had been officially cleared to see Zahra. He was shown to her room by Laurie, and once he entered, he immediately spotted Leeloo resting peacefully on a medical bed. She had a bandage covering the left side of her head, and something Laurie called an IV tube attached to her wrist that was replenishing essential liquids after her surgery; vitamins, blood, and such. Laurie stayed near the door while Jamie entered the room and went to her side, where he took her hand in both of his and pressed a kiss on her knuckles. He perched himself on the edge of the bed and lifted his hand to brush her hair off her forehead as he spoke to her in Gaelic.

“They had to sedate her for surgery so she’ll be out for a couple hours,” Laurie explained quietly.

“May I stay with her?” Jamie asked, though he honestly didn’t care about the answer, he was going to stay, regardless if he had their permission or not. Laurie nodded and pushed the padded armchair closer to Jamie beside the bed. The Highlander looked at Laurie and gave him a grateful nod.

“Just let me or the nurse know if you need anything, ok?” Laurie said, to which Jamie nodded. “I’ll be right outside.” The Betazoid left them alone after that, shutting the door behind him.

Jamie scooted the chair as close to Zahra’s bed as he could, then sat down in it. He reached for her hand once more and pressed the back of her palm to his lips. He gazed at the ring on her finger, the tattoo on her hand, and whispered something in his native tongue about how much he loved her and wished she’d open her eyes so he could kiss her and show her how much he missed her; needed her. He then moved her hand into one of his, while his other hand moved to glide gently over her stomach, resting there for a moment as he gazed at the back of his hand. He spoke several more vows and promises in his native tongue, praising God and the miracle they’d been given, vowing to protect not just Leeloo but their unborn child as well.

He kept a loving, watchful vigil over her for a while, until the weariness of the past couple days finally seemed to catch up with him, and he eventually nodded off to sleep, bent over her bed, laying on his arm, still gripping her hand in his.

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A steady beeping lured Zahra back to the land of the living. She felt floaty, warm, and peaceful, which was very abnormal for her but she had been hearing Jamie's voice off and on while she slept, which was probably what had made her feel so safe. She tried to lift her hands to rub at her eyes, but one was being held firmly in someone else’s hand, the palm of which was familiarly calloused and rough. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes with her free hand, then looked down to see a mop of red curls resting on her thigh and Jamie’s hand gripped tightly in hers. She tilted her head and smiled adoringly down at him. It hadn’t been a dream. He was here. She was here. They’d made it through the portal safely and onto the Enterprise. Judging by the bandages she could feel covering the left side of her head, combined with her distinct lack of migraine, she safely assumed they’d fixed whatever was wrong with her brain. Even her ribs no longer hurt. Bones had done her up right.

She reached her free hand over to comb her fingers through Jamie’s hair, which caused him to stir and lift his head to gaze up at her. "Hey, you," she said weakly, with a smile.

A huge, relieved grin spread on Jamie's face. "Leeloo," he whispered before quickly leaning up and over her to capture her mouth in a desperate, needy kiss. A kiss she eagerly returned as her fist gripped the fabric of his shirt.

Jamie moved to sit on the edge of the bed as he held her face in his hands and kissed her as if his life depended on it, until they were both left feeling a little breathless and wanting for real privacy. Eventually, their mouths parted for air, but Jamie kept his forehead pressed gently against hers. He
whispered several words in Gaelic and brushed their noses together.

"Tha ghaol agam ort," Zahra whispered softly and Jamie's heart squeezed in his chest.

He sat up a little, grabbed her hands to place a kiss on each palm, then held them against his chest in one hand, while the other reached down to hold her cheek. "I was so scared," he said softly as his thumb brushed over the apple of her cheek. "Please, dinnae do tha' to me ever again."

She took one of her hands and lifted it to cup his jaw. "I'll do my best not to," she said quietly, and smiled. "Are you--wearing a Henley?" She said noticing for the first time how he was dressed. "And sweats?" Her lips tilted up on one side in a crooked smile.

Jamie looked down at what he was wearing. He didn't know what a Henley was, exactly, but he was definitely not wearing his usual garb. "Hale loaned them to me. They're surprisingly comfortable." Zahra's smirk bloomed into a full on grin as her eyes took him in completely. The Henley shirt was tight, not obnoxiously so, but it definitely showed off Jamie's natural muscle definition underneath and Zahra suddenly wanted to run her hands all over him. "Especially these--boxer? briefs? I didnae think they'd be as comfortable as they are."

Jamie wearing underwear? Zahra didn't know she would ever live to see the day. Her hand rubbed down his chest and stomach, then down his thigh. "I wanna see," she said with a grin, which made Jamie blush as he reached for her hand to stop its descent.

"No' here," he argued.

"Why not?" She argued back with a smirk. "I just want a wee keek," she said teasingly, using some Scottish slang she'd picked up on the road.

Jamie grinned and leaned in to press his forehead against hers. "Laurie and yer doctor're right outside."

Zahra's grin widened if possible. "So what if they walk in... they've seen a helluva lot more, or worse than the world's sexiest Highlander in his shorts." She curled her fingers inside the waist of his sweats and tugged gently.

Jamie stopped her again, however. "Later," he promised with a chuckle. He took her hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss once again. "When we're out o' here an' ye're on the mend, I'll wear whate'er ye want and ye can look til yer eyes fall out."

Her smile turned a little sultry, and she gazed at him through her lashes. "Promise?"

Jamie’s smirk soon matched her own as he could tell she was already feeling better. He himself wished he could get her out of here. "Aye. I promise, as long as ye return the favor." He pinched her chin between knuckle and thumb and held her still as he stole another kiss from her lips.

She exhaled through her nose and her hand gripped at the material of his shirt as she lost herself in his kiss. God, she could kiss him forever, but, alas, air was eventually a necessity, so the two reluctantly broke apart, but Jamie had joined her on the bed, laying beside her with her curled against his side. Zahra sighed as she pillowed her head against his shoulder. "So, you met Hale?" She asked, brow furrowing, not realizing that Laurie had brought Hale with him. "As in Laurie's husband?"


Zahra’s grin bloomed on her face and she lifted her head to look at him. "Elynn, too?" It was like Christmas! She hadn’t actually met the baby; she’d been on assignment when he’d been born.
"Where are they?"

"In their room I expect. Hale was saying he was gonna put Elynn down to sleep right before we left. I think they're--" Jamie was interrupted by a knock on the door.

When it opened a moment later, Laurie was poking his head in. "Everyone decent?" He teased with a playful grin then stepped fully into the room. He and Zahra smiled at each other before the man moved over to give her a hug and a kiss on her forehead. "How ya feeling, FJ?"

She closed her eyes against the kiss then looked up at him smiling, though she was happily snuggled back against Jamie's side. "Good. Better, thanks to you guys and McCoy... When can I get out of here?" Laurie was well aware how much Zahra despised hospitals and sickbay.

"McCoy wants to keep you overnight for observation and--to run a few more tests," Laurie responded.

Zahra's brow furrowed in concern before she asked, "Why? Did--something go wrong?"

Laurie shook his head and met Jamie's eyes for a moment where something unspoken passed between the two of them. "There weren't any complications with your surgery or anything like that,” Laurie said a bit vaguely.

"But?" Zahra filled in for him, getting a horrible feeling that was where this conversation was going. Judging by the way Jamie was anxiously squeezing her hand, it was possible her husband already knew.

"Well, firstly, we don't know how or why it happened; whether it was some--transporter malfunction, or--well, there's still a lot about the Craig na Dun site we don't understand, so who knows. It's definitely unprecedented, never before heard of nor seen in the history of--"

"Fade, please? You're killing me, here," Zahra interrupted him. "Will you just get to the part where you tell me what's wrong with me?"

"There's nae wrong wi' ye, mo ghaol," Jamie said, squeezing her hand as he held it against his chest. "It's actually a bloody miracle, is wha' it is." Zahra watched as Jamie's gaze moved down to her stomach where his hand was resting tenderly, almost lovingly against her lower abdomen.

"Whether a miracle or some freak transporter accident has yet to be proven, but--" Laurie moved to the diagnostic screen next to Zahra's bed, the one on the expendable arm that he could manipulate around how he wished. "Remember your missing uterus?" He woke up the screen and after a few taps and swipes, he pulled up her bioscan on the screen. "Well, it's no longer missing." Laurie cued up the image from before, then turned the screen to show Zahra her new, fully intact reproductive system.

Zahra gripped the screen and pulled it over so she could see and read it clearly. She was in utter, complete shock and disbelief. Even seeing it with her own eyes, she still found it hard to believe. Jamie rubbed his hand against her cheek, and Zahra turned to look up at him with tears swimming in her eyes. She fish-mouthed a little, uncertain of what she wanted to say, so she ended up saying nothing, closing her mouth and bringing her hand up to cover it. She just closed her eyes, two tears falling to her cheeks, then nuzzled her face into Jamie's shoulder. "How?" She asked to no one in particular, not caring who answered.

"We're still trying to figure that part out," Laurie said softly. "But I promise you FJ. It's not a hoax, it's not an error, it's not malfunctioning equipment... It's really there."
“Ok, well, I guess that explains why I was spotting a few weeks ago,” she sighed and scrubbed at her face then looked up at Jamie’s concerned gaze. “I assumed either Jamie’d accidentally caught me with a fingernail, or it was some kind of saddle rash, or trauma from all the horseback riding on the road. It had been very light and only lasted a couple of days.”

“Well,” Laurie said. “That would definitely explain it then.”

“Aye,” Jamie said before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“Explain what?” Zahra’s brows pinched together in confusion, it was like they were talking in code and it was frustrating.

The hand Jamie had on her stomach curled a little more firmly against her, rubbing affectionately. "Our wee little bean," Jamie clarified softly, making Zahra's eyes pop open wide, then she turned to look at her husband in shock. Her brows were pinched together again as if she were in pain. It wasn't possible. Shouldn’t be possible. Miraculously finding herself with an intact reproductive system was one thing, but to also be pregnant on top of that? It couldn't be possible.

She had tears tracking down her cheeks when she looked at Laurie, imploringly, silently begging him to tell her the truth. Laurie just smiled softly and nodded his head. "Surprise," the man said again, quieter this time, more serious. She’d had her first light period several weeks ago, and ended up pregnant from their wedding night coitus, which meant that Zahra's uterus had to have been present before the transporter beamed her and McCoy up from Craig na Dun, which was a fact that leant more credence to Laurie's personal theory that the portal had somehow had something to do with it. It was just a theory though, nothing could be proven. Nothing would be proven because they weren't going to be sending anyone else through it to find out. So it would have to remain theory and conjecture. “Conception was--less than 24 hours ago so your little bean is still in transit but… McCoy’s tests and scans confirmed it.” Laurie’s smile widened as Zahra’s heart felt like it was gonna burst. “In a couple days that little bean is gonna plant itself inside your new, perfectly functional uterus.”

