

# THE UNICORN



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## Chapter 1

Duncan stepped into the cool fall air, guitar case in hand and sat on a bench beneath an aspen just beginning to show its fall colors. The light breeze was a refreshing change from the too-warm hall where he'd fought. He hadn't won the tourney, of course - or even made it out of his pool - but then he hadn't planned on it. He'd managed to win more than he'd lost which - although it had taken some work - still meant he was an above-average unbelted fighter. All in all, he'd done pretty well for someone who hadn't fought in a tournament in he didn't want to think about how long.

But now it was time to focus on what he might have a chance of winning - the competition for the new Bard of Lindow. It wasn't until feast, so he had plenty of time to get ready. After a quick tuning and a couple of quick Beatles riffs just to make sure his fingers still worked, he began.

Most non-musicians assumed that performing was easy; you got up there, did your thing, and sat down again. And, he had to admit, that was exactly what a lot of performers did. But those performers didn't tend to win above the baronial level. Either that, or they had so much natural talent that it was nearly impossible for them to sing or play a wrong note. Even as skilled as he was, Duncan wasn't one of those people and so he took the time to warm up.

The first step was reminding his hands that he was a self-proclaimed bard and not the warrior he'd been earlier in the day. Luckily, his choice for the evening was a simple Irish folk tune that normally served that purpose. Of course, with Irish music, simple could be a relative thing, especially when done right. He played through the piece once at Van Morrison's tempo before beginning again, speeding up slightly. He would play through the piece several times, continually increasing the tempo until he lost control of his fingers and began the process again with a new song.

Or at least he would have, if someone hadn't begun to sing along. Someone who was obviously one of those natural talents that put everyone else to shame. Her voice was clear and resonant, with the barest touch of the Emerald Isle to it and he smiled. He joined in on the chorus, offering a baritone harmony to her melody.

*"From Bantry Bay down to Derry Quay, from Galway to Dublin town,  
"No maid I've seen like the fair cailin that I met in the County Down..."*

And then he sped up, just a touch and she met his challenge without a hitch. He again joined in on the chorus and again sped up on the next verse. And again, she rose to the challenge. And again. By the time they reached the third and final chorus, they were at full High Kings and still going strong. She even met his ending flourish and, with one last strum of the guitar, Duncan turned to meet his unexpected alto.

Who wore a crown. Not a circlet. Not a coronet, a crown. The queen. The queen who'd stepped up a mere two hours ago. The queen who was smiling down at him with an obvious gleam in her eye. She was tall and slender, with a red braid draped over her shoulder and brilliant blue eyes and dressed in a gown of the kingdom's red and gold.

"Might I say you have a wonderful voice, Your Majesty?" He said, rising to offer her a deep, flourishing bow.

"Thank you," She smiled. "Unfortunately, it seems that we royals are not supposed to do something so vulgar as entertain the masses, so I haven't gotten to sing nearly as much as I'd like the past five months."

"That is a true shame, Your Majesty."

She nodded, accepting the compliment. "And you, good bard, are obviously a skilled musician."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, but that was a mere warmup."

"If that was a warmup, I can't wait to hear you perform."

"Well, if Your Highness can spare me a few more minutes, perhaps I could serenade you properly."

The queen gave him a genuine smile at the offer before sighing. "Unfortunately, duty calls and I must decline your offer. You can perform for me at dinner, how does that sound?"

"I look forward to it, Your Majesty," Duncan smiled.

"Joselyn, please."

"And I am Duncan Harper, humble minstrel at your service," he said, again offering her his flourishing bow.

The last got a laugh from her. "A humble minstrel? That's got to be a first."

"We all have to strive for something," He grinned.

#

To say his private audition for Queen Joselyn upset his plans for the evening's competition was an understatement. Especially since they'd - *they'd* - performed the song he'd been planning on using. *And* he'd promised to top his earlier performance to boot.

So he punted. The piece he chose was one of his more serious warm-ups; a lively jig meant to exercise his fingers but not his voice. It was originally written for the fiddle and there were no lyrics, but that didn't make it any less a challenging piece. He just hoped it would meet her expectations.

But as he finished and offered a bow to the audience and Their Majesties, the queen raised one hand, refusing to dismiss him just yet.

"Milord Duncan," She began, and he could swear there was a mischievous gleam in her eye. "I was under the impression that serenading someone involved singing as well as playing."

*So much for punting*, he thought, frantically trying to come up with another appropriate song. *Time for a Hail Mary*.

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” he said when inspiration struck. The song wasn’t period, but it fit the situation so perfectly that he couldn’t resist. He played slower this time, obviously accompanying himself.

“*If I were a singer, I’d sing you a song...*” he began.

Whereas his first piece drew immediate applause, his second brought silence before finally being broken by a hushed, “wow” from a gray-haired performer who’d taken his own turn at wowing the crowd. When the applause did begin, it was led by Her Majesty who smiled and nodded approvingly at him.

“How am I supposed to top that?” The next performer laughed as she took center stage, and the answer soon became obvious: sing an original song. And it sure didn’t hurt that even if she didn’t have The Queen’s natural gift, she *was* classically trained.

For the second time that day, Duncan lost. But unlike in earlier tourney, he he’d made the finals.

#

“That was incredible,” The new Kingdom Bard said, approaching him after the feast. “I thought you had me.”

Duncan smiled at the compliment. “Anybody can perform someone else’s song; it takes real talent to write your own stuff.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said, waving away the compliment. “I’m Maire, by the way.”

“Duncan.”

“So, what was that bit with the queen, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, she caught me practicing earlier and I kind of shot my mouth off.”

“And she called you on it?” Maire guessed.

“Yep,” He answered. “I hoped the jig would do it, but...”

“Apparently not,” She grinned. “So how much of your set was actually planned?”

“Planned? Like beforehand? None of it. She caught me practicing the song I *was* going to perform, so I had to punt.”

“Twice. That’s no small feat in itself.” Maire added with a grin and Duncan shrugged.

“You going to the after-revel?” Maire asked and Duncan shrugged again.

“I’ve still got to drive home tonight.”

“You can just stop by for a little bit,” Maire suggested.

“It’s at Their Majesties’,” She added a moment later, obviously trying to tempt him.

“Not this time, but thanks.”

## Chapter 2

*So much for my first event*, Duncan thought as he peered through the light rain speckling his windshield. All things considered, it hadn't gone too bad. He'd made a friend - or possibly two, if he counted the queen, which he wasn't too sure about. Could a brand-new member who didn't even belong to a group yet call himself a friend of the queen? Okay, so he wasn't quite brand-new, just new to this kingdom, but still...

But still, if it had been plain-old Nathan Barr instead of Duncan Harper, up-and-coming bard who'd encountered her, he'd have been well-and-truly tongue-tied. She was tall and thin, with red hair and bright green eyes that made her look like...

Not an elf, but something tugged at the back of his mind, or rather someone. He could almost see her, almost remember. She was... from a movie - a cartoon he vaguely remembered his parents making him watch as a child. He could almost remember... He *did* remember sitting on the couch, trying to act bored as a magician frantically tried to cast a spell on...

On a unicorn.

The last unicorn.

*The Last Unicorn*. That was it, one of the numerous cartoon fantasies that filled the early 80's. The revelation made him nearly miss his exit and he was glad there was no one behind him as he slammed on the brakes.

#

*"I dislike the feel of these woods. Creatures that live in the unicorn's forest learn a little magic of their own in time..."* the hunter on the TV told his companion as Duncan sat down to discover just how close his memory was to the truth.

#

Duncan watched the fighting with detached interest. He wasn't taking part in it - couldn't, in fact. Not only didn't he have anything even remotely resembling a consort, but he hadn't moved in-kingdom until after the deadline for the letters of intent. It did give him a good chance to size up the big guns, though, which was a necessity for figuring out just how good he'd have to be to get by. He'd gotten a start on that at Coronation but he'd always found it easier to really get a feel for a fighter by watching instead of fighting them.

It felt weird watching from outside the list ropes, though. Almost as weird as fighting for Queen's Champion.

"Did you hear?" Gregor asked, coming up next to him. He was tall and lean and had been the one to authorize him when he'd first showed up. "His Majesty wants to have a go at all of us unbelted fighters after the tourney to get a feel for where we're at. It's tradition."

*Oh that's going to be fun*, the other man thought. "Is that why you wanted me to throw in my armor?"

"Yep," he answered. Duncan wouldn't call the man a friend yet, but they'd moved somewhere beyond acquaintance over the past few months. "Armor inspection starts a half hour after the tourney."

"Suppose I'll have to suit up, then."

"Aren't you the one who's always saying bards have to know swords as well as songs?"

"At least well enough to die without embarrassing themselves."

That got a chuckle from Gregor. "I think you're sorta past that point, at least when you're on."

"When I'm on?"

"Oh yeah. When you're on, you're *on*. If you could do that consistently, you'd be a knight in no time."

Duncan chuckled. "I don't know about that."

#

Joselyn wasn't sure why she was surprised to see the bard - when did she start thinking of him as an actual bard? She'd only heard him perform twice - surprised to see the bard suiting up with the rest of the unbelted fighters. She shouldn't have been, she supposed, it seemed like everyone deserving of a codpiece tried heavy.

What was even weirder was that she couldn't decide if he was a new fighter or not. She'd assumed he was a newcomer at Coronation - she would have remembered that skilled of a musician - but looking at his armor... It was obviously used, maybe even old, the leather coat of plates sweat-stained and the helm darkened by years of use, but just as obviously well cared for. She supposed he could have bought it used, but it all matched and looked to be fitted to him, which wasn't something most fighters worried about until some time after they'd taken a squire's belt. He didn't wear one, though, or a knight's. Instead, his belt was a cinch strap cut down until it barely fit around him.

Joselyn watched as he did a few slow warm-up passes with Lord Gregor and while she wouldn't call him good, he fought clean. It reminded her of their impromptu duet by the way they slowly ramped up their speed until they were truly fighting and that's when she'd noticed it. Between her aborted attempt at gymnastics and her much more successful time on the volleyball team in high school, she'd learned quite a bit about body mechanics and the bard's were good, bordering on excellent.

#

Finished with his warm-ups, Duncan removed his helmet and waited for his turn to fight the king, not really looking forward to the experience. He was kind of enjoying being a nobody, at least as far as fighting was concerned. Okay, yes, he was pushing towards notoriety as a musician, but that didn't bother him. In his experience, even the best bards were like tapestries; only noticed in their absence. Skilled fighters, on the other hand...

Better to be a tapestry on the wall than the centerpiece of the table.

Finally, it was his turn and he put his helmet back on, picked up his shield and stepped into the list field. He'd managed somehow to delay the inevitable until the very end, but it was just that, inevitable. And, he realized, maybe hadn't been one of his better ideas. "Permission to strike, Your Majesty?" he asked, invoking the traditional beginning of any battle against royalty.

"Permission granted," The king said. "Lord Duncan, right?"

"Just Duncan."

"We'll have to see about that," The other man said and threw his first shot, hitting him in the helm.

"Good," Duncan announced and continued to move.

"It felt a little light to me."

"Take light, throw light," He answered, landing his own blow on the king. "At least in practice. That way, when the adrenaline's running, your calibration's spot-on."

"Nice," The king replied and grinned. "You're from Bastion, huh?"

"Your Majesty?"

"That's one of Magnus the Great's mantras," The other man said, catching him in the ribs. "You must have got it from Sir Pal."

*Crap! Crap! Crap!*

And from there, things went rapidly downhill.

#

Duncan obviously skipped a beat early on in the fighting and it had rattled him, Joselyn thought. His fighting became erratic - awkwardness interspersed with brief moments of brilliance - which really wasn't all that unusual with newer fighters, but something still nagged at her. Something that said he wasn't as new as she'd thought at first. No. Not as new as he pretended to be.

Their fight over, Marcus and Duncan removed their helmets and walked over to her.

"You remember milord Duncan," The king said, putting a companionable arm around his shoulders. "He's one of Sir Pal's students."

"A pleasure to finally meet you," she said. That was one of the things she was still getting used to; that she wasn't supposed to mingle with the "commoners" without a proper introduction, unlike the king. "Might I say you have a wonderful voice. Perhaps you could perform for us again at feast?"

"Thank you, your Majesty, I would be honored to," he said with a flourishing bow made only slightly awkward by the armor he still wore.

"Would you be insulted if I admitted I don't know your Sir Pal?" she asked.

"He's from Bastion," Marcus told her. "Made the finals in their crown a couple times."

"Actually, I've never met him, either," Duncan said in reply.

"That I find hard to believe," The king told him.

He shrugged. "It's been a long time since I played."

Joselyn listened quietly. Something definitely felt... off about the man.

#



“Maire, I’ve got a job for you,” she said quietly while they lined up for court.

“Oh?”

“Well... maybe for Bran, it might be more his kind of thing.”

“Ah,” The bard grinned. “Her Majesty’s Secret Service. How can I be of service, Your Majesty?”

“See what you can find out for me about Duncan Harper.”

“The bard?”

“I think he’s from Bastion, and he may have studied under Sir Pal,” Joselyn told her.

“Is this something we should be worried about?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s just say I’m... curious.”

#

“Quite the selection you have here,” Joselyn - or as she was known in mundane settings such as these as Robin - asked, eyeing the wide array of pizzas before her. She had her choice of ham and pineapple, pineapple and ham, or Hawaiian.

“One time!” Melissa protested. “I call her Tiffany one time! And she...” She gestured expansively at the card table covered with pizza boxes.

“I warned you,” Aria told her calmly before taking a delicate bite of her own preferred flavor - Hawaiian.

“And the Broncos?” Mary prompted.

“Trying to get back on her good side,” The younger woman blushed.

Robin smiled at the pair. She’d known Mel for a few years now, but she hadn’t really had much chance to interact with Aria yet. She had to admit she liked what she’d seen so far, though.

“So, what have you found out about Duncan?” she asked, balancing a paper plate on her lap as she sat in one of the folding chairs that currently served her hosts as furniture. “I take it that’s why we’re here?”

Mary nodded, swallowing a bite. “According to Matt, there is no such person as Duncan Harper, at least not before he showed up here.

“Gregor says he authorized him himself just before Coronation. He also said he doesn’t make any of their meetings.”

“I’m not too surprised. I took a look at the gate book last event, and he put his home group as ‘Crown Lands’,” Melissa added.

“Springbrook,” Aria said. “And his real name is Nathan Barr.”

“And his number’s higher than Aria’s.”

“So, he’s been in less than a year,” Robin said, again impressed with Mary and her personal version of the Baker Street Irregulars. Her Majesty’s Secret Service, indeed. Although, when you threw in the ever-absent Matt, the whole thing reminded her more of Charlie’s Angels.

“What about Sir Pal?”

“Now he *does* exist, or at least used to,” Mary told her.

“Used to?”

“From what Matt could find, Real Life hit this summer and he dropped off the face of the Earth.”

“Any idea why?”

“All sorts of rumors. Laid off... a bad breakup - he did break up with his girlfriend shortly before he disappeared - banishment...”

“No on that one,” Robin said. “*That* I would have heard about. What else?”

“Oh, dying mother... pregnant sister... pregnant mother... took vows... witness protection... on the run from drug dealers... you know, all the usual stuff.”

That got a chuckle from the queen. “And what’s your guess?”

“Hard to say. Maybe Duncan Harper is Sir Pal in disguise.”

“Wrong name. Mundane name, I mean,” Melissa said around a bite of the dreaded ham and cheese pizza. “Besides you said Matt said he hadn’t heard anything about Sir Pal being a musician.”

“And?” Mary countered. “Look how long it took Matt to come out of the closet.”

“He’s...?” Robin began, surprised. She hadn’t heard anything about *that*.

“Musically,” The other woman clarified before muttering, “Know a guy for fifteen years, only to discover his minor was music.”

“You should know better than to challenge the man to anything,” Melissa grinned.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mary grumped. “But back to the subject at hand, my guess is that Duncan used to play and decided to come back for some reason.”

“That’s basically what he said.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t get any sort of weird vibe from him.”

“Me neither,” Robin said. “Which is weird because there’s *something* there. I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“Something?” Melissa asked playfully.

“Oh, shut up,” she said before cocking her head at Mary. “Invite him to bardic practice?”

“That means we’d have to *have* bardic practices.”

“So? You’re going to Harvest Faire, right? You could talk to him then, maybe find out more about him.”

## Chapter 3

“Mistress Maire, might I have a moment of your...” Duncan trailed off and began muttering under his breath before smiling apologetically. “Sorry, lost in alliteration. Can I talk to you for a minute? In private?”

“Um, sure,” she answered, surprised. She’d hoped to track him down at the event - probably after the bardic - but she hadn’t expected him to come to her. She followed him into an empty classroom and waited while he shut - and locked, she noticed - the door behind them.

“What’s this about?” she asked as she planted her hands on her hips, conveniently close to the dagger she wore. She may never have gotten a bad vibe from the man, but she barely knew him and he *did* just lock the two of them in a room, all by themselves.

“Am I right to think that you’re one of Joselyn’s friends? A good friend?”

“I like to think so. Why?”

“I... heard something she might need to know, unofficially. It’s not something that should go through regular channels. And I really don’t know her, so...”

“So, you brought it to me.” Did he know just what Maire’s position - her unofficial position - in court was?

“Yes,” Duncan answered and took a deep breath before diving in. “The king is cheating on her.”

“I see,” she said, crossing her arms as she processed the information. “Do you know that for a fact, or is it a rumor?”

“I didn’t catch him in the act, if that’s what you mean, but I did overhear the other parties discussing it.”

“The other parties?”

“The Ladies Catherine and Elizabeth. Apparently, they ‘shared’ him at Crown.”

“Catherine and Elizabeth, as in Her Majesty’s ladies in waiting,” Maire said, not expecting an answer but still getting a confirming nod.

“I hope you’re not too upset if I don’t take your word for it,” she added, not really caring if he did.

“Not at all,” Duncan said with an understanding smile. “I hope I’m wrong and it’s just stories, but if not... tell Her Majesty she has at least one loyalist in her camp.”

“I’ll be sure to pass it along,” Mary told him. *For what it’s worth.*

#

“We need to talk,” Maire said quietly after court. “In private.”

Oh?” Joselyn asked and the other woman began to hum the James Bond theme.

“Lead the way,” she said, her curiosity piqued. That curiosity grew even greater when she found Rian and Eva already waiting for them in the small classroom.

“Can I assume this is about your previous assignment?” she asked, her curiosity reaching overload as Maire locked the door behind them.

“Only peripherally,” Maire answered. “Mark’s cheating on you.”

“What?”

“It’s confirmed,” Eva said. As the newest member of their little cabal - all of three months now - she was still a relative unknown to the general populace and had a much easier time of blending in with others. “Catherine and Elizabeth, for sure - sounds like all three of them spent the night together - and probably another three, but I don’t have names yet.”

“Sounds like he’s ‘collecting’ one or two each event,” Maire said.

“How...? When...?” Joselyn asked, trying to wrap her head around the news. “How did you find out?”

“Your bard, actually.”

“My bard?”

“Duncan. He also said to tell you he’s in your camp.”

“In my...?”

“What... what do I do?” Joselyn asked. She’d been cheated on before - unfortunately it seemed to be a common failing in the men in her life - but never one she was so publicly associated with.

“First off, get rid of Catherine and Elizabeth,” Rian told her. “You do *not* need that sort of constant reminder.”

“And I happen to know where you can find a couple of replacements who Mark’s not going to get anywhere with.”

#

“I’m moving out,” Robin announced after they got home the next day. The night before had been pure torture, knowing that Mark’s night out with the boys probably *didn’t* involve any boys. Or if it did, she *really* didn’t want to think about it.

“What? Why?” Mark asked.

“Catherine? Elizabeth?” she prompted, going into the kitchen and grabbing a roll of trash bags.

“That... that was just a one-time thing,” He protested.

“What about the others?” Robin asked before waving away any attempt at an answer as she entered the bedroom. “Doesn’t matter, once is still too many times.”

“But... what will I tell everyone?”

“Don’t worry ‘Your Majesty’, I’ll finish out the rein,” she told him as she began stuffing clothes into a trash bag. “Beyond that, I don’t give a fuck what you tell them.”

“What... what about the cat?” He asked, obviously trying - and failing - to come up with a reason for her to stay.

“Your problem.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“None of your fucking business.”

#

“I am so sorry,” Aria said, wrapping Robin in a close hug.

She didn’t really know her all that well, but that didn’t matter, she was hurting. For the first time since the revelation of the day before, Robin cried and felt the other woman’s hand gently caressing the back of her head, soothing her.

“We set up the air mattress in the back room,” Melissa said, picking up the first of the garbage bags stuffed with her clothes. “You can stay here as long as you need.”

“Thanks,” she said from Aria’s shoulder.

“Mary said she’d be by after church,” The young woman called from the guest bedroom. “She’s bringing something called ‘funeral potatoes’, whatever those are.”

“Not exactly what I had in mind,” Robin told them, pulling away from Aria. “Unless maybe she’s talking about Mark’s funeral.”

“And you’re in luck,” Melissa said, rejoining the other two. “Ari dipped into the us fund and hit the liquor store. Gotcha a pretty good selection; everything from Boone’s Farm to Masterba...”

“Mastroberardino,” Aria said before Mel got her foot stuck too far down her throat. “And not until after food. I’m betting you haven’t eaten today?”

Robin shook her head.

#

“I still don’t know what I’m going to do,” Robin said after the food had been eaten and the wine poured.

“You’re not going to let the bastard win is what you’re going to do,” Mary answered.

“Hasn’t he already?”

“So he’s got a string of bimbos, they’re all going to dry up once he steps down, then what?”

“And what do I have?”

“Us.”

“Oh Lord, what’s everyone going to think when they find out I moved in with a couple of lesbians.”

“The ones who matter? Nothing.”

“And the ones who don’t are going to be jealous.”

“Not that anything’s going to happen,” Aria added, taking the younger woman’s hand in hers.

“Yep, sorry. Strictly monogamous.”

“Besides, this is just until you find a place of your own.”

“And you are *not* going to play his game,” Mary added.

“Hadn’t planned on it.”

“*Don’t* go around whining to everyone, but you don’t have to pretend nothing happened.”

“Again, hadn’t planned to.”

Robin took a sip of wine before pushing things in a different direction. “How’re things going with getting the bardic guild up and running?”

“There’s a planning meeting Thursday night at *Harper’s Heart* over in Springbook,” Mary answered.

“Isn’t that a bit of a ways away?”

“*Harper’s Heart*. In *Springbrook*.”

“As in...”

“*Duncan Harper*, who just happens to live in *Springbrook*,” Mary confirmed. “It was his idea. I think he mostly wants to see how things are going with you.”

“Why the Hell is he so interested in me?” Robin asked, exasperated.

“Maybe you should ask him?”

“What?”

“We’re not supposed to meet up until 8:00, and you’re done with your last class at what? 6:30? You could swing by, pick me up and we could go over together.”

“No,” Robin said firmly.

“You’re going to have to deal with him sometime.”

“First let me deal with my current asshole.”

Mary sighed. “Okay, I’ll see what I can find out for now, but...”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll have to deal with him sometime. You already told me that.”

## Chapter 4

“Be right with you,” Nathan called when he heard the bell over the door chime.

“Okay, anything else for you tonight?” He asked his current customer before ringing her up and coming around the counter to greet the two women.

“Mistress Maire, I’m glad you could make it,” he said, shaking her hand before turning to the other woman. “I know I’ve seen you before, but I don’t think we’ve ever actually met.”

“I do stand out,” she said with a smile, which was an obvious understatement. Not only was she tall and exotic, with curves in all the right places, but her artificial leg was nearly as impossible to miss. “Aria. And no, I don’t sing.”

“I’m Duncan - Nathan here,” he said, unphased. At least by her declaration. The barely concealed wince when he introduced himself, not so much. “Do you play?”

“No, but I was thinking about learning to drum,” she admitted.

“Doubbek or bodhran?”

“My fiancé belly dances, so I was thinking the doubbek.”

“The cute brunette? She’s your fiancé?” Nathan smiled. He’d guessed as much after seeing the amount of time the two women spent together at events. “Would it be impolite to say you’ve got a handful there? From what I’ve seen, she’s a bit on the feisty side.”

“I have to agree with you there.”

“I don’t have much in the way of doubbeks right now, but if you’re interested, I could see about ordering one for you.”

Aria smiled at his salesmanship. “Things are a bit tight right now, but I’ll keep that in mind once I get caught up on the bills.”

“Tell you what, I’ll keep my eye out for a good used drum and if I find one, you get first pick.”

“How can I say no to that?” The woman replied.

“How’s Her Majesty doing?” Nathan asked, curious. “I take it since you’re here, it all panned out.”

“I wish it hadn’t,” Mary admitted.

“So do I. And I take it it was a one-way thing?”

“If you mean did she cheat on him too, the answer is no.”

“Didn’t think so. She didn’t strike me as the type.”

Nathan pursed his lips. “I never was much for that sort of thing.”

“Maybe we should get back to the bardic guild...” Mary suggested.

“It actually belongs to my sister,” Nathan told them some time later. “I just help out in the evenings. Which is why I can’t generally do stuff during the week. I get weekends off, so events usually aren’t that big of a deal - at least the closer ones - but the rest of the week...” He shrugged.

“And she lets you live upstairs?”

“She lets me *rent* the apartment upstairs, at least until I get settled in,” He could see the question in their eyes. “Let’s just say life *hasn’t* been good to me the last few years.”

The two women surprised him by simply nodding at that instead of pressing the matter. Not that he was complaining.

“I can relate to that,” Aria told him before throwing a questioning glance at Mary. “If you need people to talk to...”

“I’ve got things pretty much under control, but thanks.”

“And you just happened to steal the name of her store for your own?”

“It seemed to fit,” He shrugged.

“Any other questions while you have me cornered?”

“That obvious, huh?”

“I figure you came by to try and figure out who this guy is who tried to break up the king and queen,” Nathan told them, scratching the back of his neck.

“Don’t forget that you’re obviously not a newbie, but nobody’s ever heard of you before.”

“Took a few years off.”

“Okay, how about this one - what are your intentions towards Robin?”

“Who?”

“The queen.”

“Um... none?”

“That I have a hard time believing.”

“What the hell brought this on anyway?”

“Like you said, you just broke up Their Majesties’ relationship. Something tells me it wasn’t just out of the goodness of your heart?”

He sighed. “Yes, she has an incredible singing voice and she is... wow, but I doubt I’m any more interested in finding someone than she is.

“I would *love* to perform with her more,” He continued. “She really does have a beautiful singing voice - but other than that... friends, maybe?”

Both women stared at him with raised eyebrows.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

#

“So?” Robin asked, looking up from the card table where she was grading papers.

“He thinks you have an incredible singing voice,” she told her as she kissed Melissa’s cheek. “And that you’re ‘wow’. In that order.”

“Wow, huh?” Her fiancé said, not looking up from her homework. “Hard to beat that.”



“That’s not what I meant,” Robin said grumpily. “Where’s Mary?”

“Things went a little longer than we expected, and she has to work in the morning,” Aria answered.

“And if she didn’t come in to tell you all about it herself, that means it can’t have gone too bad,” Melissa pointed out.

“Pretty well, actually,” The other woman confirmed. “He said he could probably get me a good deal on a doumbek.”

“Don’t make me banish you...” Robin warned. “I can do that, you know.”

“He seems like a decent guy,” Aria said more seriously. “Sounds like he’s coming off a pretty bad stretch, but he’s trying to put that behind him.”

“Sounds familiar,” Melissa said.

“Doesn’t it?”

“He also said he was never much for stuff like what Mark did. I think something like that happened to him and he’s trying to keep things from being any worse for you than they have to be.”

“And that’s why he told Mary?” Robin said.

“Look,” The other woman said, sitting across from her. “I’d have done the same thing if I were in his shoes, and so would you. Okay, yes, we’re better known than he is, but can’t you at least give him the benefit of the doubt? Talk to him, maybe?”

## Chapter 5

Joselyn tried to lose herself in the feel of the gentle snow falling around her, tried to put the last year out of her mind. A year ago - at this very event, in fact - Mark had promised to make her queen if she would be his consort. She'd agreed and - being the closet romantic she was - she'd also agreed to move in with him and three months later he'd won crown, turning her into Princess Joselyn. Three months ago, he kept his promise and she'd become Joselyn Speer, Queen of Lindow. And in the three months since then, he'd slept with at least a half-dozen "ladies" that she knew of.

Including two from her own retinue.

Needless to say, that little detail had put a big damper on their relationship.

And she still had three months stuck sitting on that damn throne next to him before she could put that whole disaster behind her. Not that she hadn't already begun the process. She'd left him as soon as she'd found out and was moving into her new apartment in just a few days.

Three more months.

Three was *not* her lucky number.

Of course, she *could* abdicate, but that would be letting him win, and she wasn't about to let that happen.

"Your Majesty, may I offer you my cloak?"

It was Duncan. Of course it was Duncan. He was a touch taller than her, slender, with shaggy brown hair and dressed in the type of generic garb that could have meant he was anything from a Viking to a Pict to from nowhere in particular. And it felt like he always seemed to turn up at times like this, when all she wanted was to be alone.

And, worst of all, he always seemed to cheer her up.

"Joselyn," she corrected, remembering her instructions to him the day of their impromptu duet.

"You didn't come out here to warm up again, did you?"

"No. I don't think my guitar would forgive me if I did."

"But you *are* competing this afternoon, right?"

"Yes, Your... Yes," He answered, correcting himself at the last minute.

"Do the song we sang together," She found herself suggesting, maybe as a reminder of before everything began going downhill? "For me?"

*Where had that come from?*

"As you wish," Duncan answered with his trademark flourish.

“I am *not* Princess Buttercup,” She scolded. The last thing she wanted to think about right now was “true love”.

“Definitely not,” He agreed, again bowing. “Although you do hold more than a passing resemblance to Lady Amalthea - except for the hair, of course, and maybe the eyes - if you don’t mind me saying so.”

*Lady who?* Joselyn blinked and then a moment later, *Is he flirting with me? Was that what I was doing? Flirting with him?*

Before things could go any further either way, though, she heard one of her new ladies in waiting call from the open door.

“I’ll be right there,” She called back and then smiled at the bard. “I look forward to your performance.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said with a final bow.

“Rian, do you know a Lady Amalthea?” Joselyn asked once she’d passed beyond Duncan’s hearing.

“Who?”

#

“Who?” Eva asked when Joselyn again brought up the subject.

“Lady Amalthea.”

“I have to admit it rings a bell, but I’m not sure from where,” Maire said. “I wish...” she began before pulling her phone out.

“What brought this up, anyway?” she asked, typing away.

“Duncan. He said I look like her,” Joselyn said.

“Duncan? As in your mystery bard?” Maire said, looking up at her with a raised eyebrow.

“*My* mystery bard?”

“Is *that* who you were talking to?” Rian grinned with mock surprise.

“Oh shut up.”

Maire’s phone buzzed and she glanced at it before laughing.

“What?” The three other women asked.

“Bran,” She cocked her head at Joselyn. “Yeah... I can see it. Except for the hair. Well, and maybe the eyes.”

“That’s what he said.”

“What?” The other two women repeated.

“Let’s just say...” Maire began before Marcus, of all people, interrupted.

“Joselyn,” he said, pulling a gray-haired man she’d never seen before along with him. “I’d like you to meet Sir Pal, he just moved here from Bastion.”

“Your Majesty,” He offered her a bow. He was tall and broad-shouldered, most people’s image of what a knight - or a king, for that matter - should be. She, however, had learned that looks could be deceiving.

“A pleasure,” She smiled politely, trying to turn back to her entourage.

“I was telling him about your bard,” The king said, drawing her attention back.

Agan with the “her bard” bit.

“I did know a Magnus Harper, but I’m sure it’s not the same guy,” Sir Pal said, studying her. “He was my knight, but I haven’t seen him in probably ten - fifteen years.”

“Didn’t he - Duncan, I mean - say he’d never met Sir Pal?” Joselyn reminded Marcus.