Zahra was crying, though they weren’t tears of sadness, more tears of unspeakably overwhelming joy, wonder, and disbelief. "But... how?... Jamie, I--" Zahra said, cheeks stained with tears again. She was freaking out, Laurie could sense it, though it wasn’t an entirely bad sort of freaking out. She was just emotionally overwhelmed.

Jamie wrapped his arms gently around her and pressed a kiss to her hair. "I know, mo ghaol. I know... I know ye might be scared, but I'm right here. I'm right here with ye." The man whispered his love for her in his native tongue and pressed a gentle, loving kiss to her lips.

McCoy was there beside Laurie a moment later, taking in the scene before him. "So, you told her?" Bones asked, to which Laurie nodded. McCoy sighed and cleared his throat as he moved closer, and said, "We still have options, since we’re still in that preliminary window. It's not too late for plan B, to terminate," McCoy offered.

Zahra looked up at Bones as if he'd just told her he had murdered a puppy. "Terminate?" Jamie asked, sounding positively scandalized, and he started to stand up to square off against Bones, but Zahra gripped onto him, keeping him by her side on the bed.

"It’s ok, Jamie. No one is terminating anything," Zahra said, pointedly looking at Bones.

“Look, I know this might seem like some sort of medical miracle, kid, but the truth is we don’t even know how this happened, let alone if it’s permanent, or--"
“I said no, Len!” Zahra cut him off with a stubborn scowl.

Leonard inhaled and exhaled out his nose. “Zahra… we need to conduct some more tests, before--”

A thankfully empty water cup suddenly thunked Leonard right in the head, making him flinch back. It was only plastic, but it still carried a sting when thrown with such tenacity and precision as Zahra was capable of. “Ow! What the fuck was that for?”

“I said--no,” she repeated herself, more calmly, but just as stubborn. “I don’t know, nor do I rightly care how this happened, but I am not going to be some--guinea pig to satisfy your curiosity.”

Bones took in a deep breath once more, then exhaled heavily out his nose. “Fine.” He pointed at her seriously. “But don’t come cryin’ to me if some alien chestburster starts rippin’ through your guts.”

Zahra rolled her eyes, huffing dryly in amusement. “Lovely visual, Len. Thanks for that.”

“Happy to help, kiddo,” he responded with a smirk of his own as he moved to do what he had actually come in here to do, which was to check her vitals. “You--” He snapped at Jamie, then pointed at the chair. “--off.” The biobed couldn’t function properly with more than one occupant because it didn’t know whose biosigns it was supposed to read.

At Zahra’s nod that it was ok, Jamie reluctantly untangled himself from her side and moved to sit in the indicated chair once more. Once Jamie was off, the biobed started working properly again, reading Zahra’s lifesigns, and hers alone. “How are you feeling?” Len asked.

“A little tired, cranky,” Laurie began to answer, then acted like he hadn’t known Bones wasn’t talking to him when the man gave Laurie an annoyed look. “Ohp, sorry. My bad.”


Leonard nodded and noted her medical PADD. “We’ll get you something to eat. You’re still a little underweight,” the doctor said observationally. “I mean, you’re definitely looking a lot healthier than when you got back from SFI. In fact, I’d say your time in the 18th did you some good.” He could say that again. Zahra hadn’t been working out or exercising nearly as much or as often as she normally did. She’d been downright lazy in comparison. Plus, they ate a lot of carb-heavy foods, so she had definitely lost a lot of the staunchy, skeletal, malnourished features she’d been sporting after getting back from her undercover assignment. Plus, she was actually, legitimately happy, and not just the fake-it-til-you-make-it happy.

“But, I’d still like to get you back on a regulated diet,” Leonard continued logging her vitals. “Especially now if you’re gonna be eating for two.”

“Yes, dad,” Zahra said with an affectionately teasing smirk. Then it all suddenly hit her all over again, her uterus, getting pregnant… Her head fell back against her pillow and she kind of stared off at nothing while her hand subconsciously drifted down to grip at the sheet above her stomach. Jamie saw her do this, so he reached out for her hand, twining their fingers together. Zahra blinked through the unshed tears that were causing her eyes to glass up again, then she looked over at him with a soft smile. He brought her wrist to his lips and gave it a kiss before resting their hands back against her stomach.

“We’ll start you on a prenatal regimen as well, but for now I’ll, umm--” Leonard cleared his throat. “I’ll go put in a food order for you.” Leonard reached over to touch her forehead, gently brushing his thumb across her brow, it was a very fatherly gesture; affectionate, but not in a flirtatious or romantic
way. “Try to get some rest, kiddo? I’ll come back to check on you later.”

Zahra lifted her hand to touch Len’s elbow, her own affectionate touch, though, again, it was more familial and not sexual at all. “Thanks, Len. Seriously, thank you.”

“You can thank me by knocking all this almost-dying shit off,” he said with a stern gaze. “Seriously, I already put up with Jim’s dumbass on a near-daily basis, don’t need you making my life more difficult, too.” He put her medical PADD back in the folder by the door.

“Love you, too, Len!” Zahra said teasingly to the gruff doctor who liked to pretend he didn’t have feelings, but they were close enough friends that she knew better.

“Yeah, yeah!” Leonard just waved his hand dismissively as he left.

“And then there were three,” Laurie said as he watched the door close, then animated with a clap of his hands. “So, I have a--favor to ask of you,” he said to Zahra.

Zahra sat up a little straighter, bashing at her face as she nodded her head. “Of course, Fade. Anything.”

Laurie propped himself on the edge of her bed. “I need to--fix our bond.”

Her brow furrowed in concern. “Oh my god, it’s still--”

“--broken, yeah.” He nodded his head and rubbed his hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry, what bond are ye talking about?” Jamie asked with a slightly furrowed brow. He wasn’t jealous, not really. He knew their bond was strictly familial. He was just very, very curious

“When Laurie and I were slaves on Meikeih,” Zahra began to explain to her husband. "Laurie created a psychic link between us so I would never feel alone or scared again.”

“The Betazoids have a word for it, called Imzadi. It means beloved.” Or soulmates; only in the highly polyamorous Betazoid culture, no person is limited to one Imzadi, or soulmate, and not all Imzadis/Soulmates are sexual in nature. Laurie, personally, had like ten Imzadis, including Hale, Zahra, and the two other couples he lived with on New Vulcan, to name a few.

Zahra nodded at Laurie’s explanation. “He wanted to make sure I knew he’d always be with me.” Zahra smiled softly and reached for both of their hands, holding one of theirs in each of hers. “If I was scared, or cold, or lonely, he could feel it. When one of the Orion children tried to kill me, it was through our bond Laurie felt it and--he saved my life.” Their connection was deep, powerful, meaningful. As he’d said before, Jamie wasn’t jealous of it, wasn’t jealous of Laurie, but it was more he was almost envious of their bond.

“Hey,” he suddenly heard Zahra’s voice call to him as both of her hands held his face, making him look at her. Zahra was intuitive and able to read body language to a point where it almost was as if she could be a psychic, but she wasn’t. She had seen the way Jamie’s expression had changed, even the subtlest bit, when she and Laurie had started talking about their bond. “You know the bond between us is just as strong and meaningful, right?” she asked in a whisper, urging him up as she leaned forward to press their foreheads together. “How many times have you known what I’m thinking or feeling even better than I do? Hmm?” She brushed her hands down his face and pressed a soft, but sensual kiss to his lips. “Our bond goes beyond mental, Jamie.” She pressed his hand to her chest, just over her heart. “Ours is a spiritual connection. Deep. Endless. It’s emotional. Cerebral. Physical…” She placed her own hand on his heart. “You ken?” she asked as she opened her eyes to look into his.
"Aye," he said quietly, brushing the hair back from her head and meeting her eyes. "I've always been able to talk to ye as if ye were my very soul, Leeloo... And yer face--" He pressed his forehead to hers. "--is my heart." They were just leaning in to share a highly passionate kiss when a very obvious throat clearing had them pausing to remember they weren't alone.

With twin blushes on their faces, they turned with sheepish, apologetic expressions to Laurie. "Getting back on track, you probably can't feel it as strongly as I can anymore, especially with painkillers in your system, but--you know that feedback noise and the migraine you had a couple days ago?" Laurie asked.

"Of course," she answered with a soft frown. "Don't think I'll ever forget it." Jamie squeezed her hand and she returned the gesture.

"Well, I've been feeling something similar to that for going on six weeks, now, ever since you fell through the stones."

"Oh, my god, Fade, I'm so sorry." She reached out and gripped Laurie's hand in hers. "I didn't know."

Laurie shook his head and held her hand. "It's ok. You're not a Betazoid or a psychic. You don't have the ability to pull on a mental bond across space and time. You literally had no way of knowing anything was wrong. Even when you started feeling the pain, I'm sure you had no idea what it was."

Her brow furrowed. "Are you saying that my migraines, the aneurysm, that was because our bond was broken?" She had assumed her migraines and stuff were from stress, fatigue, and her other injuries. She never would have guessed it was because she had a frayed psychic bond in her brain.

Laurie shrugged softly. "I can't be 100-percent sure because nothing like this has ever happened before, but--I can tell you that when you passed out that night at the inn, I felt it... And that morning after the ceremony, Jamie said you'd had an episode then, and I felt that one, too." He sighed softly and scrubbed his hand over his face. "So, maybe the break didn't specifically cause the aneurysm, but I wouldn't be surprised if the strain it put on your brain had exacerbated it, inadvertently brought it on because your brain is simply not equipped to process these things the same as a Betazoid."

"So, you've been hurting all this time because of me?" she asked with fresh tears springing to her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Fade,"

Laurie squeezed her hand and shook his head. "Don't be. Unless you planned to drop yourself 500 years into the past?" He raised a teasing brow at her and smiled. "Besides, as it turns out, it was a blessing in disguise." He tapped his finger against his left temple. "It's how I knew you weren't dead. It's--how we found you."

Her smile was soft, and watery. "Well, never thought I'd be grateful for a migraine, but damn."