“At least that much was true,” The king said.

“Marcus...”

“Not that I have to worry about him, do I? Now that you’ve joined the other side.”

Joselyn rolled her eyes and saw Sir Pal raise an eyebrow at the comment. She knew what Marcus was trying to do - he wanted her to get angry, to make a scene, to hit him, to do *something* in front of his new friend to prove just how big of a bitch she was - but she refused to play his game.

“It was nice to meet you,” she said to the visiting knight before turning and walking away.

#

Duncan ducked behind a laughing group of young men when he spotted the man the king was escorting. What was he, of all people, doing here? He... he shouldn’t be here. He was supposed to be in Bastion. Did he know he was here? Was he checking up on him for his father? Make sure he was living up to his part of the bargain? It couldn’t be. It could be worse, he supposed - it could be his father - but still, Duncan was *not* ready to deal with this.

His eyes drifted past the two men to Joselyn. It looked like he wouldn’t get to sing her request after all. Sighing, he began to gather his belongings.

## Chapter 6

Robin rang the door and waited. Mary had warned her that Duncan lived above the music store, so she didn't expect him to immediately answer the door. It didn't take long for the sound of someone tromping down the stairs to reach her, though, and the door opened, revealing a slender brown-haired woman.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Is Dun... is Nathan here?" Robin asked and the other woman ran her eyes up and down her, obviously sizing her up. For her part, Robin wasn't sure why she was surprised he hadn't answered the door himself, or why she was disappointed that this woman had.

"Follow me," She smiled politely, gesturing for her to follow up the narrow stairs.

"Nate, company!" She called when they stepped into the - to put it politely - well-aged apartment, but the only answer was the sound of a guitar from the front room.

"He's moping," She shrugged and led her towards the music. Nathan was there, hunched over his guitar on a low chair. "Nate?"

He finally looked up and noticed Robin. "What are you doing here?"

That was the question, and she didn't have an answer for it, not really. "You owe me a song," she finally said.

"So I do," Nathan answered and gave her a lop-sided smile, obviously playing along with her.

*"In Banbridge Town, in the County Down one morning last July..."*

#

"So why are you really here?" he asked after his third song.

"I'm... I was curious why you disappeared yesterday."

He pursed his lips but didn't say anything.

"Coffee?" The woman who'd answered the door asked, juggling three cups in one hand and a mostly full coffee pot in the other.

"Robin, this is Karen," he said, making the introductions as he freed her of one of the cups. "Karen, Robin."

"Thanks," Robin said when it was her turn to take a cup.

"You bet. You're one of his Scadian friends, right? The...queen?"

Robin cocked an eyebrow at Nathan who shrugged around his drink and offered her that same lop-sided grin.

"Yes, I'm the queen," Robin said and sighed. "At least for a few more months. Do you play?"

“SCA? Never really my thing,” Karen said, plopping down on the couch next to her.

“So just what are your intentions towards my baby brother?” She sounded teasing, but that didn’t stop Robin from feeling her eyes bore into her.

And then what she said struck her.

“Your what?” She’d assumed the other woman was his girlfriend, but as she studied her closer, she realized there was a definite likeness between the two.

“It’s only fair,” Nathan said, taking advantage of her being off-balance. “Eva asked me the same thing about you.”

“She what?”

“Quite the vocabulary she’s got,” Karen teased.

“You heard me,” he said, ignoring his sister.

“Is that when you said I was wow?” Robin asked, trying to share the embarrassment.

“Well, you are,” He told her, blushing appropriately.

“And what do you think of him?” His sister asked, obviously enjoying stirring the pot. “Is he wow, too?”

“Um... I hadn’t really thought about it?”

“Which is why you showed up here unannounced,” Karen said pointedly and it was Robin’s turn to blush.

“I was curious why he took off like he did yesterday.”

Karen looked at her brother who shrugged.

“Something came up.”

Robin hadn’t been teaching for long, but she knew an evasive answer when she heard one. She also knew she didn’t have the right to push.

“Okay. How about why Sir Pal said he’d never even heard of you?”

“So, you haven’t set your sights on my brother?” Karen said, refusing to let the subject drop.

“Well, you didn’t hear this from me, but he was supposed to get his AoA last night,” Robin admitted, again deciding not to push things. “But that’s about it.”

“And the same goes for you, about her?” Karen asked her brother.

“I’d love to sing with her some more.”

“Anything else?”

“I *am* a little short on friends.”

Friends.

Robin studied Duncan’s hopeful, almost pleading face. Why was she such a sucker for puppy-dog eyes?

#

“You have a date?” Melissa said, nearly spraying her root beer on the other woman.

“It is not a date,” Robin explained patiently. “I’m just going back down there Wednesday night for bardic practice.”

“Does Mary know about it yet? The practice, I mean?” Aria asked.

“We just set it up this afternoon,” Robin said. “When would I have had a chance to talk to her?”

“On the drive back?”

“Okay, how about this,” Aria said. “Why’d you go down there in the first place?”

“I was curious about him taking off like that,” Robin answered, not particularly liking the way the two women were beginning to adopt Mary and Matt’s habit of tag-teaming conversations.

“So you drove two hours out of your way to ask him.”

“Definitely not a date,” Melissa grinned.

She wasn’t too fond of their sense of humor, either.

#

“I like her,” Karen said, opening the bedroom door to release “the hound”. Yipping like a squeaky toy, he came spinning out of his prison and vaulted onto the couch, panting for her to sit next to him. “And I can see why you like her, too.”

“I don’t know why you have to bring him with you everywhere,” Nathan said, grinning at the pair of them.

“Because he gives you an excuse to change the subject.”

“I like her too,” Nathan admitted. “For what it’s worth.”

“That’s not part of the deal, you know. Dad never said you couldn’t make friends.”

“And when I leave?”

“That’s not part of the deal, either. There’s nothing saying you *have* to leave when your time’s up.”

Nathan paused in surprise. That minor detail never occurred to him. It also didn’t deter him. “She’s not ready for another relationship.”

“Shouldn’t you let her decide that?”

“What about Pal?”

“I told you, he’s not here to keep an eye on you. That’s my job.”

“Kind of hard to do when you don’t come to events, isn’t it?”

“Seems like everything I need to know comes here,” Karen pointed out with a grin.

“Look, I’m not saying you should go all Don Juan on her, but... leave the door open. Be her friend - didn’t sound to me like she objected to that - and see where things go from there.”

## Chapter 7

The store was usually slow Wednesday evenings - which was why Nathan had suggested it - and the fact that it was one of Robin's early-out days was an unexpected bonus. It sounded like most of the other members of the fledgling bardic guild had real jobs, though, and they'd had to push the practice back to 7:00. Quite frankly, he would have preferred to start earlier, just to get it over with, if nothing else, but he knew that wouldn't have made a difference. Especially since he'd started fussing - as his sister called it - the night before. It wasn't that he wasn't looking forward to the meeting, the problem was the exact opposite.

And it was all his sister's fault.

She was the one who'd suggested Robin could be more than a friend. She was the one who'd shot down his every objection. She was the one who'd offered a compromise too tempting to pass up. And she was the one who hadn't even bothered trying to come up with an excuse before disappearing and leaving him to face the music - literally - alone.

But at least there wasn't any reason for Robin to come early. After all, why show up if no one else was going to be there?

Then again, it *would* end the waiting.

Nathan looked up at the clock: 5:30. He still had an hour and a half to go, and the store was dead. With the store empty and nothing else to occupy his time, he took an old Martin guitar off the wall and began to play.

#

Robin grabbed an open parking spot and glanced at the car's clock: 5:45. Way early, but she'd never been good at waiting, and there was no way she was going to put up with another hour of Mel's supposedly knowing smirks before it was finally time to go. She was two doors down when she heard someone playing guitar, extremely fast and extremely well, and she was pretty sure she could guess who it was. Whatever he was playing, it wasn't rock, or pop, or even any period song she knew. But she *had* heard it before, she realized.

She stepped inside and took in the store. It was about what she'd expected: brick, with softly glowing walnut counters that separated the mere mortals from the instruments ranging from electric guitars to mandolins to violins.

She'd sung the song he began as she entered unnoticed before and, once again, she couldn't resist the call of his music.

*"Cold, cold nights lead to cold, cold mornings..."*

And again, he joined in on the chorus.



“Take the journey...”

They finished and he looked up, grinning. “How ‘bout this one...?”

“This one” was nearly as hard to sing as it was to play - fast and frenetic - but she rose to the occasion.

“I set out long ago, didn’t give a thought to all the rogues and robbers on the road...”

#

*Damn*, the thought floated through Nathan’s mind somewhere along as he played. They weren’t performing. They weren’t jamming. They were playing a game - musical stump the chump - and they were in a dead heat. It didn’t matter what one picked, two times out of three, the other one knew it. Their original bluegrass flowed into blues and then rock and even some country, but by some unspoken agreement, they never touched on period or folk music.

Although he couldn’t wait to hear her hidden trill come out in something like... *The Fox*, maybe? No. That one really needed a bass to do it right. *Dulaman*. Or *Nil Se’n La*. Or *Long Journey Home*.

That was it. *Long Journey Home*.

Actually...

That might be a good one for when she stepped down...

Robin laughed when his fingers finally lost track of where they were going. “Got you!”

“Victory is yours, milady,” He told her, bowing over his guitar and briefly wondering where the others were. It had to be... He glanced at his watch; 7:43.

Then where...?

“Can we clap now?” Mary asked, making them both jump. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one who’d lost himself in their music.

“Can a duet win Bard of Lindow?” Aria asked, honestly curious.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not allowed to compete,” Robin grinned, wiping a thin sheen of sweat from her face. She was... flush from the music and she looked better than she sang, even in jeans and an oversized T-shirt - although as slender as she was, just about any t-shirt would be oversized, Duncan thought - and her hair in a ponytail.

“I don’t see why not. You won’t be queen anymore.”

“But...”

“Tell you what, we can bill you as Duncan’s accompanist.”

“Not sure that would fly...”

Nathan found his mind wandering as the women spoke, trying to picture her in a t-shirt that *wasn’t* oversized; her belly button peeking out beneath it. Did she have an innie or an outie?

Silently, he cursed his sister for planting ideas in his head.

“Yoo-hoo... Earth to Nathan...” Robin called.

“Huh?” he asked, returning to the present. “Sorry, drifted off there.”

“Obviously. Where do you think we should start tonight?”

“Um... we should probably try figuring out who does what, and how well.”

“Well, I think we know what you two can do,” Mary snorted.

In the end, it turned out they had the makings of a pretty decent little group. In addition to Robin and Nathan, Mary was an operatic soprano, Melissa played violin, Liam - another member from Grangemont - also played guitar, and Aria was still interested in doumbek and - in spite of her protests to the contrary - *could* sing, if not well enough to take the lead.

It wasn't an instant band, of course, more like one from Ikea: some assembly required. Mary had a tendency to overpower the other singers, Liam was still fairly new to the guitar and not very confident, and Aria - of course - had yet to even try her hand at any sort of drums. And they weren't used to performing as a group. But, if nothing else, Nathan figured they had almost a full set's worth of solo pieces - and he and Robin could probably fill in whatever else they needed.

All in all, a good start.

#

"You gonna ask him out for coffee some time?" Mel asked after the three women got home.

"What?" Robin asked, not sure if she should feel annoyed, embarrassed, or scandalized.

"Look, if you two have half as much - Hell, a quarter of - the chemistry socially as you do musically..." Aria shook her head, trying to come up with a comparison.

"You'd make us look like an arranged marriage," Mel supplied. "I don't know if you noticed, but you two have that same sort of Musashi thing going as Mary and Matt."

"I think you're exaggerating," Robin said.

"Really? We were there a good half hour before either of you even noticed and it was like you two were playing a concert."

"Not likely. There were a bunch of songs we knew that the other didn't."

"Not while we were there."

"Ask him to coffee."

"I'm pretty sure it wouldn't work," Robin said. "He's too much a gentleman."

"To go out for coffee?"

#

"How'd it go?" Karen asked when Nathan finally made it up the stairs.

"Do you ever get tired of being right?" He asked.

"That good, huh?"

"Oh Lord."

"Need a cigarette?"

"Maybe."

"So... when are you going to see her again?"

"Next practice is in two weeks."

"And the next event?"

"Next weekend."

"What about going out for coffee?"

"She's not ready."

"For coffee?"

## Chapter 8

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Duncan said, coming up behind the queen. Even from behind - especially with her hair falling loose over the soft red fabric of her gown like that - she was a sight; lithe, graceful even at rest, and though no taller than he, her slender frame made her seem... more.

Much more.

“And what’s wrong with talking to my bard?” Joselyn asked, turning to offer him a smile. He really was... right? Was that the word? His poise, his smile, even his garb suited him - all except for the plain brown belt she swore was the wrong color.

“I thought Maire was your bard.”

“She’s the kingdom’s, you’re...” Her words trailed off and Duncan could see something behind her eyes. “I hope you know how much you’ve meant to me the past few months. Seems like you always put a smile on my face, no matter how bad things get.”

“Even when I’m the reason things went to shit?”

“And I love your way with words,” She laughed. “And it wasn’t your fault, things were going downhill for us even before then.”

“I hope he was at least good in bed,” Duncan joked.

“Meh,” She answered, wiggling her hand side-to-side.

“You’d think a dick like that would be comparably endowed... to make up for his other deficiencies, if nothing else,” he told her.

“In my experience, it tends to be the other way around,” She replied, unfortunately speaking from too much experience. “The bigger the dick, the smaller the dick.”

“Then there’s hope for me yet,” He beamed, flagrantly flirting with her as only a bard could.

“Most definitely,” She smiled and while it was obvious her words were meant to be good-natured, Duncan thought he could sense a touch of something more behind them.

Then again, it wouldn’t be the first time he’d ever read more into a situation than there really was.

#

The king wasn’t at the event, nor was Sir Pal, which eased things between Joselyn and Duncan while simultaneously making them more restrictive. She didn’t have to worry about stroking Marcus’ ego - or pretending she cared, for that matter - but she was keenly aware that she had to keep the pretense of being the proper queen, even if everyone - except, perhaps, some

hermit who hadn't crawled out from under his rock since the turn of the century - knew she and Marcus had broken up.

Although, if she were being honest with herself, the latter might have more to do with Duncan's presence than Marcus' absence. No matter how much she argued the point with her retinue, there *was* something there.

Something she wasn't sure she was ready for.

Something she was pretty sure she didn't want to give up.

And - no matter the other's comparisons - not nearly as platonic a something as Maire and Bran had. At least not on her side. And, unless she was reading too much into their earlier conversation, quite possibly not on his side, either. It was obvious, though, that he felt the same constraints she did - while she was queen, he could only be her subject. Preferably under the watchful eyes of the public where there could be no question of propriety.

Which was part of why she hadn't taken Melissa's advice and asked him to coffee - or even to help her move - she had to play the proper queen until she was finally able to remove that damn crown from her brow for the last time.

Duty sucked sometimes.

#

Duty sucked sometimes.

Yes, Duncan got to spend time with Joselyn at the event for a change - probably already more than he was due, in fact - and yes, she'd watched him nearly win their champion's tourney, but there was no crossing the invisible circle around her that separated a queen from her subjects.

And he was tired of being her subject.

They'd talked more at this event than the whole time they'd known each other before, and he had to admit the day's conversation only reinforced his desire to be her equal.

She might be a pretend queen of a make-believe land, but she was still the queen, and he was no Lancelot to steal her from the king she no longer loved. He *could* still be her bard, though. Could still sing for her, play for her. Bring her the happiness her reign no longer supplied.

And so he found himself a quiet corner in the hall - far away from Joselyn - to warm up for the dinner's bardic, hoping that maybe someday he could actually sit with her.

#

Maire watched the two of them with a bemusement that bordered on disgust. They weren't fooling anyone with the whole courtly love routine. The worst part was that no one would care if they admitted what was going on - or at least what was starting to go on - but the whole pining away for each other, separated by both duty and station was so damn romantic - so damn Arthurian - that everyone else just soaked it up.

It was enough to make her puke.

But it was also exactly what Joselyn needed, that touch of over-the-top romance. Someone who brought her joy and asked nothing in return. Someone who preferred *just* Joselyn over *Queen* Joselyn. Someone who believed she was worth waiting for.

She did wonder, though, what would happen when Joselyn finally stepped down. Would they flounder, trying to make sense of a world where their sacrifice was no longer necessary? Would they ignore reality and continue on as they were? Would they find their way from their chosen world of courtly love to a world where they could openly be together?

In its own way, it reminded her of the road Rian and Eva walked.

Speaking of which...

Maire watched as the two young women gestured, summoning her once again to duty.

#

Joselyn smiled when she noticed Duncan sit next to Gregor for the feast. When he'd disappeared that afternoon, she'd been afraid something had come up requiring his immediate attention and that once again he hadn't bothered to tell her first. Okay, sure, she didn't have any claim on him other than as her fanciful personal bard, but the idea he'd leave without telling her first hurt. She'd obviously been worried about nothing, though, and he met her eyes across the feast hall, offering her a small toast and a smile in greetings. It was ridiculous how such a small gesture could make her feel - and maddening the knowing smile it drew from Maire.

And Rian's wink as she poured the wine didn't help, either.

He was here, and that was what mattered. And he'd sing for her - a song of his own choosing this time, not one she'd forced on him.

Only he didn't. Not as the final preparations were made, nor during the first remove.

Or the second.

Or the third.

Finally, as they prepared to serve dessert, he stood, catching the queen by surprise. The last performance of the night was traditionally reserved for the kingdom bard or, at the very least, the local group's champion. But Duncan was neither. She glanced over at Maire, who seemed perfectly content to stay where she was. Duncan, on the other hand, was not.

Her bard.

Not Grangemont's.

Not Lindow's.

Hers.

After all, hadn't she claimed him that very morning?

Duncan offered the audience a flourishing bow and then repeated the process for her before beginning his performance.

*"When the last eagle flies over the last crumbling mountain..."*

"Movie night. My place. Tomorrow," Maire told Joselyn beneath the applause after he finished.

## Chapter 9

Robin responded to Mary's obvious summons with a mixture of confusion and dread. The confusion was over why she'd so suddenly proclaimed their gathering and the dread was because, well, it was Mary.

"Come on in," her host said when she greeted her at the door.

"Thanks. What time's everyone else showing up?"

"We're it," Mary replied. "Pull up a seat and I'll start the movie."

Robin's dread intensified and she took her place on the couch. No one else, no small talk... this was definitely a Mama Mary moment.

"What's going on?"

"I did a little more digging on Nathan," Mary said, joining her on the couch.

"Oh?"

"Since you said he isn't from Bastion, I decided to take a peek at the O and A," The older woman said, pressing play on the remote.

"Did I say that?"

"Pretty sure," Mary said. "I did find a Duncan Harper, registered to one Nathan Barr - from Bastion, by the way... in 2000."

"2000? That has to be a typo," Robin said. "There's no way he's that old."

"If he is, I want to know what sort of soap he uses."

"Was that really worth summoning me for a private audience?"

"No, but this is," Mary said, gesturing towards the TV as it filled with the bright colors of a cartoon. "I figured after his performance last night, you might appreciate being in on the joke. And considering that I'm not sure if you're going to scream or gush, I figured you might appreciate a little privacy."

"Gush?"

*"I dislike the feel of these woods. Creatures that live in the unicorn's forest learn a little magic of their own in time..."* The hunter on the TV told his companion.

#

"A unicorn?" Robin asked after the music store's door closed and she found herself attacked by a spinning dog with the bark of a squeaky toy, packing a chew-toy wider than he was.

"Who's this?" she asked, reaching down to pet the grinning dog. It reminded her of a Corgi, but with a shorter body and a larger head, and colored more like a coyote.

“Loki,” Nathan answered as the dog ushered her towards where he thought she was supposed to sit. “God of mischief and mayhem. His main job is to distract people from what they were talking about.”

“He’s obviously good at it, too,” She smiled, sitting and petting him more when he jumped up on her lap. “But... unicorn?”

He leaned back on his tall stool, studying her. “Well, except for the hair. And the eyes.”

“I suppose that makes you Prince Lir?” Robin said, half teasing, half accusing.

“More like Schmendrick.”

“Are you going to make me human?”

“No.”

“So you think I’m some damsel in distress who needs to be saved? Is that why you told Mary about Mark?”

“That was part of it,” He admitted and held up a hand to forestall her reply. “Sorry, that’s one of the downsides to the SCA, it tends to attract a lot of the ‘knight in shining armor’ types. But that wasn’t the main reason.”

“Then what *was* the main reason?” Robin asked.

“Because I thought you deserved better than that.”

She paused, studying him before she decided to accept his answer. “Mary actually found you,” She finally announced.

“I didn’t realize I was missing.”

“In the O and A,” She gave him a smile that added a silent *you dummy* to her words.

“Duncan Harper, registered to you in 2000.”

“2000?”

“Mary and I figure it’s a typo.”

“Could be,” He agreed and checked the time. “Looks like we’ve got a while until everyone shows up, you hungry? I could order pizza.”

Once again, Robin recognized his diversion and again she accepted it in the name of peace. Yes, this sense of mystery - of evasion - was more than a bit annoying, but she was also beginning to think of it as a part of Duncan, good or bad.

#

“A unicorn,” Robin repeated for at least the fifth time, smiling through a mouthful of the pizza he’d chosen which, while containing ham, showed a definite lack of pineapple.

“It would explain the wow.”

“I still don’t see it.”

“So, call me delusional and accept the compliment,” He smiled.

“Usually, people compare me to an elf, not a horse.”

“A *horned* horse,” Nathan pointed out and she rolled her eyes. “And even without your scandalously rounded ears, your cheek-bones aren’t sharp enough to be an elf and your chin’s a little short.

“I hate to break it to you, but you’re all human.”

“Because, of course, you’re an expert on all things elven.”

“Delusional, remember?”

Robin snorted. “You know, I really am glad you decided to come back.”

“So am I. And I hope you don’t mind me saying I’m looking forward to when you step down and become a mere mortal again.”

“Says the forty-year-old twenty-something,” She dimpled and then sighed. “Two months.”

“*Only* two months,” Nathan told her, even if he didn’t feel the only either. “Think maybe a dirty old man could take you out for dinner after you step down, instead of having to buy you pizza at work?”

“Actually...” She grinned wickedly. “Alba has a big Irish festival the weekend after Saint Paddy’s. I was thinking we could stake out a street corner...”

“We’d have to figure out something appropriately Irish to play,” he said, mulling over the logistics of the idea.

“That’s probably doable.”

“And what were you thinking we’d wear? I assume you weren’t thinking ‘impoverished street busker’,”

“That might actually be fun.”

#

“Oh Lord,” Mary sighed when she saw Robin and Nathan hunched over a half-eaten box of pizza, deep in quiet conversation. That’s what she got for telling her her bard was real. And showing her who Lady Amalthea was probably contributed to the scene before her, she supposed. Nothing like having someone compare you to a mythical beauty to brighten your day.

Then again, considering Robin hadn’t been this open with her happiness even during her and Mark’s “good times”, it was probably worth the diabetes-inducing scene before her. Of course, once they allowed themselves to pursue a *real* relationship...

Mary groaned.

“Oh hey,” Robin said, finally looking up at her. “We didn’t hear you come in.”

“I noticed. What’re you two plotting this time?”

“We’re trying to figure out a set list for the Irish Festival.”

*So much for waiting until she stepped down*, Mary thought, although not disapprovingly. “How’s it going?”

“We’ve got about a set’s worth of actual Irish music, and we can pad that out with other stuff, that should give us at least a couple of hours of material.”

“We figure play through lunch, go wander, play some more, and then see about sitting in on the big jam session Saturday night.”

“What about Friday? Got any plans?”

“I have to work,” Nathan sighed.



Chapter 10

“Lord bard,” Joselyn smiled. Even with Marcus there, Duncan’s presence lightened her mood.

“Your Majesty,” He replied, bowing with his trademark flourish. “As always, your presence brightens the sun itself,” He gushed.

It was funny. Even with as flowery as Lord Duncan was, she could see through the veneer of Nathan’s persona to the man beneath and knew he felt what he was saying. “You do me too great an honor.”

“Way too great an honor,” An unexpected voice - an unwanted voice - said.

The two of them turned to find Marcus standing with his arms crossed, watching. Behind him stood his apparently new lackey, Sir Pal, who wore a bland smile.

“Your Majesty,” Duncan said, again offering his bow, but this time to the king.

“Stop your groveling,” He muttered before turning to Joselyn.

“I guess you’ve decided to play both sides of the field now.”

Her frozen smile didn’t twitch. She supposed it was bound to happen, either he’d notice the way they continually seemed to meet “by accident” or - more likely - someone had fed him that juicy bit of gossip. She pressed a light hand against Duncan’s arm, restraining him from anything rash. An action that wasn’t lost on the king.

“You’re not her champion,” He pointed out. “And even if you were, the King can’t fight a duel, so you’d be facing *my* champion.”

“Then perhaps we could postpone our discussion,” Duncan suggested, his voice full of unfelt courtesy. “Say until Coronation? Saturday afternoon, maybe?”

Marcus snorted. “Why would I even bother with someone like you?”

“True. Why risk losing to a nobody?”

“Duncan...” Joselyn hissed. Was he trying to get himself killed?

“He’s got a point, you know,” Pal said with a mischievous grin, adding his own two cents’ worth into the mix. “Duke Marcus gets killed by some newbie... what’ll people think?”

“Fine,” The king spat, showing just how easily egged on he was. “Saturday, during lunch. I’ll show you just what your ‘lady’ is worth.”

*Shit! Shit! Shit!* Joselyn thought as Marcus stomped away, Sir Pal trailing behind. If there was one person she’d thought would be above the effects of testosterone poisoning, it would have been Duncan.

So much for her sweet, mild-mannered bard.

“Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?” She hissed at him.

"I will not listen to him insult you."

"You are not my champion, you're my bard!"

"I will not listen to him insult you," He repeated.

"So, you're going to prove your point by bleeding all over him? Dammit Duncan, he's going to kill you! Can't you... I don't know, eviscerate him in verse, or something?"

"I will..."

"I know, I know, you won't have me insulted. Jesus, Nate, don't do this. He's not worth it."

"You are."

"Dammit Nate," She sighed with a defeated flap of her arms.

So much for him bringing a smile to her face.

#

"It is you," Pal said, grinning, when he managed to catch Duncan alone.

"Yes, it's me," The other man sighed. "Long time no see."

"I haven't blown your cover, have I? You can imagine what I thought when Marcus mentioned you."

"Probably about the same thing I did when I saw you. What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were still in Bastion."

"Work. What about you? Last I heard, you'd suffered a career-ending injury. Got better, huh?"

"Well, you know Dad."

"Yes, I do," He chuckled. "Damn, you've filled out, you know that?"

"That does tend to happen."

"And what does the queen think of having Magnus the Great's son as her personal bard?"

"She doesn't know."

"A prince posing as a commoner, huh?" Pal laughed. "I can see where a lady could find that romantic, but isn't that a bit cliché?"

"Please don't tell her," Duncan said to his once-knight.

#

"He challenged Mark!"

"Sounds romantic," Eva smiled. "Maybe a bit of a cliché, but still..."

"Are you crazy? He's going to get himself killed!"

"I think you're overreacting," Maire told her.

"Really? You know how Mark gets - remember Taber?" The queen paced around the little room that had been set aside for her.

"I remember Taber," The older woman said. "And Duncan isn't him."

"But..."

"I think you might be underestimating Duncan," Rian said, even though she wasn't entirely convinced herself. "Gregor says he's good."

"*When he's on,*" Joselyn pointed out. "But I've seen him fight; it's like the closer he gets to winning, the worse he does."

“Have you ever seen him fight for something he actually cares about?”

“Queen’s Champion.”

“You sure he wanted to win?” Maire asked. “You know a lot of fighters just enter because it’s expected of them.”

“But he was fighting for me!”

“Ego much? That was before you met, remember?”

#

It was obvious Duncan wanted to win this tourney, even if it was a fish tourney - for the halibut. He one-shot his first three opponents. But then came Sir Pal, and he had to work for it.

“Nice,” The knight said as he barely caught the other man’s cross-body shot on his shield.

“But did your dad teach you this one?” he asked, throwing a rising snap that hit air as Duncan spun out of the way while throwing another cross body shot that caught Pal on the back of the helm.

“I guess so,” The older man grinned, acknowledging the hit with a quick salute. “How about this one?”

He thrust, but paused as Duncan’s shield moved to block it. He spun his sword in a wide arc, rising to meet his opponent just above the hip. Unfortunately, in the process, he wound up blocking the other man’s sword with the grill of his helm.

Laughing, Pal acknowledged the other man’s win and the two of them stepped out of the list field. He had a feeling the upcoming duel wasn’t going to go the way the king expected, and he wouldn’t miss it for the world.

There was someone he should probably call first, though...

#

*Who are you, and what did you do with my bard?* Joselyn thought as she watched Duncan face all comers and win. In fact, the only ones who’d managed to score any sort of hit on her supposed nobody were the knights, and it didn’t do them any good.

“I’ll do some more digging,” Maire told her as if reading her mind.

“Do that.” Definitely the wrong colored belt.

Her eyes drifted across the eric to where Marcus stood, arms crossed and scowling. *Might not be as easy as you thought, huh?* She grinned silently.

Her initial worry for Duncan’s safety faded, although his little performance added to her irritation. She’d thought he was a nice guy before all this, but now it looked like he was just another guy, after all.

## Chapter 11

“How old were you when you registered your name?” Mary asked a few days later when she stopped by the music store to have a little chat with the bard-cum-warrior. “Ten? Twelve?”

“You figured it out, huh?” He answered matter-of-factly.

“So... Defender of Bastion at seventeen?”

He nodded.

“Queen’s Champion at eighteen, along with the Sword of Bastion. Knighted at nineteen - the youngest knight ever in Bastion, from what I can tell - and King’s champion at twenty.”

He didn’t say anything, but Mary thought she caught the barest hint of embarrassment in the man’s face.

She chuckled. “Ironically, the AoA Robin gave you is your first.

“You know she’s going to be royally pissed when she finds out, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I kind of figured as much. Any chance you could keep this to yourself?”

“Why?”

“I like being just Duncan Harper, nobody, instead of Sir Duncan Harper, youngest knight in Bastion’s history and son of Duke Magnus the Great.”

“That might be a bit of a challenge, considering the performance you put on at Feast of Saint Valentines.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Any chance you can at least let me tell her myself?”

“The sooner the better - dropping this on her at Coronation would *not* go over well - but I’m not sure how willing she’s going to be to talk to you.”

“Can you at least try?”

Mary pursed her lips. “You might have to go to her. *And* you might have to miss work to do it.”

“Just tell me when and where. I’d hate to not be able to talk to her again.”

“What about signing with her?”

“If she’s not talking to me? It’d be like singing karaoke.”

#

“What did you find out?” Robin asked without any of the usual niceties when Mary opened the door.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

“I am not going over there.”

“That’s what I figured,” Mary said. “So... I invited him over. He’s in the garage with Jack.”

“What is this, The Doctor Phil show?” Robin asked, bristling.

“Come on,” The other woman said, taking her arm and dragging her towards the back of the house. “You want to know what’s going on, *you* do the dirty work for a change.”

Apparently without a choice, she followed her to the garage. There hadn’t been room to park a car inside it for as long as she’d known the two of them, the entire space filled with tools and projects too big to fit in the sewing room, and that hadn’t changed. In fact, there was a new addition to the clutter, there against the back wall, buffer in one hand, helmet in the other and looking up at her, stood Nathan.

“Hi,” he said hesitantly and took an abortive step towards her. “Mary said you wanted to ask me some questions.”

Robin snorted. “You mean like how the Hell you became a Sword God overnight?”

“Yeah, something like that,” He answered and set the helmet and buffer on the bench next to him before wiping his hands on his pants and offering one to her. “Hi, I’m Sir Duncan Harper, formerly of Bastion.”

“What?” she asked, her eyes wide in disbelief. “You have *got* to be shitting me.”