Laurie chuckled softly and perched on the edge of the bed. "Well, at least for me it didn't make my brain bleed, so there's that." He took her hand and squeezed it. "So... do I have your permission to proceed?" Because verbal consent was important, kids. Even if this was for both their sakes, because the last thing they needed was this bleeding, aching, broken psychic bond to continue to cause even more damage to her already wounded brain.

Zahra squeezed his hand and nodded. "Yes. Of course. Always. Whatever you need to do. I'm ready."

"Do I need to--uh--may I stay?" Jamie asked, not sure if his presence would affect whatever Laurie
was about to do.

“Of course,” Laurie nodded. “It’s actually probably better that you’re here as—kind of an anchor as it were. Not that— I mean this isn’t dangerous by any means, but you know. Always better to err on the side of caution as they say.” Jamie nodded and Zahra squeezed his hand, smiling. “You ready?” Laurie asked. Zahra turned to look at him before she sat up a little straighter and reached out both of her hands for him to take. “You remember the drill?” he asked.

Zahra nodded. “Find my happy place,” she said softly and closed her eyes and started taking deep, steady breaths, in and out.

For as long as she could remember, Zahra’s happy place had always been the dulcet, rhythmic vibrations of a didgeridoo lullaby, luring her deep into the heart of the Australian Outback. Midnight bonfires. Mud coated skin. Topless children, women, and men in loincloths. Dark skin. Odd languages. Fire dancing. Laughing. Eating. She took in a deep breath and could almost feel the warm, hot air blowing across her face… until suddenly everything changed… The warm air grew cold, chill, and she could feel a cold mist of rain on her face. The didgeridoo was replaced by the sound of a piper calling, playing an enchanting durge, while a minstrel plucked his harp and sang of druids dancing through stones… Gone were the dark-skinned aborigines in loincloths dancing around a fire, replaced by Druid women with lanterns dancing through stones and praying to the sun… Gone was the endless desert and in its place was so much beautiful stretching greenery as far as the eye could see; Horses running wild over the Highlands… A misty rain falling on her face as she walked through the most beautiful field of heather; stalks so high she could just stretch out her hands and her palms and fingers grazed over the tops. She could feel Fade all around her, making her happy place come to life in a way she never would have been able to on her own.

“Scotland looks good on you,” the Betazoid’s voice called to her from her left, and she turned to see his face, smiling and pleased. He held out his hand, she reached for it, and the moment their palms touched she felt an incredible burst of energy and warmth that made her gasp audibly. She was overcome by a blindingly bright light and she could feel the bond between them twining, and growing; mending, melting, and fusing back together with gold and green tendrils of energy and light; like crackling electricity lacing up and down her arms, causing goosebumps to raise all over…

She eventually felt the brightness recede but the warmth, the energy, the bond remained. The ache she hadn’t even realized was there, was suddenly gone. For over six weeks she had been living with that pain, oblivious and unknowing, until that very moment when it was gone and she could feel the relief.

When she opened her eyes, she turned to see Jamie standing on the hill in the distance, his hand stretched out to her. She saw his mouth was moving as if he were calling to her but she heard no words. “Jamie?” she asked, brow furrowing in confusion. She gasped as the sunlight behind him caused his curls to glow like fire on his head and that disarming smile of his graced his lips, beckoning to her.

“Yeah. He’s here,” she heard Fade say beside her, and she looked down to see she was still holding onto his hand. “I don’t know how it happened, exactly, but—he’s an actual part of this, too.” She turned back to look at her husband where she saw him wave his hand in a ‘Come here’ motion. “I think he’s become your happy place far more than—” Laurie gestured around at the beautiful mindscape around them “—this will ever be.” Laurie released her hand, and with it, he withdrew his energy but she could still feel the warmth of their bond between them.

“Leeloo!” She heard Jamie’s voice this time and turned once again to see him urging her to come.

“Go,” Laurie said with a nod of his head in the Highlander’s direction. Zahra took a few steps away
from him, then turned to look at him questioningly. “Go, it’s ok. I’ll still be here. Go!” the Betazoid shooed her off, and Zahra turned, lifting the skirts of her dress before she ran up the hill.

“Aye, mo nighean peantadh. What took you so long?” She took both of Jamie’s hands in hers and the two shared a kiss before Jamie led her by the hand down the hill. She turned briefly to look back at Laurie, who gave her a wave, and when she turned back around the sun turned into a bright, all-encompassing light.

Zahra slowly blinked open her eyes to see Jamie looking down at her, felt his hand on her cheek. “There ye are,” he said softly and leaned down to give her a soft kiss on the lips. She returned the kiss for a moment, then felt Laurie squeeze her hand tight. When she lifted her head, the Betazoid smiled at her affectionately.

“Thank you,” Zahra said softly, squeezing Laurie’s hand back and reaching for Jamie with her other hand.

“Is it done then?” Jamie asked, mildly concerned, but hopeful. They had both been unresponsive for several minutes; he was about to call the doctor.

“It’s done,” Laurie said with a nod.

“Everything’s all right?” He asked again.

Zahra squeezed Jamie’s hand and nodded her head, then extracted her other hand from Laurie’s to reach for Jamie’s face. “Everything’s perfect,” she assured him before leaning in for a kiss.

“And with that, my friends, I shall take my leave for now, but Hale wants you both to come over for breakfast in the morning.” Laurie stood slowly, then extended his hand for Jamie to shake. “Call me if you guys need anything, yeah?”

Jamie stood and shook the Betazoid’s hand firmly. “Aye. Thank ye, Laurie. Truly. For everything ye’ve done for me, for Leeloo, for us.”

Laurie shook his head. “You’d have done the same in my place, I’m sure of it.” The men released hands and Laurie bent over to give Zahra a hug. “I’m just a comm away.”

“I know… Thank you.” She felt her eyes watering and she was reluctant to release their hug.

“Everything’s gonna be all right, now, FJ,” Laurie said assuredly. “I promise.”

_I love you, Fade,_ she pressed into his mind, never really feeling comfortable saying those words out loud, always in fear that they could lose their meaning if said too often.

_Love you too, Fre’ja,_ he said back with a loving stroke of her hair. The two then parted and Laurie gave them both a wave as he turned to leave. “Later, babes.” They all waved at each other as Laurie opened the door and left.

“Ye all right?” Jamie asked, noticing how Zahra’s eyes were still filled with tears.

The woman smiled up at him and nodded her head. “Yeah.” She pulled on his hand, urging him back down to lay next to her. Jamie went willingly, laying beside her on the medical cot and wrapping his arm under and around her shoulders. Zahra turned to her side slightly, facing him, and twined their fingers together. “Better than all right, actually,” she said before she tilted her head up, silently asking him for a kiss, which Jamie happily gave. She wasn’t satisfied with a simple kiss, however, when she opened her mouth to his and deepened the kiss with a heady sigh. She was
suddenly pressing and forming his hand against her breast, and Jamie groaned as he instinctively massaged it into his palm, and rubbed his thumb against the hardening bud beneath her gown.

It wasn’t until he felt Zahra’s hand rubbing him through his pants that his senses seemed to return to him and he reached for her wrist to stop her. “Nae, mo ghaol. We cannae. No’ here.”

“Yes. We can. Right here.” She leaned forward to nip his bottom lip playfully between her teeth. “Look, they just took my vitals, which means they won’t be back to check on me again for hours,” she said before she slipped her other hand down between them to continue pressing and rubbing him through his pants, making him have to bite his lip to keep from making an embarrassing noise.

“Someone may hear,” he objected further, though his hips were already subtly rolling against her hand.

“Then you’d better be quiet,” she said teasingly before leaning in to claim his mouth once again.

Just like that, all protest seemed to drain out of him and his kisses grew hungry and desperate, trying to devour her from the mouth down. Listen! They’d only made love the one time back at the village on their wedding night, then they’d both been seized by peril and hardship ever since. Jamie had wanted to make love to her over and over again the night of their wedding, but he’d ended up almost losing her instead. They had a lot to make up for. That night felt so far away now, as if it were actually like it had been the 500 years that now separated them from then. This was the first bit of respite they’d had in days and, by Christ, Jamie was desperate to reunite with her; desperate for that solidifying connection he felt that first time they’d joined together. It had been like coming home and he needed it; needed her; right here, and now.

Zahra’s leg was constricted by the hospital sheets slightly but she still lifted it to raise over Jamie’s hip. The man helped her and held her thigh against his waist as they rolled their hips together, both of them moaning at the contact, but then there was a banging at the door. They both startled apart but did not untangle from each other. "No fucking in my sickbay, ya goddamn animals!" McCoy’s voice came through the door. Zahra sighed and rested her head back with a laugh.

"How did he bloody know?" Jamie asked on a whisper.

Zahra smirked and huffed dryly in amusement. "This damn bed is a medical bed. It reads bio signatures of the one, or in our case ones that are lying on it. It probably registered our spikes in blood pressure, heart rate, and body heat."

“It can do all that?” Jamie asked, gazing up and behind them at the monitor above the bed.

“Yes. Never realized how annoying that could be until now.” Zahra scrubbed her hands over her face and rubbed her eyes before she turned and reached for the PADD that had been left on her bedside table.

"What’re ye doin’?” Jamie asked as he held her close against his chest and watched her work the tablet in a blur of finger movements.

Zahra logged into the PADD with her credentials and brought up a direct message with McCoy. “Trying to get out of here,” she answered Jamie’s question as she typed in a series of texts. I wanna go home.

She typed into the text bar before hitting send, whereupon the PADD made a little baloop noise. She worried on her thumbnail for a moment or two until the little … ellipsis appeared indicating Bones was replying. Her PADD made a different noise when she received a message from him.
McCoy: You just had brain surgery for fuck's sake, Zahra.

Another ping.

McCoy: Despite your Halloween costume from last year, you're not the goddamn Wonder Woman.

And a third and final ping.

McCoy: Your body needs to heal. You need to rest and recuperate.

Zahra sighed and pressed the screen to her chest before plopping her head back against the pillow. "Sorry to say, but he has a point, ye ken?" Jamie said softly nuzzling the side of her head. "As much as I want ye," he said as he palmed her breast through her gown and nipped at her earlobe. "I want you strong and healthy even more."

Zahra groaned and bit down on her bottom lip. "You're not helping, ya know?"

Her PADD made that noise again and she picked it back up to read the message.

McCoy: I'm sorry kiddo, but thems the breaks.
McCoy: We'll reevaluate tomorrow morning.

Zahra sighed and typed back a response.