“It checks out,” Mary said, retrieving a mildewed white belt from another bit of workbench and beginning to work saddle soap into its surface.

“Yeah. I probably should have told you that earlier.”

“You think? Like maybe when we met? Or maybe before you challenged Mark to a duel?”

“Were you *ever* planning on telling me?”

“It... it was a challenge,” Nathan said. “My dad thought a year as a nobody might teach me some humility.”

“Okay, that’s new,” Mary said as she worked, shamelessly eavesdropping on the two of them.

“Your dad.”

“Yeah, um... Duke Magnus.”

“Duke Magnus,” Robin said flatly. “So, if you’re such a hot stick, why hasn’t Mark ever heard of you? He has sort of a thing for ‘famous knights.’”

“I stopped playing about ten years ago,” He shrugged. “I... got hurt and couldn’t fight anymore. I...”

“Just happened to miraculously get better?”

“Robin...” Mary warned.

“You stay out of this.”

“I am sorry. I... I liked being a nobody. Liked being liked for who I am instead of who I was.”

“So you lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie, I...”

“Didn’t tell me, like Mark didn’t tell me about his bimbos.”

Nathan winced. It wasn’t quite the same thing, he knew, but that was more a matter of degree than deed.

“I should probably go,” he said after a few awkward moments. “I am sorry.”

Robin turned an accusing eye towards the other woman after he'd left. "You knew!"

"Not until after Feast. He wanted to tell you himself."

"Why? So he could see my face?"

"So you could see his, I think."

"You're on his side?"

"I'm..." Mary began and sighed. "I don't want to watch you throw away a good thing."

"A good thing? Really? He lies to me, and you *still* call him a good thing?"

"If you'd have known, would it have made a difference?"

"Hell yes, it would. The *last* thing I need is another knight trying to conquer my summits."

"Does it really change who he is that much?"

"Yes."

Mary cocked her head at the other woman. "Sure seemed pretty consistent for someone faking it."

"Then why..." Robin began and sighed. "Dammit, why did he have to be like Mark?"

The older woman decided not to answer. Some things were best figured out on your own.

#

Nathan was slumped over the steering wheel of his truck when he heard a tapping at the window.

"How'd it go?" His sister asked after he rolled it down.

"Pretty sure it's over," he answered, both his voice and face blank.

"I'm sorry," she said. She opened the truck's door and gently pulled him towards his apartment.

"Don't tell me it's better it happened now instead of later," he said when he finally fell into the couch.

Karen didn't say anything. Instead, she sat down and wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulder.

"But what if I don't want to be Sir Duncan anymore?"

"Dad did want you to learn humility."

He snorted.

"And who's to say you can't be Duncan the Bard, retired Knight of the Realm?"

That drew another snort from Nathan. "Retired. At thirty."

"It's true, isn't it?"

This time he sighed. "Not that it makes a difference."

"You are such a pessimist. I'm betting the biggest reason she's pissed at you - now, at least, we'll leave out the whole Suicide by Duke bit - is because you didn't tell her all about your sordid past."

"And..."

"Shut up, would you? Look, I'm betting she's going to be pissed at you for a while, let her. It sure as hell isn't the first time you've had a woman pissed at you. Either she'll learn to deal

with it, or she won't, and in the meantime, go ahead and club 'good' King Marcus like a harp seal."

"And that's supposed to make her like me again?"

"No. It's supposed to make *you* feel better. Nothing like pounding an asshole into the ground like a tent stake to release tension."

## Chapter 11

Coronation.

The day she'd been waiting for.

Joselyn sat in her throne for the last time, absently scanning the crowd as Marcus released his retainers. It didn't take much work for her to spot Duncan towards the back, flanked by his sister trying to hold a squirming Loki and an older man who looked so much like him that he had to be his father, the infamous Duke Magnus the Great. A part of her wished he hadn't come, but an equal part was glad he had. She'd realized Maire might be right, being Sir Duncan might not change who Lord Duncan - who Nathan - was.

If nothing else, he deserved the chance to prove himself one way or the other.

Marcus finished and it was her turn to call her retinue forward. Giving and receiving hugs and tears, she released each one until only three remained: Maire, Rian, and Eva.

"I can't say how much all three of you have meant to me during my rein," Joselyn began and heard a muted snort from behind her. Maybe having her own private Sword God wouldn't be such a bad thing. She doubted Duncan'd be able to beat some manners in Marcus, but it was worth a try. "I couldn't have survived if it wasn't for each of you. All three of you were my confidants, my supports, my hearts..." She trailed off.

"Unfortunately, I can only give one of you the Heart of the Kingdom, and I can't choose between you three," A month ago, it would have been an easy choice, but now... She glanced to the back of the crowd - and a certain bard - briefly before letting her eyes fall back on the trio in front of her. "And I know all three of you would insist that one of the others was more deserving. So I'm going to take the easy way out and not give my - the queen's - heart to any of you."

Again, she glanced to the back of the pavilion, wondering if Duncan caught the distinction. Yes, he'd lost her trust - some of it, at least - and no, he hadn't won her heart, but even with everything that had happened, she could see the possibility was there. Barely, but...

"All I can give you is my undying thanks and know that if there's any way I can ever repay what you've done for me - what you've meant to me - all you have to do is ask, and I'll be there."

The four women shared tearful hugs and they finally reached the end. For the last time - ever - Joslyn knelt before Marcus and as he reached for the crown on her head, she rose. He stared dumbfounded as she claimed the king's right and removed her own crown, setting it on the now empty throne of the Queen of Lindow.



Again breaking with all tradition, and to the disbelieving silence of the crowd, she turned and strode out of court, unescorted. She made it about a third of the way down the aisle before a quartet of familiar voices called out.

“Long live the Queen!”

Unsure what else to do, the crowd followed their lead, cheering her one last time as she returned to her place among the common and - as she watched Duncan bow to her with his ever-present flourish - the not so common folk.

And then it was the others’ - the so-called commoners’ - turn to abandon tradition as those among the crowd who considered themselves *her* loyal subjects made their way to the center aisle and escorted *their* queen out.

Behind her, Marcus could only watch as at least a third of the crowd followed the former queen out.

#

“What the fuck was that?” Marcus spat, forcing his way inside the former queen’s circle of friends as soon as his court finally - officially - ended. “Are you *trying* to humiliate me?”

“Well... yes,” She admitted, smiling brightly at him. “Did it work?”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? *I’m* king! *I* won Crown, not you!”

“Watch yourself, boy,” The middle-aged knight who’d accompanied Duncan warned.

“Screw you.”

“Your Grace.”

“What?”

“It’s ‘screw you, Your Grace.’”

“Might I introduce you to my knight, Duke Magnus?” Pal said, joining the group.

“Commonly called, ‘The Great’. Duke Magnus, this is Count - soon to be Duke - Marcus.”

“I can’t say I’ve heard good things about you,” Magnus said to the former king.

Marcus stared at the old duke, trying to process what was going on. The man was somewhere on the upper end of fifty, with gray hair and an obvious paunch, but the chain around his neck shone like the sun and the white belt he wore glowed despite its obvious age. And the sword... Marcus liked to think of himself as a connoisseur of blades and everything he knew screamed that the arming sword in the well-worn scabbard at the man’s side was the real thing.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Marcus said, finally remembering his manners.

“No.”

“Excuse me,” Maire interrupted before the older man could truly release his fury. “You’re being called up.”

Marcus waited only a moment for Joselyn to join him before admitting the truth and stomping off alone.

“Might I have the pleasure of escorting you, my dear lady?” The elder Harper said, offering her his arm.

“I thank you for the offer, Your Grace, but I already have a champion,” She smiled, tucking her hand in the crook of the younger Harper’s arm.

“We’ll talk later,” she told her obviously surprised champion as they slowly strolled towards the new king and queen. “*After* you deal with that prick.”

“I await your pleasure, Your Excellency.”

#

Joselyn’s coronet was draped over her forearm as she watched Duncan - Sir Duncan - put on his armor. It was the same armor she’d seen him wear for the past six months, but a good cleaning and polish made all the difference. Even without the well-aged white belt and gold chain that went around his neck, neither of which he’d put on yet, he no longer looked like the... not new, but newer fighter he’d pretended to be. It fit.

Or it would, when he finished dressing.

“Come here,” she said as he adjusted his coat of plates.

“What?” Duncan wasn’t entirely sure what was going on with her. Yes, she was talking to him, but he didn’t feel the bond he’d thought they’d begun to share.

“You’re missing something,” she said, handing him her coronet and pulled out a knight’s chain that she draped around his neck.

He handed her back her coronet and studied the gift, a complex spiraling pattern of interlocking links. “Thank you.”

“And I believe this is yours,” Joselyn added as she took his now-clean white belt and wrapped it around his waist. “You’re a knight, act like one.”

“I’d listen to the lady,” Duncan’s father advised him.

“Um... Yes, Your Excellency,” Duncan said, bowing to Joselyn, still not quite sure what was happening.

“Your lady,” She corrected as she adjusted the belt with a practiced hand. Finally satisfied, she reached into her pouch and pulled out a strip of cloth that she wrapped around it. “At least I’d better be if you’re fighting for me.

“Don’t think this means I’ve forgiven you, though.”

“Yes, My Lady,” he said and brought her hand to his lips.

#

Joselyn walked next to Duncan - Sir Duncan - carrying his helmet. It was the same duty she’d carried out for Marcus throughout their relationship, but it didn’t carry any of the old memories with it this time. She might not have forgiven the man at her side, but even she could see that *he* fought for *her*. Marcus had never done that. He’d always fought for himself; she was just a necessary piece of adornment, like the coronet he’d already affixed to his helmet.

“So now you’re pretending to be a knight?” The former king said when they reached the secluded clearing that had been chosen for the duel.

Neither Duncan nor Joselyn bothered to answer, nor did the three men standing to the side. All three of them wore knight’s belts, but two of them also wore crowns, apparently both Lindow’s new king and Bastion’s had decided their little get-together was worth their time.

“I’m Allan, and I’m the marshal for this little get-together,” The only non-royal bystander - a mountain of a man that Joselyn recognized - announced. “Their Majesties have decided that

since a knight of Lindow is facing a Knight of Bastion, and in the interest of inter-kingdom relations, they will serve as your seconds. If you will both take your places on the field of honor?"

"My Lady," Duncan bowed one last time to Joselyn before finishing his preparations.

Marcus finished his own preparations and stepped into the clearing.

"Please salute your respective crowns," Sir Allan said, and the two fighters turned to face their seconds. Duncan held his salute until his - Bastion's - king nodded in recognition while Marcus shot Lindow's a quick snap of his sword.

"Please salute the lady who's honor you fight for this day."

This time Duncan turned and walked to Joselyn before kneeling before her. She smiled and placed a gentle hand on the crest of his helmet.

"Go," she said quietly.

He stood and turned towards his opponent who hadn't moved.

"Salute your most worthy opponent."

Duncan moved, bringing the basket of his sword in front of his face, while Marcus stood in apparent boredom, waiting for the fight to begin.

"Duke Marcus, are you ready?" Sir Allan asked.

"I am."

"Sir Duncan, are you ready?"

"I am," He replied over the sound of his opponent's snort and finally dropped his salute.

"Lay on!"

The fight should have been over after the first shot was thrown - Duncan's sword bounced off the other man's helm unopposed - but Marcus shrugged it off as light and threw his own series of attacks. A single shot made it through, catching Duncan in the side, but the other man called it back as flat. Duncan knew Marcus' game - had even played it himself in his younger days - and he gritted his teeth at the pain as the kingdom's newest duke tried not to win, but to beat him into submission.

*What did Robin ever see in him?* Duncan wondered as he stepped back into the fight and took the offensive. A variation of the move Sir Pal had used against him the month before brought his sword up behind Marcus' shield, slamming into the base of the ribs and again he shrugged off, this time calling it glancing as he his own sword arced down towards his head.

But Duncan was expecting the attack and brought his sword up to block it, using the force of the Duke's attack as a springboard for his own. Before the other man could react, his sword slammed home and slid down his chest. He arced it again, landing his next blow on Marcus' other shoulder. The other man finally threw another shot, catching Duncan in the side as he spun, his sword again picking up speed until it slammed into the side of Marcus' helm one last time.

The marshal yelled hold as the other man dropped to his knees. Duncan pressed his sword arm against his side in an unconscious effort to protect it from more damage. Say what he would about Marcus' honor, the man could swat a fly out of the air with a sword; he'd hit the exact same place his earlier shot had landed.

## Chapter 12

“Why’d you lie to me?” Robin asked, looking at him across the small table in the coffee shop, still trying to make sense out of what had happened.

It wasn’t the first time she’d asked the question and Nathan’s response to it was continuously evolving. At first, he’d felt guilty, but that feeling had changed over time into an annoyed defensiveness.

“I didn’t lie,” He set down his coffee. “You never asked. In fact, I don’t think you’ve ever asked me anything about myself. Instead, you sent your goon squad off to see what they can find.”

“Goon squad?” It was the first time she’d ever heard them referred to that way, and she wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about the description.

“You know who I mean. Did you ever think of just asking me instead of going through all that mess?”

“As I recall, when I *did* ask you about yourself, you tended to be a bit evasive.”

“So? I didn’t realize I had to pass a background check to talk to you,” he took a sip of his coffee. “I was *trying* to make a fresh start.”

“Well, you kind of screwed that one up.”

“How? By trying to defend your honor? The guy’s a dick. Tell me he didn’t deserve to be called out. Besides, fighting a duel isn’t about winning or losing, it’s a way of telling the world there’s something they need to look at. “Yeah, he could have kicked my ass, but that wouldn’t keep people from knowing *why* I’d called him out. Something like that happens once, and it could just be the guy being overly sensitive. Twice, maybe something’s going on. A guy keeps getting called out for the same sort of shit and, win or lose, people are going to notice.

“I didn’t have to be a knight to defend your honor,” He finished. “*You* decided that.”

“Would you have admitted it if I hadn’t?”

“You didn’t give me a chance. Did you ever wonder why I didn’t let anyone know I was a knight in the first place?”

“You said it was some sort of challenge, to teach you how to be humble.”

“Okay, how about this one, did I decide to come back before I got the challenge, or after?”

Robin blinked. That question never occurred to her. She’d just assumed... she didn’t know what she’d assumed.

“When I was thinking about coming back, I told Dad it’d be neat if I could start all over again as a newbie and see if I still had it. That’s when he came up with the idea - he bet me I couldn’t play for a year without admitting who I was.”

“A year.”

“Yes, I was pushing it with Mark - I was going to kick his ass, knight or not - but *you* were the one who made sure everyone knew.”

“You could have told me.”

“The queen?” He snorted. “I liked you, but I didn’t know you. And given your choice of kings...”

“Okay,” She finally admitted. “I suppose I can see that.”

“In the end, I decided I was going to tell you everything after you stepped down. In private, not in the middle of Coronation.”

“And I blew it for you.”

Nathan sighed. “Please, next time you want to know something, don’t send Mary to do your dirty work, just ask me.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

#

“I brought Chinese, I hope that’s okay,” Robin announced over the door’s bell.

“What are you doing here?” Natan asked, surprised.

“The Irish festival’s this next weekend,” She pulled out an array of little white boxes and set them on a clear bit of counter. “If we’re still going to perform at it, we should probably practice.”

“You still want to do that?”

“Okay, yes, I’m still trying to make sense of that whole insta-knight thing, and I know I’m not exactly your favorite person right now, but it’s been over a year since I really got to sing for anyone, and I miss it.”

“And I’m available.”

“That... that’s not what I meant,” Robin sighed. “Melissa was right, it’s almost like we can read each other’s minds when we perform together.”

“Melissa said that?”

“Yeah, and... well, she’s right, performing with you is like singing with one voice sometimes. And that’s when we’re messing around. Imagine if we practiced first.

“If you still want to, that is.”

It was Nathan’s turn to study her. “You ever think about calling instead of driving all the way over here?”

“What?”

“You know, call? With a phone? What if I wasn’t here? What if I already ate? What if I didn’t want to perform with you?”

“Well, you’re obviously here,” Robin said as she took off her coat and draped it over the counter. She dished herself up some food. “What about the other two? Did you eat?”

“Yes,” Nathan answered, caught by the sight in front of him. She’d obviously come straight from work and her light blouse and skirt drew his attention like her garb or the types of clothes he was used to seeing her in when she came to visit couldn’t. Okay, so it wasn’t the blouse, other

than giving her a lightness, a gentleness. Her skirt, though... its fitted waist and hips told him of a body beneath devoid of any unnecessary fat.

“Um, Nate?” Robin asked with a quizzical expression.

“When was the last time anyone told you you’re beautiful?”

“Feast of Saint Valentines,” She answered, smiling. “Although I don’t think you used those exact words. As I recall, that’s what started this whole thing.”

“So, should I stop calling you beautiful?”

“You didn’t answer my question. Do you still want to do the Irish festival?”

#

“So, pick me up about 10:00?” Robin suggested as they finished up for the evening.

“That early?” Nathan asked.

“I figure we can walk downtown from my place and that’ll give us time to warm up before we get going.”

“I finally get to see your place?”

“I might even let you buy me coffee,” She smiled. “If you ask nice.”

## Chapter 13

It was a good thing they'd practiced because whatever synergy they'd had before was gone. Robin doubted anyone noticed - at least anyone who'd never seen them when they were on - but she did. And she had a feeling Nathan did, too. They'd planned on playing through lunch but decided to tear down early when the rain began to fall.

"What should we do now?" she asked as she pulled up the hood of the sweatshirt she wore underneath her faded bomber jacket.

"You're the one who knows Alba. Maybe go somewhere warm?"

Robin looked down the street, getting her bearings. "I think Mel works at a cafe not too far from here. We could stop by there."

"What else is there?"

"You don't like Mel?"

"You're not the queen anymore. We don't need a chaperone."

"She's got a car. I figured we could put your guitar in it so you don't have to carry it the whole time."

"Oh," he said. "I suppose that makes sense."

#

"Now what?" Robin asked when they stepped back out into the misty rain.

"I don't know... do the tourist thing?" he said. This was actually his first time in Alba, and he really didn't have any idea what there was to do.

"Not much of a thing for tourists, but we could wander until we find something interesting."

The Irish festival was centered around one of the older parts of Alba, a dozen blocks of turn-of-the-century storefronts filled with boutiques mixed with shops run by the same families for decades. The rain had thinned the crowds that would normally fill the streets and when it slowly turned to snow, they thinned even further.

They followed the trend, slipping inside a store that seemed part thrift store, part junk store, and part antique store, all mixed together with little rhyme or reason. They wandered the cluttered aisles, pointing out oddities and the occasional truly interesting item, although it was sometimes difficult to tell the difference; was Robin really interested in the way too long striped scarf? And did Nate really want the collection of old Schmidt cans? From there, it was on to candy store filled with elephant statues where they indulged in cups of rich hot chocolate that had never heard of Swiss Miss.

They continued their wanderings all afternoon, checking out the neighborhood bookstores and antique stores, and Robin even managed to drag him into a vintage clothing store, but as 5:00 approached, the snow had returned and the crowds continued to thin. Finally, they decided to give up on their original plan and settled on giving a pub she knew hosted an open mic night Saturday nights a try. They recovered Nathan's guitar and walked the couple of blocks to their destination. The wood paneling and muted lights gave the place a warm, comfortable feel and they selected an empty table not too far from the still-dark corner stage.

"I take it you're here for the open mic?" Their server asked. "Normally we don't start for a couple of hours, but with this crowd, you could start early if you want."

Robin glanced at the clock and then over at Nate. "What do you think?"

"Maybe in a half hour or so? Give us time to get some food in us and let my guitar warm up a bit. What's good?"

They shared an appetizer sampler before declaring themselves ready and taking the stage. After a quick tuning session, they began. The synchronicity they'd been missing earlier had mostly returned and they played. Robin took the first song.

*"Maybe in another life, I could find you there..."*

And then it was time for him to take the lead.

*"Tell me have you ever wanted someone so much it hurts?..."*

But it was what was supposed to be their final piece - the duet - where they truly shone.

*"She put him out like the burnin' end of a midnight cigarette..."*

They played a full set before other performers began to show up and found themselves with an invitation to come back and a hundred dollars richer by the time they returned to their table and nursed one last drink before calling it a night.

"That was fun," Robin said as she slipped an arm around Nate and gave him a quick hug. "I'm glad I suggested it."

"Well I did," She told him when he let out a laugh.

"And you're right, it was fun," He answered. "We'll have to remember to go window shopping first next time, it sure helped us get back on our game."

"I think it was more us remembering we liked each other," she looked over at him. "At least I did."

"I'm not sure I ever really forgot. But yeah, it was nice getting to know you better. And since you're the one with all the good ideas, what's next?"

"Maybe a movie? We could go back to my apartment and see what we can find."

"Robin..." He began, giving her an odd look and she laughed.

"Not like that. Just... you know, a movie night."

"Just the two of us."

"Hey, you're the one who said we didn't need chaperones anymore," She laughed. "Friends, remember?"

"Friends."



“Besides, I have every intention of changing into my frumpiest, warmest, most comfortable clothes once we get there,” she said. “And if you think they’re sexy, you really *are* delusional.”

#

*I guess I really am delusional*, Nate thought when Robin emerged from her bedroom. The loose flannel shirt she wore might have done something to hide the form beneath it if it were buttoned, but as it was, neither it nor the camisole she wore beneath it were up to the task, no matter how slender she was. And then there were the yoga pants, which only accentuated her legs. *If that’s frumpy, I’d love to see sexy.*

“So what sounds good?” she asked, curling up on the couch not too far away from him.

“You’re the one with all the good ideas today.”

“And it’s about time you picked up the slack.”

“You ever see *Knight Riders*? I can’t say it’s particularly good but...”

“Sure, we can give that a try.”

The movie wasn’t exactly riveting and went mostly unwatched as the pair fell into conversation. Finally - too soon - after it ended, Robin walked him to the door and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“It’s still snowing pretty good out there,” she told him. “Give me a call when you get home, okay?”

“I don’t have your number.”

#

“How’d it go?” Karen asked, plopping cross-legged in the chair across from Nate.

“It went good,” He answered. “We got snowed out at lunch, so we spent most of the day window shopping, but good.”

“You spent twelve hours window shopping?”

“Not the whole time. Robin found us a pub hosting an open mic night, so we went there for a while.”

“And?”

“It was good,” He shrugged, deciding to keep his answer on the business side of things. “We made a hundred in tips and the manager said we could come back any time.”

“Something tells me you didn’t play until ten. Not with that goofy expression on your face.”

“We decided to go back to her apartment and watch a movie.”

“Netflix and chill, huh? What didn’t you watch?” Karen grinned and her brother rolled his eyes.

“*Knight Riders*. And there was no chilling involved.”

“Yeah, that’d kill the mood. Was that your idea or hers?”

“It wasn’t...” He stopped and sighed. “We’re not there yet.”

“We, she, or you?” Karen asked before exchanging one question for another. “You going to see her again?”

#

“You actually went through with it?” Mary asked as they drank coffee the next morning.

“You make it sound like some sort of ordeal,” Robin said.

“So you had fun?”

“Yeah, I did. Okay, the first part pretty much sucked, but after that, it was pretty fun.”

“What was wrong with the first part?”

“We just couldn’t click. I was actually glad when it started raining and we had to pack up shop.”

“And that’s when you dropped his guitar off with Mel?”

“Yeah. After that, we kind of just wandered around all afternoon window shopping. Did you know he’s into Miami Vice? Well, I think he is, at least.” She shrugged.

“After that, we went over to Toby’s for open mic night.”

“And how’d that go?”

“He let us play for almost an *hour!*”

“I take it you two finally clicked?”

“Ohhh yeah. Damn, it was good. I... God, what a turn-on.”

“And after that?”

“We went to my place and watched this horrendous movie he picked out. And no, before you ask, nothing happened.”

“Did you want it to?”

Robin paused. “No, but if he’d asked...”

Mary nodded in understanding. She’d gone through the same thing when she’d first started dating, but she’d been a virgin then, Robin knew *exactly* what she was missing.

“Sounds like a good man.”

“The thing is, I don’t know if he actually likes me like that.”

“The man who said you’re wow.”

“He did say that, didn’t he?” Robin said before her phone started ringing. She glanced at it and smiled.

“Hold on,” she said before answering. “Hey, how’s it going?”

## Chapter 14

It was apparently Robin's turn to make the drive, but the roads weren't too sloppy, and she soon found herself at the little Italian restaurant where Nate waited for her in jeans and a button-down underneath his pea coat and she could feel him taking her in as she approached. She'd dressed a bit nicer than 'just friends' really called for - even going above and beyond and wearing pantyhose and heels with her dress - and thought she could see a look of appreciation on his face.

"You look beautiful," He told her in a thoroughly non "just friends" way as she kissed his cheek.

"You clean up pretty nice yourself."

"What? This old thing?" He grinned.

She laughed and slipped her hand in the crook of his arm.

#

"I was thinking maybe we could go to Crown together," Robin said, wishing he was tall enough to properly rest her head on his shoulder as they walked. The neighborhood had the same feel as the shops they'd explored during the Irish festival, but these were all closed, only the back lights left on inside adding their glow to the streetlights above.

"I can't. I'm moving that weekend."

"What?" she asked, stopping in her tracks.

"Not like that," Nate said, turning towards her worried face. "Karen decided I'm back on my feet enough to kick me out."

"Oh. Where are you moving to?"

"Hornbrook."

Robin smiled in relief. He wasn't moving away. In fact, he was moving closer. "Isn't that going to be a bit of a commute?"

"Actually, I'm starting a new job tomorrow. Over at the college."

"Wait, what?" she asked, again stopping in her tracks. "The college? As in *Metz* College? As in where I work?"

"That's the one. I'll be filling in for Doctor Roberts' music theory classes for the rest of the semester and over the summer and, if things go well, I'll be a full adjunct next fall."

"Okay, you have got to stop doing this," She grumbled at his continuing surprises. "You have to have... wait. You do, don't you? You already have your Masters. Or is it a Doctorate?"

"Masters. This isn't going to be a problem, is it?"

“Well, at least we’re in different departments,” Robin said. “I mean, I like you and all, but that might be a bit much.”

“I have to agree with you there. It would definitely make it hard to keep my mind on my work.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Robin teased.

“I’m not sure if you know this, but you can be a bit... distracting,” He answered and leaned in to kiss her.

“Nate...” She sighed after they broke apart. “I’m not...”

“I know,” He pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “But when you are...”

“What about Spring Fling?” she asked, catching him off guard. Was she saying she’d be ready at Spring Fling? “It’s the week after Crown, I could help you move, and then we could go to that one next weekend.”

#

Robin laughed when Nate pulled up in front of his new apartment complex.

“What?”

“What floor are you on?”

“Second, why?”

“Mel and Aria used to live in the basement.”

“That should make giving out directions easier, I suppose.”

“Let’s get you moved in,” She smiled, enjoying herself. Since Nate had started working at the college, she’d discovered the joy of thoroughly confusing him. Which, surprisingly, wasn’t all that difficult. Of course, it helped she pretty much knew everyone and all their inside jokes at work. Although, as he was settling in, it seemed it was getting harder and harder to do so.

“You really didn’t have to help, you know.”

“Obviously,” she said, pulling out a box. Their current load - a single layer of boxes in the bed of the truck - constituted probably three-quarters of all his possessions. “How does a grown man manage to have so little crap?”

“Divorce.”

“That’ll do it,” Robin said, and it seemed like where she was constantly confusing him, he was just as frequently surprising her. “Is she the one that cheated on you?”

“Yeah.”

“I can honestly say I know how much that sucks.”

He smiled at her and juggled the box in his hands so he could open the door. “Ta-dah!”

Robin stepped inside. The front room was bright, and cheerier than his last place. And emptier. There was no furniture, and the only thing covering the wood floors was a light layer of dust.

“I thought it’d be furnished,” she said. “Mel’s place was.”

“Fraid not.”

“What about the bathroom?” she asked, following him. That had been the one redeeming factor in the two women’s apartment in the basement.

“Better than my last place,” He shrugged and gestured to the door across the hall.

Robin set down her box and peeked inside. “That’s... cozy,” she said. The so-called bathroom consisted of a small sink, a toilet, and a shower stall. It had been remodeled some time in recent history, but she bet you could still take care of all of your business at the same time. She looked back at him. “That’s better than your old place?”

He chuckled.

“What’s the...”

“Unpack first, then I’ll give you the tour.”

“Slave driver,” She sighed and followed him back down the stairs.

#

“I like the balcony,” Robin said as she followed Nate towards the back. The combined living and dining rooms - complete with gas fireplace - were the only part of the apartment that didn’t fit her earlier claim of cozy. And the kitchen didn’t do anything to change that. In fact...

“Something’s off here,” She announced and gave him a questioning look.

He smiled and led her back into the bedroom where he’d left the air mattress to inflate.

“Nate...” She began, not entirely sure what he was thinking.

She was still confused as he led her to - and into - what she’d assumed was a closet. She’d assumed wrong, though. The bathroom through the door still wasn’t what she would call big, and it still didn’t have a bathtub, but it was at least twice the size of the one she’d found earlier and this shower - a part of her mind noted - was big enough for two. At least if they didn’t mind close quarters.

“I told you it was nicer than my old place,” He grinned.

“Asshole,” She grinned back.

“You ready to go back for the next load?”

#

Even though Nate had less than two truck-loads of stuff, the back-and-forths to Springbrook meant moving still took them most of the day, and that was without any furniture beyond a set of plastic patio furniture and a half-dozen milk crates.

“I like it,” Robin announced as she took the beer Nate offered her. “It’s...”

“Cozy.”

“Comfortable.”

“At least until summer. You can always add layers if you’re too cold, but you can only take off so much when it’s hot out before it becomes a felony.”

“Misdemeanor,” Robin said. “And that’s only in public. In private...”

“And there you go, being all distracting again.”

“What?”

“You... in a tank top and shorts, rolling a cold beer across your neck...” He said, tracing a finger from the end of her jaw to her Adam’s apple.

“You’re delusional, you know that?” She laughed, trying to ignore the goosebumps forming on her skin.

“Are you complaining?”

“Well...”

## Chapter 15

It felt weird, going to an event *with* Nate, instead of hoping to see him there. And that they were leaving Friday night and coming back Sunday instead of day-tripping like he usually did. *And* that they were sharing a hotel room. Yes, it had two beds, but... And she was pretty sure he felt the same way, considering the awkward silence that had filled most of the five-hour drive to Rye.

Luckily, they'd been able to hit the road before five, so even with stopping for dinner in Neihart, they made it to the hotel by eleven.

"Reminds me of your place," Robin grinned, hanging her garment bag in the small room's closet.

"Makes you wonder what a single looks like, doesn't it?"

*Too small*, She thought, imagining being forced to share a bed with him. Okay, yes, the temptation was still there with them sharing a room, but at least this way they'd be in separate beds. She wouldn't have to feel his warmth next to her... him holding her... his breath on her neck...

"I'm going to grab a shower," She grabbed her small bag and disappeared into the bathroom.

Nate was hoping for a shower of his own - preferably on the colder side - but knew he would have to wait. In fact, the thought of *not* waiting - of joining Robin - made the need even greater so he turned on the TV and began wandering through the channels, looking for something to take his mind off her.

Of course, that went completely out the window when she emerged in exactly what he'd imagined her wearing in his daydream that day she helped him move in.

"My turn," He announced and made his own retreat into the bathroom.

#

Robin woke early to begin getting ready for the event. It was probably the drawback to really long hair she disliked the most, the time it took to get it looking good. Which was why she usually wore it braided. But since she was finally free and clear of that damned crown - and Marc - she'd decided to wear it loose today to broadcast her newfound independence to the world. Which, in turn, meant she'd had to wake up earlier than she'd really have preferred. And the fact that she'd spent the night all too aware of Nate sleeping in the bed next to her had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Nothing at all.

She contemplated taking her garb into the bathroom with her and changing right then and there, but the event didn't start for nearly four hours still, and even given the time it'd take for

her to get ready, it really was pointless to start now. She stepped out of the bathroom after her shower still wearing what she'd slept in and dabbing at her hair with a towel before beginning The Process.