Fine

She sent it off with a ping thinking that would be the end of it but the little … appeared again meaning McCoy was writing something else. Her PADD pinged with another message a moment later.

McCoy: If you fuck in my hospital bed, I'm having you court-martialed for conduct unbecoming.

Zahra snorted in laughter, and rolled her eyes.

don't worry, DAD, we're not gonna fuck in your PRECIOUS biobed.

She sent that message off then set her PADD aside.

McCoy said he didn't want them doing it on the bed. He was not specific about anything else. Before she could act on any of those thoughts, however, there was a knock on the door again, this time much softer. One of the nurses was poking her head inside a moment later. "Knock, knock," the woman said and opened the door, carrying in a tray that had a few covered dishes on it. "Wasn't sure what you'd be hungry for so I just ordered you something based off some of your previous meals and Dr. McCoy's diet plan."

The woman set the tray down on the mobile cart/desk and helped wheel it over in Zahra's reach. "Thanks, Christine," Zahra said, turning over and sitting up a little straighter but still had Jamie pressed in close behind her.

"Call if you need anything," the nurse said before leaving with a wave.

Zahra waved back, then reached to pull the table closer. She removed the chafing cover and was very pleasantly surprised to see an appetizing Steak Fajita salad on her tray. It had slices of perfectly
rare flank steak, grilled fajita peppers, avocado, mixed greens, corn, and tomatoes. The dressing on
the side was a creamy lime green in color, so she assumed it was the cilantro-lime-avocado dressing
that she usually paired it with. She'd ordered it before from the ship cafeteria.

"What is that?" Jamie said, looking very intently at the bowl. It smelled really good.

"It's a steak fajita salad with avocado cilantro dressing. One of my favorites." Zahra unrolled her
napkin that held the silverware and set the silverware aside before draping her napkin over her
stomach and lap. "It's Spanish slash Mexican slash Latin-American. A little spicy but nothing crazy."
She drizzled the dressing liberally over the salad then picked up her fork and knife to start cutting and
mixing the contents around, into smaller bite-sized portions. The serving was definitely large enough
for two. "You want a taste?" She asked as she scooped up a forkful that had a little bit of everything;
a piece of steak, a little fajita peppers, lettuce, tomatoes. She then offered the bite to him.

"Hmm. It does look and smell ruddy amazing," he said before he took the offered bite and chewed
on it thoughtfully, brows raising slightly in surprise and delight. "That is--surprisingly good, but--" he
inhaled through puckered lips.

"Too spicy?" She asked as she removed the plastic lid from her water glass and handed it to him to
take a drink.

Jamie accepted the glass and took several gulps. He then set the cup down and shook his head. "Nae,
not too spicy. I mean it's definitely spicy, aye, but--I dinnae think I've eaten anythin' with so much--
flavor before. It's so--robust."

Zahra scooped up her own bite and ate it. "Mexican and Indian food are like some of the only types
of food I can actually taste because of all the spices and flavors." There were a couple tortilla rounds,
some cilantro lime rice, and black beans on the side. Zahra picked one of the flour tortillas up and
scooped some of the steak, lettuce, tomatoes, beans, and rice onto it, drizzled some of the avocado
dressing over it, then folded it into a taco, which she presented to Jamie. "Here. It's a taco. You just
hold it like this--" she showed him how to hold it. "Then just take a bite, just be careful. It can be
kind of messy." She grinned as she gave him a cloth napkin to go with it.

"A talk-oh?" He butchered the simple pronunciation, but he was curious nonetheless. So he took the
taco and the napkin from her eagerly.

"It's gonna be really good, I promise," she said with a grin as she watched him.

Jamie felt a little awkward as he kind of just looked at it, turning it this way and that until he just
followed her advice; holding it carefully before he took a large bite. His eyebrows were pinched in
the center at first as he chewed a few times, but then they were raising toward his hairline as he
looked at his food, then at Zahra in surprise.

Zahra grinned. "Good, right?"

Jamie finished chewing, then swallowed. "Aye. That's--" he cursed in Gaelic. "That's very good."
He eagerly took another bite. Zahra's grin widened and she leaned over to lay a kiss on his cheek
before she tucked back into her food with gusto. She was starving.

They ate in companionable silence for a spell until Jamie broke said silence first. "So... now that
ye're healed, and we're no longer in immediate danger, may I ask ye a question?" He said as he
licked some of the sauce from his thumb, then wiped his hand on her napkin.

"Of course," she said, taking a drink from her water. "I am an open book."
"Well," he chewed thoughtfully on his food for a moment before actually posing the question that he'd actually been dying to ask for quite some time now. "Yer--umm--yer honeypot is bare."

"I'm sorry, my what?" Zahra asked, trying not to laugh. Was he talking about her vadage?

"Ye know--yer lady part." Which he'd started calling her honeypot, simply because any other words for it seemed too crude, and because he thought her taste was sweet. Look! He was a virgin when he met her, and a gentleman, and he didn't know what else to call it, ok?

"It's called a vagina, Jamie," she said, making the younger man blush. "Or a muff if vagina’s too 'clinical' for you… Some even call it a pussy if they're feeling particularly bold." Jamie's face was beat red and Zahra smirked a bit crookedly before nodding her head. "But yes. Mine is hairless… You didn’t--just notice that did you?" She teased playfully.

Jamie liked his use of the word honeypot, though, especially when he knew she tasted almost as sweet. He huffed in dry amusement and shook his head. "Aye, no. Noticed it the first time I touched ye, but couldnae confirm it 'til--our wedding night when I got to see you. All of you."

"Is there a question in there somewhere?" She prodded a little, offering him a fond smile. "I s'pose I'm just curious how it's possible." They both resumed eating as if talking about the weather and not Zahra's sexy bits. "Every lass I've ever seen is thoroughly--thatched over--down there. Now, I'm not complainin' mind. I mean… I like it… A lot. Ye’re so soft, and smooth and--" he had to bite his bottom lip and take a deep breath through his nose, already getting himself worked up a little just thinking about it.

Zahra grinned and leaned over to kiss him softly on the lips, grinning as she leaned back. "Orions, as a culture, generally do not like body hair of any kind. Most males are even known to shave their heads along with everything else. My old master in particular had a strong distaste for any body hair below the neck, so when I was of age, he paid to have mine removed with this special laser light... A couple sessions with it, and the hair stopped growing back, at least, not thick.” It was like that baby fine, super light, super soft hair most women had on their faces. “Obviously, he kept the hair on my head for aesthetic purposes."

Zahra shivered softly from the touch and exhaled heavily out her nose. "Yeah. Saves me from having to go through all the trouble and money on upkeep or embarrassing trips to the salon."

"Well," he started to say as he trailed his fingers up her arm again. "Call that a blessing in disguise, I guess?"

"Yep," Zahra said popping the p, then leaned over, questing for another kiss which Jamie happily gave her.

His hand came up to hold her face, though, and he deepened the kiss; the taste of their meal lingering on both their tongues. The little moan Zahra let out against his mouth had Jamie groaning on his own
before he broke the kiss and pressed their foreheads together. "Does it ever stop?" He asked a bit
breathlessly, to which Zahra lifted her head, looking at him questioningly. "The wanting you," he
continued. "The needing you, does it--ever stop?"

Zahra bit down coyly on her bottom lip as her shoulders raised in a subtle shrug. "I hope not?"

Jamie sighed and started rubbing and threading his fingers with hers. "Even when I was apart from
you, while the doctor was healin' you, I still wanted you so much my chest felt tight, and my fingers
ached with wanting to touch ye again." Their hands were touching and rubbing together still, fingers
grazing and twining between each other. "Is it--normal?" Zahra lifted her face to look into his eyes as
he continued. "What it is between us, when I touch you, when I lie with you?" He inhaled and
exhaled through his nose and gently brushed the hair off her forehead. "Is it always so between a
man and a woman?"

Zahra ignored her food for now, pushing the tray gently away as she instead chose to snuggle
closer to Jamie, pillowing her head against his shoulder and watching their fingers twine and rub
together. "In my personal experience, no... Not even remotely."

“How do you mean?” Jamie asked, still with that morbid curiosity. He placed a kiss on the crown of
her head.

Zahra’s lips pursed together thoughtfully for a moment and she exhaled through her nose. “Well…
You have to realize my body wasn’t--always my own... I had to learn to--compartmentalize and
disassociate myself from certain things or I’d have gone insane a long time ago.” She felt Jamie grip
her hip and she could feel him gritting his teeth, so she lifted her head and pressed a kiss to his lips
trying to calm and comfort him. “I just mean that... sex has not always been something I desired or
wanted. I think that was part of the reason none of my past attempts at relationships ever really
worked out, because as close as I would get to a person, I never really viewed sex as something I
wanted, but more something I felt obligated to give. It never--felt right… for me.”

“Leeloo, I--” Jamie started to say but she silenced his concerns quickly with another deep, heated
kiss that was all sensual languorousness and desire. Jamie returned the kiss, reaching for her and
holding her close as they each lost themselves in the other.

When the kiss ended, Zahra ended up laying half on top of him and Jamie was gripping her hips
firmly in his hands. They were both panting for breath. “Ever since I met you,” Zahra started to say.
“IT’s like there’s been this--inexplicable, primal need I’ve had to just--have your hands all over me
and inside me, and to worship you on my knees... I wanted you. Not some--disassociative, alter part
of myself. Me. I’ve never once caught myself, in any of our interludes, wishing I was someplace or
someone else. I’ve never had to ask what was happening or why I was doing this. I’ve ached and
yearned to be with you every moment since we met... I’m pretty sure I was already in love with you
that morning we got back to Leoch, when you were cleaning my cuts, remember?” Jamie held her
face and brushed his thumb across the apple of her cheek where the faintest trace of a sliver of a scar
could still be seen. “There was this moment where I felt like I would die if you didn’t kiss me. I think
I knew then, that I was in love with you.”

Jamie grinned brightly, brushed her hair back from her forehead, then held her face in his palm again
before leaning in to rest their foreheads together. “I knew that night when I’d fallen off my horse and
woke to you cursin’ my name.” Zahra raised a single brow in disbelief. “No joke,” he said with a
grin. “I remembered a time when I’d asked my da how ye knew which was the right woman... an’ he
told me when the time came, I’d have no doubt, and I didn’t... When I woke in the dark under that
tree on the road to Leoch, with you sitting on my chest, cursin’ me for bleedin’ to death, I said to
myself, ‘Jamie Fraser, for all ye canna see what she truly looks like, and for all she weighs as much
as a good draft horse, this is the woman'."

Zahra’s eyes widened and she aimed a punch at that very shoulder she’d mended, but Jamie just grinned as he caught her wrist before the blow struck. He was teasing, obviously, but he did so love riling a reaction out of her. “I said to myself, I said, ‘she’s mended ye twice in as many hours, me lad; and life amongst the MacKenzies being what it is, it might be as well to wed a woman as can stanch a wound, set broken bones, and hold her own in a fight.’” Zahra was struggling to free her arm but he just pinned it behind her back and caught the other one she tried to slap him with as well, chuckling at her as he continued. “And I said to myself, ‘Jamie, lad, ‘if her touch feels so bonny on your collarbone, imagine what it might feel like lower down...’"

Zahra tried to maintain her glare but she couldn’t pretend to be mad when all she wanted to do was laugh and show him exactly what it felt like to be touched lower down. She struggled to release her hand so she could touch him, but he just rolled them so she was mostly on her back, one of her arms still pinned behind her back while he pinned the other with the IV next to her head. “O’ course, I thought it might ha’ just been the effects o’ spending four months in a monastery, wi’out benefit o’ female companionship, but then that ride through the dark together--” He paused to close his eyes and sigh a bit theatrically. “--with that lovely broad arse wedged between my thighs--” He ducked his face into the hollow of her throat and grazed his teeth against her pulse point, making her arch against him and moan softly. “--and that rock-solid head thumping me in the chest."

His mouth moved to her ear next, where he tongued and worried on her earlobe between his teeth for a moment, before continuing his speech; the breath against her skin causing gooseflesh to raise all over. "I said to myself, ‘Jamie,’ I said--” He trailed heated kisses and gentle love bites against her skin, down her throat, to her collarbone where his tongue dipped in the hollow between each clavicle. “--‘for all ye know, she's a Sassenach bitch, with a tongue like an adder’s’--” That earned him her own form of punishment when she lifted her head to bite his earlobe between her teeth, making him hiss in pain(and a little pleasure). He lifted his head to look down at her, that arrogant smirk on his lips. “-- but, with a bum like that, what does it matter if she's a face like a sheep?’"

Her eyes widened and with a playful battle cry, Zahra pushed against him, tackling him onto his back, but in the process made them both fall off the bed onto the solid ground below with a heavy thump. They wrestled for a bit, but Zahra ended up straddling Jamie’s torso with her hands braced on his chest, and his arms pinned between her impossibly strong thighs. He thought he might have actually offended her, afraid he’d crossed a line, afraid she might injure herself if he was too rough, but when he looked up at her, his wife was grinning down at him like the cat who’d just caught the mouse. Her smile was a bit feral in nature, predatory. It was similar to that look she’d had when Jamie had found her after the ambush on the road, ready to combat a redcoat with her bare hands. It was that similar look of lust in her eyes, and it made him grow hard just thinking about it. “You know I wanted to fuck you that day, after the ambush, when you stole my kill.” She rolled her hips against him, grinding her naked sex against the enlargening bulge in his sweats.

Jamie could now clearly see that she wasn’t wearing anything under her hospital gown and he groaned, desperately trying to free his arms but the squeeze of her thighs only seemed to strengthen with his struggles. Holy fuck, he wouldn’t be surprised if she could crack a man’s head that way. “Jesus Christ, Leeloo, let me free lass,” he said as he struggled to free his arms again. “Please!”

She stilled her slow grind on top of him, looked down into his face, then tilted her head, gazing into his eyes seriously. “I will, on one condition.”

“Name it!” He begged.

“You will not touch me--until I say you can.” She watched his eyes close as he grit his teeth a
moment, thinking it over. He eventually popped his eyes back open and nodded his head. “Good,” she confirmed before she loosened the grip of her thighs and Jamie was pulling his arms free and reaching for her hips a moment later. Zahra immediately grabbed his wrists and pushed at them to stop him. “Ah, ah, ah, ah. What did I say?”

Jamie grit his teeth again, warring with himself, wanting to just grab her and take her like they both obviously wanted, but he’d promised… so he’d obey. “For now… But dinnae test me too long, mo ghaol.” He dropped his hands away to the side, and curled them into fists. He wondered, in that moment, how differently their wedding night would have really turned out, had Zahra not been injured. The woman was wild, and strong, and definitely not afraid to take what she wanted.

When she was sure Jamie got the message, Zahra started grinding her hips on him once more, rubbing her sex up and down the bulge in his pants, soaking the material through until Jamie could feel her wetness, and her heat directly against his erection. He grit his teeth and shut his eyes tight, fisting his hands so tight they were turning white and he was probably gonna bore crescent marks into his palms. Jamie was helpless to watch as Zahra rocked herself even harder and faster against him. He cursed in Gaelic and raised his hips against her, joining her thrusts. She’d said he couldn’t touch her, not that he couldn’t rut against her. “Oh, Fuck, Jamie, I’m so close…” She breathed out trying to keep her voice low.

He cursed in Gaelic again, and had to bite the back of his fist to keep from grabbing her hips, or moaning too loud. It didn’t feel as good as being inside of her, but it was damn near close; like that first time they’d dry-rutted together. It felt so good. His need to feel her, to hold her, touch her, was overwhelming and he wanted to pull his hair out from the need. “Christ, Leeloo, I want you so much I can scarcely breathe. Please, mo ghaol!”

“After,” she promised as her hips quickened their pace and her body rolled and rocked against him in a beautifully fast rhythm. “You can touch me… after I come.”

His eyes popped open and he gazed intently up at her. That was a promise, and he had never wanted something so much in his entire life. He raised himself up on his elbows and watched her as he lifted his hips against her; moved with her. “Come for me, then, mo ghaol.” He blushed at his own words, feeling breathless and overheated. They were both wearing far too many clothes.

Jamie sat up a little and reached his arm back to pull the fabric of his shirt up and off over his head; tossing it aside carelessly. He then watched her brace one arm back against his knee, while her other hand stayed pressed to his stomach for balance. Her head had fallen back between her shoulder blades and he could see her mouth was open in a soundless, ‘Oh’. Even covered as they were, Jamie was mesmerized by the bounce of her breasts from each roll of her body and deep breath she took.

When he could feel the grip of her thighs tightening along with the rest of her body, he knew she was close. So close. Unable to help himself, Jamie pushed up her medical gown, careful not to actually touch her as he sat up in the same motion. His lips then encircled one of her exposed nipples, nibbling and suckling gently on the rosy bud. Again, he wasn’t breaking any rules, because he technically wasn’t touching her. He heard Zahra gasp at that final piece she seemed to need, and she brought her wrist to her mouth, biting down to stifle her moan as she climaxed.

Jamie felt her body tremble and convulse above him, rolling through wave after wave of pleasure. As soon as she started coming down off that peak, his arms were encircling her waist, hands gripping onto each supple cheek of her bottom where he helped her continue rolling through her orgasm. She watched him suckle on her nipple, her mouth still open in a soundless ‘Oh’. Her body shivered through the aftershocks, and tiny pleasurable pulsations that his lips, teeth, and tongue were sending through her. “Such a cheater,” she said breathlessly.
“Am not,” he said after popping his mouth off her breast, and letting her gown fall. “You said I
couldn’ touch you. You mentioned naught about my mouth.” He raised his hips against her and
pressed a kiss to her lips.

Zahra groaned and bit down on his bottom lip. “Take off--your pants,” she muttered against his
mouth. Jamie groaned, and without being told twice, he laid back to push the material of his
sweatpants off. Zahra lifted herself up on her knees to give him better access, then helped push the
fabric down to his thighs, just enough to release his cock. Zahra gasped, then worried her bottom lip
between her teeth as she took his erection in her palm and pressed him against her sex while she
rolled her hips against him, slicking him up and down between her folds, coating him with her own
fluids.

“Ai, Christ!” Jamie groaned and gripped strong hands into her hips and thighs, helping her along as
she continued sliding herself against him. She took her hands away from him momentarily, but
continued rocking against him. Meanwhile, she leaned up to pinch the tube on her IV closed.
Honestly, she was amazed she hadn’t violently yanked it out after that fall. Once the drip was
pinched off, she twisted off the connection port by her wrist, and in the next moment she was
crossing her arms in front of her, grabbing the ends of her hospital gown, and lifting the material off
over her head. Jamie groaned, brow furrowing together at the sight of her fully exposed above him.
He muttered something in Gaelic, praising her beauty, before he planted his feet on the floor to raise
his hips against her. Christ, he was desperate to be inside of her.

In the next moment, Jamie was wrapping his arms around her back as he sat up. He pushed one hand
through her hair, holding the back of her head as he sealed his mouth to hers in a hungry kiss. He
was still holding her waist with one arm, and after some light maneuvering of his own hips, Jamie’s
cock was easily sliding into Zahra’s velvet heat. They both let out simultaneous noises of pleasure
and relief from the penetration that were muffled and swallowed down through their kiss. God, it
really was like coming home. They both trembled, foreheads pressed together, panting heavily as
they breathed the same air.

They gazed into each others eyes as Zahra slowly sank down on top of him until Jamie was buried
clear to the hilt inside of her. Zahra sighed as her inner walls fluttered lightly around him and her
body shivered from the sensation. “Oh my god,” she exhaled breathlessly before she wrapped her
arms around his neck, brushed her cheek against his, then pressed her mouth against his shoulder.
She closed her teeth around his skin in a gentle love bite that effectively muffled the moans she let
out next when Jamie withdrew slightly, then thrust back deeply inside of her.

Zahra leaned back a little, keeping one arm wrapped behind his neck and shoulders, while she
reached the other back to brace her hand on his knee. Jamie’s hands firmly gripped each buttock in
his hands and helped her along as she began rolling her hips against him in a slow, but beautiful
rhythm. “Oh, my god!” She breathed out again, helplessly.

Jamie muttered something in Gaelic as he rocked up into her in rhythm with her body. He then
closed the distance between their lips to seal their mouths together once more in a heated, passionate
kiss. His hands rubbed her ass, spreading her cheeks gently, as he thrust up hard into her, making her
head fall back with a moan, that she immediately regretted for being too loud. She bit down on her
bottom lip as she leaned back, removing her arm from around his shoulders to brace it back against
his other knee, to give her more leverage to ride him harder, faster. Jamie groaned heavily at the sight
of her breasts bouncing in time with their thrusts, and watching his cock disappear inside of her over
and over again. He kept one hand firmly gripping onto her backside, while he brought the other one
around to fondle and massage her breast. His mouth descended on the other one, suckling her nipple
and worrying the bud gently between his teeth.
“Oh, fff-” Zahra cut herself off, biting down on her bottom lip once more, trying to stop herself from making too much noise.