#

Nate awoke to the sound of a hair dryer somewhere in the room and blearily looked at the clock on the nightstand next to him: six o'clock. That wouldn't have been too bad, he supposed, except for the fact that he'd spent the night unable to do anything but think of the beautiful woman sleeping in the bed next to his.

The woman who was obviously already awake and getting ready to face the day.

Knowing there was no point trying to go back to sleep now, he got up and walked toward the bathroom. Luckily, their hotel room was set up with separate bathroom and sink areas, so he wouldn't have to wait for Robin to finish or make her stop what she was doing before he could take care of his morning routine.

"Morning," he said and absently kissed the top of her head as he came in.

"Sorry," she said, turning off the hair dryer and smiling up at him in the mirror. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He waived off her apology. "Let me get a shower and I'll help."

"I'll start the coffee."

He emerged a few minutes later looking almost human and gratefully collected the cup of coffee waiting for him and filling her nose with his scent.

Nope. He didn't have anything to do with her inability to sleep.

Nothing at all.

Despite the coffee's temperature, Nate took a long drink before picking up Robin's brush.

The sensation of him brushing her hair combined with his scent, and she had to work to suppress the shiver that went through her. "Please don't."

"Did I hit a snag?" He asked her image in the mirror. "I'm trying to be gentle..."

"It's not that," She reassured his reflection. "It's... it's too much."

"Too...?" He began before he realized what she meant. "Oh. Sorry."

"Don't be," She reached back to pat his arm and retrieve her brush. "It's actually kind of nice to feel this way again, but... I'm still not ready."

"It's okay," Nate replied, wishing she *was* ready and wondering what she'd think if he disappeared back into the bathroom for another shower, a cold one this time. "I'll let you get ready, then."

#

"Hey Nate," Robin said some time later, gently shaking his arm. "You hungry?"

"Huh?" he asked blearily. Apparently, his sleepless night had trumped the coffee and he'd managed to fall back asleep after all. "What time is it?"

"About seven," She answered, thankfully changed out of the loose tank top she'd obviously worn over nothing into a loose t-shirt and yoga pants that at least removed the possibility of seeing more than he could handle.



“I thought we could go get some breakfast.” she suggested, pushing a long lock of red hair behind her ear.

“Do you do that every day? Your hair, I mean.”

“No. I’m not really much of a morning person. That’s why I braid it, so I don’t have to spend an hour on it every day. Why? Don’t you like it down?”

“No, I like it. It just seems like a lot of work is all. I hope it’s not all for me.”

She smiled. “I noticed a diner just down the street last night.”

“I suppose I should get dressed then.”

#

“Why don’t I get dressed first and then we can attack you,” Nate suggested when they got back to the room. They’d managed to kill an hour over breakfast, but still had almost another entire hour until the event started and probably a full two until opening court.

“Sounds good,” Robin answered. It really didn’t matter who got dressed first - especially since Nate’s garb was so simple - but she thought she recognized his logic, if he went first, he wouldn’t feel hurried if it took her longer to get dressed than she expected.

It didn’t take him long to get changed, either. It wouldn’t have, even if he’d put on his tunic before coming back out, but he didn’t, opting instead for the bare basics. With emphasis on the “bare” part. Not that Robin was complaining. It was the first time she’d seen him without a shirt and it was definitely worth the wait; only lightly fuzzy, with a noticeable but not over-defined chest that just begged her to run her fingers across it.

Definitely not complaining.

At least not about the view.

“My turn,” She grabbed a couple of things out of her garment bag. Just like he’d done, she only changed into the minimum required by modesty before re-emerging where she found Nate staring at her, frozen halfway through putting on his belt.

“Let me help you,” She offered, coming closer.

“Robin...” He warned and she took a step back.

“What?” she asked before recognizing her earlier tone in his voice. “Too much?”

“Ohhh yeah,” he said.

“Really?” she asked, pretending she didn’t know what he meant. She looked up and was surprised when he came to her and placed his hands on her hips.

“I don’t think you know what you do to me.” He said and shook his head.

*I think I can probably guess*, she thought, remembering his thoroughly petable chest. “Then we’d better finish getting me dressed or we’ll never make it to the event.”

Chapter 16

“Your Excellency,” Duncan said with a bow as he held the door open for Joselyn.

“Thank you, Sir Knight,” She smiled with a small curtsy of her own.

“This feels weird,” He admitted quietly as he lead her towards the gate.

“Good weird, or bad?”

“Not really bad, but...”

“But?”

“Not that. It does feel weird having you by my side, but that’s definitely a good weird. It’s... it’s admitting being a knight again. It was nice just being your bard.”

“*Just* being my bard?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure I do.”

Duncan didn’t answer as they stepped up to the gate. “Two members.”

“Are you on the feast list?”

He looked at Joselyn.

“No,” she said. She was realizing that that was one of the unexpected perks of no longer being queen; she didn’t *have* to eat feast any more, which meant no more suffering through bland leek soup and still half-frozen chicken.

“I can put you on the waiting list, if you want.”

“No thank you.”

“So two adults... Lunch?”

“Please.”

“Forty dollars, please.”

Duncan fished out his wallet and paid for the two of them.

“You don’t have to do that,” she told him.

“I want to,” He replied, and she dimpled.

On a whim, she asked Duncan for her wallet. “How much is site again?”

“Site? Fifteen dollars.”

“And lunch is five? Here,” she said, handing over a pair of twenties. “This is for the next two newcomers, site and lunch.”

The man behind the desk blinked. “Thank you, Your Excellency.”

Joselyn smiled and again slipped her hand in the crook of Duncan’s arm. “Now about this *just* my bard thing...” She began as they walked into the event proper.

They were setting the last of their belongings in a corner that had yet to be claimed when Joselyn realized something.

“You didn’t bring your sword.”

“It’s still at Dad’s.”

“You know you have to wear one to court, right?”

“Yes,” He sighed.

“We’re going to have to do something about that,” She thought for a moment. “Come on.”

She led him across the hall to a shut door with a sign taped on it saying “Baronial Room” and knocked.

“Yes?” A young man asked, opening the door slightly.

“Is Tamsin in? Can you tell her Her Excellency Joselyn would like to ask a favor of her.”

The door shut and Duncan grinned at her.

“What?”

Before he could answer, the door opened revealing a smiling woman a little older than them. “Your Excellency, I didn’t think you were going to make it,” she said and glanced past her. “And who is this?”

“Your Excellency Tamsin, may I present Sir Duncan. Sir Duncan, Baroness Tamsin.”

“A pleasure,” he said, taking her hand and planting a light kiss on it.

“*That* Sir Duncan? Come in, come in. What’s this about a favor?”

“I’m afraid Sir Duncan here forgot his sword.”

“Really?” Tamsin asked, eyeing him up and down and leaving him feeling more than a bit uncomfortable. “I’d have thought after Coronation he’d have been sure to bring it with him.”

His discomfort grew into a blush and Tamsin laughed. “No matter,” She decided and turned to the large man pulling on his boots that Duncan realized he knew. “Allan, do you have a sword Sir Duncan can borrow?”

“Over in the corner,” The big man answered, not looking up. “Help yourself.”

“He always brings spares,” Tamsin told him.

Spares was an understatement. There were a half-dozen swords piled in the corner and Duncan chose a short sword hanging on a baldric.

“Much better. Thank you, Your Excellency,” Joselyn said once he’d slipped it over and once again gave him an appraising look. “Except...”

“I know, I know. I’m not sure what happened to them.”

“We’ll just have to keep our eyes out for a new set.”

#

It was nice. Spring Fling was far enough away from Grangemont - and even farther from its surrounding shires - that Duncan hardly recognized anyone. And what was even better was that Marcus wasn’t there; he and Joselyn could be together without having to worry about whispered comments.

It wasn’t completely without awkwardness, though. Apparently, news of his duel had made it this far and he was “*That* Sir Duncan”. Not that anyone held that against him. They seemed to

be holding their judgement until they got a feel for him. They'd even gone so far as to invite him to take part in the tournament. He couldn't win - that honor was only open to residents of the eastern end of the kingdom - but he could fight and give them a chance to see if the rumors they'd heard might be true.

"You're really going to fight this time, right?" Joselyn asked as they finished their lunch of cold cuts and cheese.

"Probably not as hard as I did at crown, but no, I'm not going to throw the tournament."

"Good," She smiled. "I'd hate for everyone to think my champion's a fake."

Joselyn helped Duncan put his armor on, wondering if he was as nervous as she felt. This really was an important tourney for him, even if he couldn't win. Whether he realized it or not, this was the first step in rebuilding his tarnished reputation; they wouldn't just be watching how well he fought, they'd be watching *how* he fought. Did he take his shots? How did he react to fighters who didn't? Did he hit too hard? Too soft? There were so many questions to be answered and only a dozen fights to answer them.

No pressure at all.

She helped carry his helmet to the erik and waited as he had his armor inspected and the assembled fighters did their salutes, smiling when his eyes met hers.

"Duncan," Joselyn said when he came and took off his helmet, waiting his turn.

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

"Good luck," she said and kissed him. Their first kiss, in public or private, at an event or not.

"Thank you, My Lady," he said, his cheeks as flush as hers felt and she hoped she hadn't distracted him too much.

#

Duncan hefted his shield and stepped onto the field, facing off against his seventh opponent of the day. From what she could see, the kiss she'd given him before the tournament had obviously served more as an inspiration than a distraction and he'd finished his first six fights undefeated. The knights had been close things just like last time, as had one of the squires, but the outcome of his other fights had been a foregone conclusion.

And Joselyn was fairly certain his current opponent - a skinny young left-hander in loaner armor - was about to suffer the same fate as the others.

"Lay on!" The marshal called, stepping back as the two men closed on each other.

If there was one thing she'd noticed about Duncan's fighting style that bugged her, it was his tendency to play with his food. He never sloughed or let down his guard, but the newer his opponent, the slower his attacks began as he tested their skill before gradually speeding things up, always staying just a hair better than them, but he'd misjudged his opponent this time and the man landed a blow on his knee.

Duncan grunted and his usually expert footwork disappeared. In fact, he planted his feet solidly, not moving them at all. He even stopped putting his hips behind his shots, relying solely on his upper body strength for the force he needed instead.

#

Duncan grunted as the other man's shot landed and the fight was no longer a sure thing. It came in low enough that it didn't count, but it was hard and landed right on his bad knee.

His opponent obviously realized *something* had changed in the fight and began to attack the knight in earnest. Now immobilized and completely on the defensive, Duncan struggled to find an opportunity to take the offensive, but with little luck. Finally, he thought he saw the kid fall into a pattern and threw a shot, catching him in the head.

"Dead!" The young fighter announced, and Duncan limped forward.

"Good fight. You nearly had me there. You might want to work on your accuracy, though. That leg shot was a bit low."

The young fighter nodded, and Duncan stepped back.

"You two ready?" the marshal asked as they returned to their spots. "Lay on!"

This time there was no playing with his food. As soon as the fight began, Duncan's sword arced around and caught the young man in his side.

"Dead!"

#

Joselyn watched as Duncan's form completely went to Hell before her eyes. The way getting hit in the knee by the new fighter had rattled him reminded her of that first fight with Marcus and he ended up only winning one of his last five fights.

"What happened?" she asked after he limped away from his last fight and dropped his sword and shield.

"Remember when I said I quit fighting because I got hurt?" he asked as he pulled off his helmet, revealing sweat beading on his face.

"Yes..." She said with dawning realization. "Your knee?"

"Yeah. Can you undo the straps on my legs for me?"

"I am *so* sorry," The young man who'd hit him said, interrupting them. "Are you okay?"

"Don't worry about it," he said, patting him reassuringly on the arm. "Shit happens. Just work on your accuracy, okay? And maybe work on your calibration a bit, too."

"Oh, um yeah. Of course. I'm so sorry."

"How bad is it, really?" Joselyn asked quietly once the young man had left.

"I hope you don't mind if we don't go dancing any time soon."

#

"Let me help," Joselyn said as Duncan lifted his armor bag with a grunt. She'd watched him hobble around as he armored down, trying not to let anyone see just how bad he'd been hurt.

"Can you grab my helmet and shield," he said, finally giving in to her, at least a little bit.

She pursed her lips in disapproval but didn't say anything until they reached her car in the parking lot.

"Why do you have to be so stubborn about this?" she asked after he managed to get his armor bag in the trunk of her car.

He leaned against the car and wiped at the sweat that was beading on his face. "I was an honest mistake," he told her, deciding there wasn't any reason to point out that *she* was stubborn, too. "If I make a big deal out of it today, they're going to pull his card."

She blinked at that. He was trying to save the kid?

"I can pretty much guarantee you he's never going to make that same mistake again," He continued. "Not after today, so why ruin it for him like that?"

"But he really did hurt you," She pointed out, her anger at him beginning to fade.

"No, I was already hurt, and he just hit it again. Sort of like what Marcus does, but on accident. And Monday I'll go see the doctor because it hasn't gotten any better and he'll tell me no more fighting..."

"And you'll ignore him, I suppose."

"No, believe it or not," He smiled and shrugged. "At least most of the time."

"Let me guess; unless somebody insults me again," Joselyn said.

"I wouldn't be much of a champion if I didn't. The rest of the time, I'll be a properly retired knight."

"I still say you could just eviscerate them in verse," she said, slamming the trunk harder than she really needed to and slipping under his arm to give him a helping hand.

"Just to the door," She reassured him. "And if anybody asks, we're snuggling."

Chapter 17

“We are going back to the hotel,” Joselyn announced shortly before it was time to set up for court.

“I thought you...”

“No arguing,” she told him. She’d been watching Duncan hobble around all afternoon, hoping he’d get better, but if anything, he’d continued to deteriorate instead. And she had a feeling that unless he got off his leg, he’d just continue to do so. “You’ve done your macho he-man bit enough, it’s time to actually rest your leg.”

“But...”

“No arguing,” She repeated, her voice becoming gentler. “Please? We’ll go back to the hotel, and you can soak in the hot tub for a while. I’ll get us some dinner, find something to watch and we can spend a quiet night in, just the two of us.”

“I...” He began before changing whatever it was, he’d been about to say and smiling. “I think I’d like that.”

#

“Jesus Christ,” Robin said. She studied Nate’s bruised and swollen knee before looking up at him accusingly. “You are such a guy.”

“I sure can’t say the same about you,” He smiled. They’d changed into their swimsuits and while hers was fairly modest, it still revealed more of her slender frame than even her pajamas the night before had.

“Such a guy,” She repeated with a shake of her head and a slight blush. With her slender hips and small breasts, she’d grown used to - and only somewhat past - being described as boyish and hearing Nate’s description did something for her.

“Think you can make it to the pool?”

“As long as we take the elevator,” He answered. “Don’t think I’m up for the stairs.”

She walked with one arm around Nate - half support, half embrace - all the way to the hot tub before helping him in. It was perhaps a bit overkill, but he didn’t complain; having Robin pressed against him like that did more to improve his mood than the Advil he’d taken earlier. In truth, he wasn’t sure if the hot water was doing more for his leg than simply sitting and relaxing, but it made Robin feel like she was helping, and that was something in itself.

“Did I ever tell you you’re an idiot?” she asked gently, snuggling against his side.

“Not in so many words, but...”

“I noticed we both brought our swimsuits.”

“I did hope something like this might happen,” Nate kissed the side of her head.

“Hurting yourself?”

“Well, no. Not that, but the rest...”

“Do you know how hard it was to sleep last night with you in the bed next to me?” Robin asked, absently tracing a finger up his leg.

Nate almost pointed out that just that morning she’d told him she wasn’t ready yet but decided that might not go over very well.

“Actually, I do. Especially since you were wearing what I’d imagined back in my apartment when you helped me move in last night.”

“I was?” she asked in honest surprise.

“And now with you next to me...” He breathed against her neck.

Robin shivered in the warm water. “I didn’t mean to tease you like that. Well, not that much. It’s just... it’s nice seeing the way you look at me.”

“That’s good,” Nate said, planting a kiss just below her ear. “Because I don’t plan on stopping any time soon.”