Jamie continued lavishing attention on her breast with his mouth while his eyes watched her reactions. He felt her hand slip between them and he turned his gaze, still keeping her breast in his mouth, as he watched her slip her hand between their bodies where she started rubbing herself. Jamie’s lips popped off her nipple and he dropped his hand from her breast to push her own hand away which made her whimper in protest. “No, mo ghaol,” he said. “The only one what’s gonna make you finish this time is me.” His mouth sought out her other breast this time and gave it the same attention as the first, meanwhile his free hand, the one not helping her ride him, slipped between them to press his thumb into her folds. He found that hard little nub and he began rubbing it in firm circles.

“Oh, my god,” she breathed out helplessly as she braced her arms back on his knees again to give him a better angle at her breasts, and her clit. Her entire body was trembling at this point, wracked with tiny pulsations in preparation for her encroaching orgasm that she could already tell was gonna be powerful and she was morbidly afraid of being too loud and bringing the entirety of sickbay down on them.

Jamie could feel her body tightening, could tell with the sudden increase of her breathing, and the way her mouth was open in a silent ‘Oh’ that she was close. He worked her clit a little harder, faster, and let his teeth worry gently on her nipple as he thrust hard and deep up into her. Instinct suddenly took over, and the hand on her rear suddenly reached back and he gave her bottom a hard, firm slap, and suddenly Zahra broke. He thrust in deep, and held himself there while he watched her shove her fist in her mouth before her entire body seemed to bow taught, her thighs squeezed his waist, then began to tremble and convulse while he felt her inner walls began to milk and squeeze him in their strong grip that threatened to force him out.

The Highlander moved quickly, giving her little to no respite, before he was holding her boneless body against him, then turning them over so she was on her back beneath him, which ended up pulling the sheet that had been hooked around her foot, up over his back. Jamie sealed their mouths together, swallowing down her moans as he thrust hard and deep up into her. She’d not even finished coming down off her second peak, before he almost threw her into a third.

Jamie was relentless now as he took his own pleasure; taking her hard and fast several more times, prolonging her orgasm, before one final, deep thrust had him pressing his face against her neck and biting down on her shoulder to stifle his own groan of release. His cock emptied inside of her while his mouth and teeth bit down hard enough that he was definitely going to leave her with a mark; not that Zahra minded. She actually loved it. She sighed and held him to her, her legs hugged his waist, then began to tremble and convulse while each wave of his pleasure washed over and through him. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding his head against her and carding her fingers through his hair as he came down off his own peak.

Her ribs had been healed, thanks to the bone mender McCoy had put her under whole she was out. The same mender had been used on the cut they’d had to do into her skull, and the bandages covering were just cautionary to remind her that it was going to be a sensitive spot for a spell. In other words, the pain was all but gone, so, when Jamie tried to move off of her, she wouldn’t let him, instead holding him close with her arms and legs.

Unwilling to argue, and because he didn’t really want to leave her anyway, Jamie just rested his body weight down on top of her and pillowed his head on her breast. They both sighed and moaned as he laid out on top of her. “Your Dr. McCoy is gonna have us both drawn and quartered,” Jamie mumbled tiredly against her skin.
Zahra grinned, huffing softly in amusement as she responded, “I believe his threat was if we fuck in his hospital bed he would have me court-martialed. Well, we very clearly did not do that, so...” They both fell into a light fit of giggles after that; with the realization that they’d just rutted on the floor like the animals McCoy had accused them of being.

By the time their giggles subsided, Zahra was carding her fingers through Jamie’s hair while her other hand was rubbing his arm. “Can I ask ye another question?” Jamie said sleepily.

“Hmm?” Zahra responded just as tiredly. She might have been dozing off a little.

“Where’s your home?” he asked shyly. “I mean--where are we to live?”

Zahra inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled just as deep. “Well, I have my own private quarters here on board the Enterprise, but--” But with Jamie now, and possibly a baby on the way, alternative arrangements were going to need to be made. She didn’t want to do anything to risk her health or the health of their unborn child, and she could easily take the Advanced Combat and Survival training position that SFA had been offering her for years, dying for her to take.

“But what, mo ghaol?” Jamie asked, lifting his head and leaning up over her a little to look into her face as he stroked her cheek.

“But--if I’ve learned anything about serving on a Starfleet vessel in space, especially one like Enterprise, it’s that it’s no place for families or children.” She shook her head softly before continuing. “When it was just me by myself, Enterprise and my duty to Starfleet was all I had, but now--” She reached her own hand up to brush his curls behind his ear, then cupped his cheek in her palm. Jamie gripped her wrist in his hand and laid a kiss in the palm of it. Zahra smiled sweetly at the display of affection. “A starship is no place for my family, so we’ll have to find someplace on Earth... I’d like to see if your Lallybroch is still around and go there.”

Jamie’s brows raised towards his hairline and his eyes widened. “Really, mo ghaol?”

Leeloo nodded, smile widening into a grin. “I mean, you’ve gotta understand, it’s been 500 years, and we’ve had three world wars since your time, so it may not be exactly how you remember it, but I still wanna see where you grew up.”

Three world wars? Jamie asked, in disbelief. He had so much to learn, but his brain was focusing on the bit where Zahra said they would visit Lallybroch. Jamie leaned in to give her a loving, tender kiss or two. “When can we go?” he asked, excitedly.

“First thing when I get out of here. Well, maybe second thing, cause I should maybe stop by to see my dad first, if that’s ok with you?” She asked.

Jamie gave her another kiss and nodded his head. “Of course, mo ghaol. He’s prob’ly been worried sick about ye, and well, it’s prob’ly best I meet the rest of yer family anyway, right?”

Zahra nodded, smiling, before she said, “That’s what I was thinking. They’re gonna wanna meet you... But then, obviously, after that we’ll go to Scotland and you can show me Lallybroch.”

He lifted her hands to his face and pressed a kiss on her knuckles. “My life is yours to decide what we shall do, mo ghaol, where we go next.” His hand lifted to hold her face and he gazed longingly into her eyes. “My heart has been yours since first I saw ye, and you’ve held my soul and body between your two hands here, and kept them safe. We shall go as ye say.” He kissed her again, though he took his time to leisurely taste and explore her mouth this go. He lingered above her for a moment, sharing lazy, post-orgasmic kisses. Eventually, however, they both needed air and a proper
chance to cool down, so with a soft groan and a sigh from each of them, Jamie pulled his still-half-hard shaft from inside of her then rolled off of her to the side. Zahra’s skin was still flushed a beautiful rosy hue, and they were both glistening with sweat.

Zahra arched her back, moaning and grunting softly as she stretched out her limbs languorously like a cat. She then rolled to her side toward him and rested her arm on top of his chest, then laid her chin on top of it. “I’m gonna use the bathroom, real quick,” she said before leaning up and placing a kiss on his lips. His hand at the back of her head prevented her from pulling away too quickly, though, so Jamie could take the opportunity to deepen the kiss a little, making her feel breathless and wanting all over again.

“Hurry back,” he said in a husky whisper that made her nethers feel all kinds of tingly.

She gave him a last, brief peck on the lips before she pushed on his chest to help herself sit up. She stood the rest of the way, and Jamie rested his arm beneath his head as he studiously watched her as she walked away; a sight Jamie decided he could watch every moment for the rest of his life and never get tired of. God, how did he get so lucky to have such a beautiful, and supple creature as Leeloo?

In the bathroom, Zahra did not slide the door all the way closed, but the light had come on automatically making her squint from the sudden brightness. “Lights 70 percent,” she called and the bathroom fluorescents dimmed to a far more tolerable level.

She used the toilet first, then washed her hands, and looked at herself in the mirror. The bandage was still intact, though she had sweat so much during their passionate lovemaking that the tape was starting to peel off. She debated just taking it off herself, but she doubted that would go over well with McCoy. Ignoring it for now, she took a moment to admire the rest of herself in the mirror.

“Lights full,” she said and the bathroom lights brightened. She blanched slightly at the disheveled state of her hair, but gave herself a smirk before trying to comb her fingers through it into some semblance of order. She felt a small sprig of white heather still hanging out near the base of her skull and she pulled it free with a fond, wistful smile. She set the wilted flower gently on the bathroom countertop; she was gonna try to keep it as a memento if it lasted. She lifted her head to look back in the mirror to inspect herself again where she saw that her neck and shoulders were adorned with several love bites and hickeys from Jamie. She smirked at her reflection once more, then she stood back to get a full view. In the light, she could clearly see she still sported some slight bruising on her ribs, but most importantly she bore some more light bruising from his hands around her hips. She couldn’t stop the grin from blossoming on her face.

“Did I hurt you badly?” she heard his concerned tone from the doorway.

She turned to look at him standing in the bathroom door, then gave him a happy smile. “Not in the least. I like being marked by you… Besides…” She flashed him a cheeky grin as she took several steps towards him and reached her hand out to graze her fingers against his shoulder. “I think I gave as good as I got.”

Curious, Jamie entered the restroom fully then looked at himself in the mirror, where, sure enough, he had a huge, dark blue and purple bruise on his shoulder the size of Zahra’s mouth. “Christ, lass. Looks like I was kicked by a ruddy horse,” he remarked almost pridefully as he ran his thumb over the bruising on his shoulder where she’d bitten him.

She stepped up next to and slightly behind him. “And I look like a leopard,” she said with another cheeky grin. “I’d say we’re about even.” She leaned in to turn on the faucet, adjusted the handle to warm, then grabbed a washcloth from the shelf next to the mirror while she waited for it to heat up a
little. She tested the temperature before running the small towel beneath the water.

Once the towel was thoroughly saturated, she gave it a light wringing out. Jamie watched her curiously, catching on to what she was planning on doing. A sponge bath of sorts was it? “May I?” Jamie asked as he held out his hand for the wet towel.

Zahra looked at his hand for a moment before she shrugged and placed the warm, wet towel in his palm. “If you want, I won’t complain, but only if I get to return the favor?”

Jamie took the towel with a nod and a smirk. “I look forward to it,” he drawled playfully. “Now, turn around,” he said and Zahra did as instructed. Jamie sighed softly at the sight of the scars on her back. He had only ever gotten a full up close look that one time after she'd taken that lashing for Laoghrie. Sure, he knew they were there, just, sometimes, he almost forgot.

With a soft exhale, Jamie leaned forward to place a kiss at the top of her spine, which made Zahra shiver softly. He then ran the wet towel from the small of her back, then down over her hip and her thigh before bringing it around to rub over her stomach. He cleaned her abdomen before moving lower, gliding the cloth over her mound before rubbing it between her legs. Zahra sighed and rested her head back against his shoulder as Jamie took his time to thoroughly clean between her legs and her thighs.. He turned them slowly so he could watch her in the mirror, because maybe he was enjoying the noises she was making and her reaction to what he was doing and he wanted to see her face as he did it.

He reached forward, pinning her against the counter top as he turned on the faucet to refresh the cloth. He gave it a light wringing out, then continued cleaning her off. He ran the cloth over her stomach, then up her sternum, between her breasts, then gently massaged and rubbed each one in turn. He heard her moan when the moisture from the cloth reacted to the cool air of the bathroom and made her nipples harden from the sensation. Jamie smirked at her reflection as he moved the cloth down her stomach once more, over her hip, then down over her bottom. He rubbed the wet cloth between her thighs, making her gasp and moan once more from the intimate touch. She opened her eyes and met his gaze in the mirror as she leaned forward to brace her hands on the edge of the counter. Jamie pressed up against her back, and pressed a kiss to her shoulder, then her neck. He brought the cloth away and dropped it in the sink before lifting his hand to cup her breast. His teeth grazed her ear and a moment later she felt his hand slip between the cleft of her ass and he sought out the opening to her body quickly, then pushed two fingers into her.

Zahra gasped and lifted her own hand to grip against his that was against her breast. “Open your eyes, Leeloo,” he ordered as he pumped his fingers out then in again with one quick, hard motion. Zahra’s eyes popped open, locking onto his in the mirror. His head was pressed next to hers over her shoulder, and his teeth worried on her ear. “Keep your eyes open, mo ghaol. I want to watch you while I fuck you,” he whispered that word against her ear, and, for some reason, it just sounded so positively dirty and sinful coming from his lips; her inner walls fluttered around his fingers as lust spiked hard in her core. Jamie hummed in approval and gave her a few more hard pumps of his fingers before they left her body. He braced one arm around her waist, holding her stomach as he helped her lift one leg against the counter, opening the angle to him a bit better. Zahra moaned as his fingers returned to her sex and he gave her another few quick thrusts of his fingers, then rubbed her juices against himself before pressing the tip of his cock to her slickened entrance. “Look at me,” he ordered again and Zahra’s head popped up to meet his eyes in the mirror once more. He wrapped one arm around the front of her neck and shoulders, while the other he wrapped around her stomach. Zahra’s mouth opened in a silent ‘O’ as she felt his cock enter her just a fraction, and then suddenly with a powerful, fast thrust, he was buried inside her to the base, which made her cry out loudly in pleasure and surprise.
“Oh, fuck!” She cried, and she had been unable to help it when her head fell back against his shoulder and her eyes closed.

“Look at me!” Jamie ordered again as his hand circled the front of her throat, to grip her jaw and tilt her head to meet his gaze in the mirror again. Zahra’s eyes locked with his once more, and Jamie slowly withdrew his hips, until he was almost completely out, only to push forward, hard and fast once more. Zahra cried out again and she lifted one hand to grip the wrist of his hand around her throat, while the other braced against the wall next to the mirror to try to anchor herself against the force of his thrusts. He did it again, pulling out of her slowly, only to push back in hard and fast, making her entire body tremble from the force of his thrusts. She was definitely gonna have bruises but she didn’t care.

As much as her instinct was to close her eyes and just react and feel what he was doing to her, he wanted her to watch him, so she would do as he commanded. Her eyes remained locked with his in the mirror, watching him intently as his pace quickened and he started taking her harder, faster. He kept his hand around her throat, and his arm around her waist, anchoring her to his will as he took her with wild abandon. Zahra couldn’t be quiet, she tried, but it was a futile attempt. “Oh, fuck, yes, Jamie! Feels so good, babe!” She panted as she encouraged his hand to grip around her throat, and at her encouragement he squeezed and Zahra gasped in pleasure. “Fuck, yes, I’m gonna come!”

Jamie responded to that by squeezing his hand a little harder around her throat and muttering his own curse in Gaelic. His other hand suddenly dipped between her legs and started rubbing her clit as powerfully as he was taking her, and Zahra gasped, inhaling sharply and gripping onto his arm as if he were a life preserver when the leg she was standing on started trembling and shaking in tandem with her inner walls when Jamie threw her almost violently into a powerful orgasm that took threatened to make her pass out, though that could have been the slight lack of oxygen talking.

When she started to go boneless in his arms, Jamie released the grip on her throat and wrapped his arms around her only to turn and take them both to the floor on their knees. He still held her to him with his front pressed to her back and his mouth kissed and nipped at her shoulder and neck as he felt her come down from her orgasm. “Are you all right?” he asked, concerned.

Zahra still felt weightless and boneless, like she were high on the best drugs. She gave him a dopey grin as her arm came up to wrap around his head and she turned her mouth to kiss him hungrily. “La petite mort,” she muttered against his lips.

Jamie grinned against her mouth, and held her face as he kissed her back just as hungrily. He remembered what that meant and Zahra had just admitted he’d sent her there. He couldn’t help it when his male ego swelled with pride and delight. He gripped her hips as he gave her another hard thrust, which made her cry out again as her mouth tore away from his. “Shall we try for another?” he asked, mouth twisted up in a crooked, arrogant smirk as he gave her yet another hard thrust.

“Oh my god!” Zahra cried out and bit down on her bottom lip. She decided he was trying to kill her with orgasms, but what a fucking way to go, right?

“Ye can call me Jamie,” he teased, and Zahra actually managed to giggle at his playful arrogance, but her giggles soon turned into another moan as he started up a slow, but steady rhythm again with his hips. “Leeloo,” he whispered close to her ear.

“Oh huh?” she responded weakly as she tried moving with him.

“I still--want to fuck you,” he said, and it was almost as if he were asking her permission.

“Yeah!” She whispered back, turning her head to claim his mouth in a kiss as she pressed back hard
against him. “That’s good… because I want you to fuck me. Please?” She pressed back hard against him again, fucking herself back onto his cock. “Please, fuck me, Jamie.”

A groan that was closer to an animalistic growl came from his chest and he surged forward, bending her over to rest on her hands, but then he gripped the back of her neck and pushed her down to rest on her chest as he leaned back and started rutting her hard. He brought his other hand back to slap her ass, which made her gasp and moan and he felt her inner walls flutter around his cock. “Liked that?” he asked breathlessly.

“Yes, Jamie,” she moaned and nodded her head.

He did it again, which earned him another fluttering of her walls around his cock, and another heady moan from the woman beneath him. He was struck with a thought then. How was he ever supposed to punish her when she seemed to enjoy it so much? It would only ever be more like foreplay than punishment? Jamie was learning a lot about himself right now. He had been afraid he was hurting her at first, but it was very clear that Zahra was enjoying this, all of this, and even begging for more. He didn’t delight in hurting anybody, especially women, and especially his wife, but this was… something completely different and unexpected. He was hurting her, but at the same time he wasn’t hurting her at all. He was giving her pleasure, and taking his own. He was rutting her violently, but she was asking him to, begging him to take her harder, faster. If he was a pervert, or strange, then it seemed he was perfectly matched with a woman who was just as perverted and strange as him, as their sensual, carnal desires matched and complemented each other beautifully. For some reason Jamie doubted any other woman would have tolerated such desires.

Jamie was gripping her hips to a point where she was going to have bruises in the shape of his fingers, and the backs of her thighs were going to sport their own bruising as well. If anyone saw they were going to think he’d beaten her. She didn’t stop asking for more though. As hard as he was taking her, she wanted it. She wanted all of him and he was more than eager and able to give. He was so close to that cusp he could taste it, but he wanted to throw her over one last time before he gave in himself; he wanted to feel her milking him as he emptied inside her once more. He snaked one hand around her hips and her waist one more time, and he braced his weight on his other arm as he leaned over her to press a kiss to her shoulder. “Come for me, mo ghaol, I want to feel you when I come inside you,” he whispered hoarsely as his fingers rubbed her clit firmly, making Zahra moan and squirm beneath him.

“Oh my god! Fuck, harder… Harder!”

Jamie let out another grovel against her ear as he took her just as hard as she asked for, rubbing her clit firmly, quickly, making her body grow increasingly tensile, and taut from her encroaching orgasm. With a final hard thrust and quick rub of her clit, Zahra was coming again and Jamie cursed in Gaelic as her walls squeezed so tight they threatened to squeeze him out, but he thrust hard into that tightening, grip until he buried himself to the hilt before he too was coming with a powerful force; feeling her walls milk every last drop from him as he emptied inside of her.

He rested his forehead against the top of her spine, and his hand gripped her hip as he trembled and groaned through every wave of pleasure that rolled over him. He whispered sweet praises in his native Gaelic and pressed a loving, tender kiss to her shoulder, and her neck, then sucked her earlobe into his mouth and worried on it with his teeth. Zahra moaned softly, tilting her head to give him better access as she pushed her bottom back against him, making him groan again. “Ai, lass, dinnae move,” he pleaded softly as his member was now over-sensitized.

Zahra smirked, and deliberately squeezed her vaginal muscles around him, which made him groan again and he bit down on her shoulder in reprimand. “Are ye tryin’ to kill me?” he asked playfully,
to which Zahra just giggled.

Jamie leaned back on his knees and gently gripped each round cheek before he slowly pulled his softening, over-sensitized member from her body. His eyes remained transfixed as he then watched his own fluids slowly weep from her body as well. He exhaled hoarsely, whimpering softly at the sight before he started pushing his own fluids back into her body by way of cupping the liquid into his hands and thrusting his fingers back into her, again and again; making his wife moan and whimper on her own from the over-stimulation. “Jamie,” she begged and he cupped his hand against her mound, rubbing gently, almost lovingly, before he was lifting his leg to dismount her legs and lay down next to her on the floor.

Zahra had her arms curled up under her chest, her cheek was resting flat against the bathmat, and her eyes were closed. She was covered in sweat, they both were, and her hair was a soaked mess on her head. “I don’t think--a simple sponge bath--is gonna cut it this time.” She was so sleepy though, like she could literally fall asleep right there and then.

Jamie grinned and rubbed his clean hand against her back, gently scratching his nails across her skin, uncaring of the scar tissue he could feel under his touch. “Laurie showed me how to use the--sonic shower.” He hoped he got that right. “Think ye can stand for a few minutes more?” he asked softly. “I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself this time.”

Zahra smiled tiredly, but giggled at his words. “Mmm, but I like it when you don’t keep your hands to yourself,” she said as she slowly opened her eyes to look at him.

Jamie’s smile was sly and a little crooked as he brushed his hand against her cheek. “Aye, but I think we both need a washing and some sleep after all that.”

It was officially official. Jamie was a natural Dom. Not only did he have an instinctive Dom voice (among other dominant tendencies of his), but he was planning on treating her to some quality aftercare as well. Definitely a good Dom thing to do. Her smile was tired, but wide and happy. She attempted to roll over but once she got on her back that was as far as she could push herself to go. Her limbs all felt heavy and achey not that she was coming down off the adrenaline of good sex and multiple orgasms. “Can I just fall asleep here?” She asked with a giggle that almost made her sound drunk.

“No, you may not,” Jamie scolded her as he sat up, then pulled her arm over his shoulder to help her sit up with him. After her stood on his feet he helped lift her up onto hers, which were wobbly and trembly like jello, forcing her to hold onto him to help keep her balance. “God damn, you gave me jelly legs,” she said with another giggle as she climbed into the shower with him. “I don’t think I’ve ever had jelly legs before.”

“Shower on,” Jamie said as he propped Zahra against the wall just as the lights dimmed and the shower turned on. Once more Jamie felt that sensation like earlier of all those tiny sonic vibrations of water that flowed over them both. He reached for a cloth and helped the shower along as he rubbed Zahra clean. “Mmm,” she hummed in contentment, feeling completely blitzed out and more relaxed than she could ever remember being. She mustered up some strength in her arms to dispense some of the soap from the dispenser on the wall and she rubbed the foam between her hands before running it through her hair. The shower washed and absorbed away the soap almost just as quickly as she applied it, but that was normal. She knew she was getting clean. Jamie followed her example and used some of the soap to wash his own hair, and his body. He made sure she was thoroughly cleaned between her legs, and everywhere else. Just like he’d promised though, he didn’t try to instigate anything, even when Zahra tried kissing on him. When he felt her hand drifting towards his cock, he deftly lifted it away and pressed a kiss to her palm.
“Behave, mo ghaol,” he reprimanded her playfully, making her giggle yet again. When he was satisfied that they were both clean, Jamie called out to turn the shower off, then slid open the door where he reached out to the rack next to it to grab a towel that he used to carefully dry her off.

“Thank you for taking care of me,” she said softly as she leaned in for a kiss which Jamie returned obligingly but did not try to turn it into anything more than an affectionate embrace.

“Aye, no need to thank me for that, Leeloo. I’ll always take care of you,” he responded as he wrapped the towel around her, then reached for one of his own as he climbed out. He dried himself off as he watched Zahra exit the shower stall and then the bathroom. He was running the towel through his hair as he followed her out, stopping short of running into her back, which was when he noticed they weren’t alone and Jamie quickly lowered his towel to cover his waist.

“It’s good to see somebody’s feeling better,” Jim’s smug cadence graced their ears and he gave both of them a casual once over, before his lips lifted in a sly smirk.

Zahra rolled her eyes playfully. “How long have you been sitting there?” she asked.

“Not long,” he assured her. “I pinged you a couple times but when you didn’t respond I assumed Bones was holding your PADD for ransom so I came by anyway.” Jim shrugged and stood up out of his chair. “You were in the shower when I got here, and once I saw the clothes on the floor, I understood why one was necessary.”

Zahra blushed and worried on her bottom lip a bit nervously. “Hey,” Jim said to get her attention, then placed his hand on her bare shoulder. “I won’t tell Bones if you won’t,” he promised, then gave her a wink, which made her smile. He looked up at Jamie and clapped him on his arm, which made a loud slapping sound as his hand had clapped bare skin as well. Honestly, Jim was happy for her. For them. He had seen the way she’d looked when she came out of the bathroom; utterly and completely blitzed out of her mind and looking happier than he could ever remember Zahra being.

“Thanks, Jim,” she started to say. “You know, under normal circumstances, I never would’ve--I mean you know me--”

“Relax, ok?” he rubbed her shoulder softly before moving to the cabinet to grab a fresh pair of scrubs, small for her, large for Jamie. “The way I see it, you just came out of a pretty serious life-or-death situation.” He turned to walk back over to them, handing them each a pair of patient scrubs. “Frankly, I’d’ve been shocked if you hadn’t tried to tear each other’s clothes off.”

Jamie’s eyes widened a bit at Jim’s candor, but he found it amusing nonetheless, and he was grateful for the new change of clothes. Zahra snorted with laughter as she took the scrubs he offered her with an appreciative nod. “I tried to ask Len to send me home but he insisted on keeping me prisoner for the night.”

Jamie was stepping into the bottoms of the scrubs Jim had given him when he noticed Jim’s smile falter a bit, then the man’s gaze focused on the side of Zahra’s head where the bandage was now missing. The Captain lifted his hand to touch the side of Zahra’s skull where her hair had been shaved, and the skin was smooth thanks to the skin-graftor, so she wouldn’t have a scar, but the bald spot was definitely noticeable.

“I’m ok,” she said, noting the concern etched into Jim’s brow. “Really, Jim. I’m better than ok. You don’t need to worry.”

Jim dropped his hand and met Jamie’s gaze for a moment, where his expression turned apologetic. Jim was clearing his throat a moment later. “I know. I think you’re tougher than all of us combined.”
He reached inside the pocket of his favorite Starfleet Command hoodie and pulled out a tiny, stuffed, plush hedgehog that was incredibly soft, with big jeweled eyes. “I got you a get-well gift.”

“Awww!” Zahra said with a bright grin as she took the little stuffy. “He looks just like Mr. Prickles.” Her reaction made Jim grin.

“Who’s Mr. Prickles?” Jamie asked as he came up behind her to look curiously.

“My pet hedgie!” she gushed and rubbed the velvety soft plush against her cheek.

“Hedgie?” Jamie asked with a slightly furrowed brow.

“Hedgehog,” Jim clarified with a smile.

“Oh... You have a pet hedgehog?” Jamie asked her.

Zahra nodded, smiling up at him merrily. “He’s probably still with my sister in Australia right now. I hope he’s ok.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Jim said. “Probably misses you, though.”

“Thank you,” she said as she leaned in to give Jim a hug.

“You’re welcome,” Jim said as he wrapped his arms around her and held her for just a moment, trying not to touch anywhere that wasn’t covered by her towel. The last thing he wanted was for Jamie to have an excuse to murder him. “Well, I wasn’t planning on staying,” he said as he released her and took a few steps back. “Just wanted to give you that, and make sure you’re all right.”

“Thanks Jim,” Zahra said with a fond smile.

The redhead smiled as he wrapped his arm around Zahra’s shoulders and held her against him. “Aye. Thank ye, Captain.”

“Jamie… Seeing as we’re practically like family now, and this is an informal setting, please call me Jim.” The Captain’s smile was gold, boyish, charming.

The redhead smiled back and extended his hand which Jim took then they gave each other a firm shake. “Thank you, Jim,” the Highlander repeated.

“Make sure she gets some rest,” Jim ordered the younger man.

“I will, of course,” Jamie responded and they let go at the same time.

“I’ll see you both around,” Jim said before he turned to leave.

Zahra nodded and waved a final goodbye, before she turned to set her new scrubs and her plushie on the edge of the bed. She only seemed to just notice that Jamie had a fresh pair of bottoms on already. When had that happened? “When did you put on pants?” She asked with a pinched brow.

Jamie grinned. “Sometime when ye were gushin’ over yer wee little stuffy,” Jamie said as he unfolded the shirt and handed it to her.

Zahra smirked and dropped her towel as she reached for the garment then pulled it on over her head. “I was not gushing,” she denied as she righted the baggy garment in place, then reached for the bottoms.
Jamie picked up the stuffed toy. “Awwww. He looks just like Mr. Pickles,” Jamie mimicked her teasingly, holding the stuffed toy to his cheek and petting it lovingly.

Zahra snorted and retaliated for his tease by jabbing him on the arm. “It’s Prickles, and he’s very cute.”

Jamie’s grin widened as he handed the stuffy back to her. “I’ve never seen a cute hedgehog before. I’ve had a tasty one, though.”

Zahra’s eyes widened and she stared at him blinking. “You--ate one?”

Jamie nodded and shrugged at the same time. “One does desperate things when they’re starving,” he admitted a bit sheepishly.

God, Zahra was all too familiar with that wasn’t she? “I used to set traps for rats,” she admitted empathetically. She also knew what feral, stray cat tasted like. Look, she had a hard life; don’t judge her, ok? They didn’t say any more on the subject after that, so Zahra just pulled her bottoms on and tied the drawstring as tight as it would go so they didn’t fall off her ass. Once she was dressed, she moved in close to Jamie, wrapping her arms around his waist while his own wrapped around her back and they shared a soft, affectionate kiss.

Jamie indulged in his wife’s lips for several moments before he eventually broke away, though he nuzzled their noses together after which showed his reluctance to end the kiss. “Come on,” he whispered as he pulled away and directed her towards the bed with a slap to her rump.

“Hey!” Zahra said with a grin that Jamie was matching with one of his own. Before she climbed back into the bed she reconnected her IV to the port on her wrist and released the pinch so the drip would start again. She climbed into the biobed, and rolled to her side, giving Jamie plenty of room to join her.

Before he crawled into the bed with her, he went to that same closet he had seen Jim grab some scrubs from and found them a new top blanket. He unfolded the linen and draped it over Zahra, who helped situate it before pulling it back for him. When that was done, Jamie finally climbed into the bed where he wrapped his arms around her, spooning her from behind. He secured the blanket around them both and pressed a kiss to her neck. “I love you,” Jamie whispered against her ear.

“Hmm,” Zahra sighed as she snuggled back against him. “Tha ghaol agam ort,” she replied in sleepy Gaelic. Jamie watched her until he was sure she had drifted off to sleep, and only then he rested his head against the pillow, and let sleep claim him as well. Together, wrapped up in each others arms, after an intense round or two of lovemaking, with hope and love in their hearts, and a bright outlook on the horizon, they both slept more peacefully than either could ever remember doing before.

End Notes

Now with beta help from RAH07890! Thanks lovely! You rock! WOOHOO!

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