“Nate...” She said in a mixture of purr and protest.

“I know. And I’m not going to push,” he gave her earlobe a little nibble.

“Tease, maybe. Push, no

“I am looking forward to it, though.”

#

“I’m... back,” Robin said, quieting to nearly a whisper when she heard Nate gently snoring on the bed. She set down the sandwiches and beer she’d picked up and slid carefully onto the bed.

“Nate?” she said, gently rubbing his arm and was greeted by a mumbled something. “I got the food.”

His eyes slowly opened at the sound of her voice. “Hey,” he said blearily as his eyes drifted shut again. “I think I fell asleep.”

“That’s what happens when you push yourself so hard. You hungry? I got you a meatball sub, unless you want the reuben.”

He opened a single eye to study her. “You like reubens?”

“Well, Joselyn does,” Robin grinned. “She’s German, remember? Anything with sauerkraut.”

“And you say *I’m* delusional,” He smiled, rolling on his side and wrapping an arm around her.

“I’m kidding,” she told him, enjoying the closeness. “I figured we’d split a meatball sub... at least if you’ll let me up.”

He sighed dramatically and released her.

“So, what’s on TV?”

“I thought you were going to pick,” he said, sitting up as she handed him his dinner.

“I figured you couldn’t do any worse than last time,” she said and placed an open beer on the nightstand next to him.



“Mystery Science Theater 3000?” He suggested with a grin, and she rolled her eyes as she grabbed her own food.

“Okay, maybe I was wrong,” She grabbed the remote and began scrolling through the channels until she came across *Key Largo* on one of the classics channels.

The hurricane had yet to hit by the time they finished dinner and Robin snuggled in against Nate’s side. “I had fun today.”

“Even if your boyfriend’s such a guy?”

“Beats the alternative,” she said and smiled. “Boyfriend, huh?”

“Well, I *am* a boy...”

“I sure hope so,” She leaned her head against him and slipped a hand under his shirt to caress his abdomen.

Robin wasn’t sure how long she’d been asleep when she realized Humphrey Bogart had morphed into Mickey Rooney. She carefully extracted herself from a still-sleeping Nate and turned off the TV before getting ready for bed. She briefly eyed the bed she’d used the previous night before turning off the lights and crawling back in bed with Nate.

#

Nate woke Robin’s gentle scent and the feel of soft, smooth skin beneath his hand. He opened an eye and was surprised to realize it was her long red hair tickling his nose. Had they both fallen asleep watching the movie? But the TV was off and the fabric his hand lay beneath was far softer than the t-shirt she’d been wearing.

She’d meant to sleep with him, then. Carefully, he tried to pull his hand from beneath her shirt and felt her shiver.

“That tickles,” Robin said sleepily and drew his hand further up to her chest. He’d thought her skin was soft, but that was nothing compared to the small breast he now held, and his body was well aware of the fact.

“Don’t stop,” She purred when he tried to remove his hand.

“Robin...”

“It’s okay, I’m ready,” He heard her smile, and she began to roll over. “And it feels like something else is...”

Nate yelped when she bumped his knee and he scooted towards the edge of the bed.

“Oh jeez, I’m sorry,” she said, reaching for him. “I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s okay,” he told her. “Really, I’m fine.”

“I... I...”

“I’m fine,” He repeated, scooting back to her and giving her a kiss.

“But...” She began and sighed. “I guess it’s my turn to wait, huh? Turnabout, and all that.”

## Chapter 18

“What’d the doctor say?” Robin asked when Nate sat down across from her in the small cafeteria. He’d been working at the college for nearly a month now, but it still felt odd to her, seeing him all cleaned up like this. Although the brace he now wore did spoil the whole professor look he was going for some.

“According to her, I’d have been fine if somebody hadn’t kicked me in the knee after I hit it the first time.”

“I did not...” She began before remembering they were sitting in the middle of the cafeteria. While there weren’t any rules about faculty members dating people from other departments, couples who were too public about it tended to find themselves the rumor du jour. “I did not kick you,” she said in a much quieter voice.

“I’m teasing,” He smiled at her. “She said there wasn’t any new damage, and if I take it easy for a week or two, I’ll be fine.”

“And fighting?”

“About like I expected.”

“Not that it’ll make a difference,” Robin said.

“And...” She gestured vaguely.

“Like I said, a week or two.”

“Sure, the one time you listen to the doctor...”

“Hey, I can live without fighting, but...” He grinned, leaving the other half of the statement unsaid.

“Oh, I got you this,” Robin said, changing the subject as she picked up the backpack she used in lieu of a purse and began digging through it. She finally pulled out a gift-wrapped box and handed it to him. “Happy birthday.”

Nate took the gift and cocked his head. “You didn’t have your goon squad dig that up for you, did you?”

“No,” she said, her mock indignation failing to hide her embarrassed blush and she shrugged. “I bribed Leo over in HR.”

“I’m not going to ask *how* you bribed him,” He smiled and began unwrapping his present.

Robin snorted. “Nothing like that. I gave him that Doctor Who scarf we found in that one store. So... what do you think?”

Nate opened the box and pulled out a pair of tarnished spurs.

“The guy said they’re supposed to be from World War II, but I don’t know if anyone was still using horses back then, so I’m guessing they’re just regular, run-of-the-mill spurs.”

“They’re wonderful,” He smiled and reached across to squeeze her hand. “Thank you.”  
Robin dimpled. “Come over for dinner tonight?”  
“Even if I’m still on the injured list?”  
“I might have an idea or two about that.”

#

“I’ll be right back,” Robin apologized when someone knocked on the door. They’d both changed from their work clothes for dinner, him opting for jeans and a button-down while she’d gone for a light spring dress. She dabbed at her lips with her napkin before getting up from the table to answer the door.

“I brought pizza!” Mary announced. “You look nice tonight.”

“Thanks, but it’s not really a good time.”

“You going to tell me all about the event?” The older woman asked as she walked past her host.

“Oh, hi Nate,” she said when she noticed him rising from what was supposed to be he and Robin’s quiet dinner for two. “Hungry?”

“Actually...” He smiled and gestured at the table set in front of him.

“Oh. Right,” Mary said, obviously pretending to be oblivious. “More pizza for me, then.”

“Mary...” Robin warned.

“We might as well get it over with,” Nate said. “Or, we’ll never get rid of her.”

“Get what over with?” Mary set the pizza on the coffee table and grabbed herself a slice.

“Whatever it was you came over to talk to her about.”

“I told you; I want to hear how the event went,” She watched as Nate used his cane to walk to the small couch.

“First, what did you hear?” Robin sighed at their uninvited guest and sat on the couch, patting the spot next to her for Nate.

“Well... for starters, you two left before court.”

“And?” Nate asked, wrapping an arm around Robin as she snuggled in closer.

Mary shrugged. “I also heard you pulled a Bran.”

“A what?”

“She means you went out, kicked ass, and gimped off the field,” Robin explained, patting his uninjured leg before turning her attention back to the other woman. “A new kid nailed him pretty hard in the knee.”

“That would do it. What about leaving early?”

“He could barely walk.”

“And he can talk for himself,” Nate said, squeezing her hand. “I wasn’t quite that bad, but yeah, I was hurting. So, we went back to the hotel and she had me soak in the hot tub for a while before we fell asleep watching...” He glanced at Robin. “*Dark Passage?*”

“*Key Largo.*”

“That’s right.”

“Okay,” Mary said. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Like that you interrupted dinner?” Nate suggested, his pleasant tone fading. “And Robin never invited you in?”

He wasn’t sure which of the two women’s eyes were wider at his sudden burst of assertiveness, but he was pretty sure Robin wasn’t too upset about it, and he really didn’t care what Mary thought right now.

“So, if you’ll excuse us, it’s time for you to go,” He finished, pushing himself up again.

“I’m sorry about that,” Robin said after she shut the door behind the intruder.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for,” Nate said, limping up to her and wrapping his arms around her waist. “It’s not your fault she’s a nosey busy-body.”

“She’s also my friend.”

“I know, but her timing sucks.”

“Could have been worse. But you’re right, she does tend to show up at the worst times.”

“And she has lousy taste in pizza. I mean, who puts pickles on their pizza?”

“Good thing I cooked, huh?”

“Definitely,” He smiled and kissed her.

“And did I mention there’s desert, too?”

“Really?” He grinned back at her. “Too bad I’m on the injured list.”

“You could still stay.”

“But...”

“I like lying next to you,” she said with a shrug. “In the same bed, at least.”

“Yeah, that whole same room, different beds thing was a bad idea,” He agreed.

“What if I promised to be gentle? I told you I had some ideas that might work...”

## Chapter 19

“Take a break, would you? We’ve got this,” Joselyn said, exasperated. Even though they hadn’t entirely followed his doctor’s orders and probably cost him an extra week’s recovery time, he had improved considerably and only needed his cane in the evenings now. Unless, of course, he pushed himself too hard or - apparently - spent too much time riding in a car. They’d already done the latter - and considering how comfortable she’d found his truck; she couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for him - and he was now working his way towards the former.

“I need to stretch,” he said, coming up and wrapping an arm around her.

She grumbled but decided not to argue. One of the things she’d discovered in the month and a half they’d been officially dating was just how stubborn he could be, especially when he got in full guy mode.

“Just the light stuff, okay? And we’ll handle the pavilion,” ‘We’, in this case, were a half-dozen people from the camp next to theirs who were already busy pulling all the materials necessary for the big tent from the back of the truck.

“As you wish.”

“Still not Buttercup.”

“Yes, My Lady Amalthea,” He smiled, kissing her cheek and taking his own turn at the back of the truck.

They didn’t have all that much light stuff, but Duncan did his best to follow her orders. He grabbed their camp chairs and piled them next to where the fire pit would be, which came next, and then the table that would serve as their kitchen and the little Coleman stove, and so on. He was ready for a break by the time they’d finished setting up the pavilion and didn’t argue when Joselyn told him to sit. At least not after he’d grabbed a beer from the cooler she’d expressly told him to leave in the truck, but still somehow wound up next to their little kitchen.

Theirs.

It was amazing how many things he - and she - had begun thinking of as theirs. Pretty much everything they’d brought was hers - nearly all of his camping gear had either been sold or rotted away in the years since he’d stopped playing - but in this instance, at least, it was theirs.

Their home for the weekend.

#

“There,” Joselyn announced, emerging from the pavilion in a tunic and pants combination Duncan didn’t remember ever seeing before. Then again, this was their first summer eventing

together and the garb he was used to seeing her in was probably a bit on the warm side for the current late-spring weather. "All set."

"You changed already?"

"I didn't want to break you before we even got started," She smiled, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"You look good," He told her after a quick kiss.

"Delusional."

"Are you complaining?"

"I suppose not. Now go get changed so we can park the truck and go wander."

"Yes, My Lady."

#

Duncan left his cane in camp, only limping slightly as they walked down the site's main thoroughfare. The sun was just beginning to set and all around them was a beehive of activity as everyone worked to get their camps set up before they had to rely on headlights and lanterns for their illumination.

"This way," Joselyn said, pulling lightly on his arm and they turned towards an obviously half-erected camp. Not even half-erected in fact; a single pavilion stood while a party of mostly familiar people worked to raise a second. "Hello in camp!" She called out.

"Come on in!" Maire called back from inside the work in progress. Duncan studied the camp while they waited. The pavilion they'd already set up wasn't a style he'd seen before, looking almost like a squashed a-frame with one side propped up as a make-shift awning, but it was obviously the way it'd been designed. And it made a certain amount of sense, he decided - at least for summer events - you slept in the tent half and lived in the half beneath the awning.

"There," Maire said, brushing off her hands before hugging Joselyn like they hadn't seen each other just a few days before. "I'm afraid you're a little late to help with set-up and too early for food."

"Don't worry. We ate before we got here, and I'm trying to keep Duncan from working."

"How's that going?"

Joselyn shrugged. "About like trying to keep Bran off his feet."

"He's here," Maire smiled. "Hey Bran, company!"

"Bran?" Duncan asked.

"Charlie to my Angles," Joselyn explained.

"Ah, brute squad."

"More like Inigo," Maire corrected. "With maybe a touch of Vissini."

"Bran, this is Duncan," she said as the tall man approached.

"A pleasure," he said, wiping off his hands on his pants before shaking the other man's. "Maire's told me quite a bit about you."

"Any of it good?"

"Mostly. It's nice to know there's someone else who doesn't put up with all her shit."

"Hey," Maire objected, slapping him. "So where are you two camping?"

“Back in no-man’s land,” Joselyn said. “After a year stuck in the Royal encampment, it’s nice to be a nobody again.”

“Why is it that when I say that, I get in trouble but when you do, it’s all right?” Duncan asked.

“Because, a Lady’s always right,” Bran pointed out before grinning at Maire. “At least usually.”

“Hey now.”

“Besides,” Joselyn added, her turn to grin as she squeezed Duncan’s side. “This way we have some privacy.”

#

“I told you; I don’t want to break you before we got started,” Joselyn purred as Duncan curled up next to her.

“I thought we were started,” He breathed into her and slipped his hand beneath her shirt, playing with her belly button. She wasn’t entirely sure what his fascination with that particular divit was, but she also wasn’t complaining.

At least not usually.

“Stop that,” She giggled as he tickled her and pushed his hand away before turning and kissing him. “Tomorrow, okay?”

“As...”

“Don’t,” She stopped him. She still wasn’t up to thinking about true love. True lust? Yes. But true love? No.

Not yet.

“You know,” She began after a minute or two of comfortable silence. “I don’t think I’ve heard you play since the Irish festival.”

“Hm?”

“Your guitar. I don’t think I’ve heard you play since the Irish festival.”

“Well, bardic kind of fell apart after I moved,” Duncan said sleepily, eyes still closed. “And Spring Fling...”

“It’s too bad,” she said, her voice becoming breathy. “It really is a turn on.”

“Really?” he asked, his eyes finally opening.

“Too bad you didn’t play tonight, huh?” she said, kissing his nose impishly before rolling over and snuggling back into him.

#

Duncan woke to the throbbing of his knee. Next to him, Joselyn half muttered something when he rolled onto his back and stretched out his leg, but other than that, she showed no sign of waking. And the pain in his knee showed no sign of easing, either.

It was dark outside and the silence filling the site told him that it was somewhere between late and early and if he had to, he’d guess it was about four. He didn’t really want to get up, but he also didn’t see any reason to wake the woman at his side with his tossing and turning until it

really *was* morning. Careful not to disturb Joselyn, he crawled out of bed, pulled on his clothes, and stepped out into the predawn darkness.



## Chapter 20

Joselyn awoke to the realization she was alone, which was the last thing she'd expected. What she had expected was to wake to the feel of Duncan's fingers tracing paths across her skin, unnecessarily trying to arouse her.

"Duncan?" she asked, blearily looking around the pavilion on the off chance he was hiding behind his guitar or something, but no luck. She couldn't even find his guitar, for that matter.

So, he obviously was outside somewhere. And not in camp, either, if she couldn't hear him playing. More curious than concerned, she dressed and stepped out into the early morning fog. But he was in camp after all, his bad leg stretched out, his guitar sitting in its case, talking to Sir Pal.

"I didn't realize you were this much of a morning person," she said, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "Did you start the coffee yet?"

"No, sorry."

"S' okay. You make it too weak anyway. What time did you get up?"

"I'm not sure," Duncan glanced at Pal.

"Don't look at me," He answered. "All I know is that it was some time after two o'clock tacos. I was wandering around, trying to find my camp when I found this idiot out here playing his guitar."

"Hey now," Duncan protested.

"She was in there, lying in bed all by herself, and you were out here doodling your guitar," The other man pointed out. "If that's not an idiot, I don't know what is."

"I told you; my knee was bugging me, and I didn't want to wake her."

Yep, definitely meant for her. He'd gotten Duncan to answer what was going to be her next question without making him go all guy on her.

"You okay?" she asked, managing to keep her tone casual.

"It's just the weather," Duncan answered, waving vaguely at the sun sitting barely above the horizon. "I'll be fine."

"Good," she said, sitting down. "You've still got to fight this afternoon."

He gave her a surprised sideways glance. He'd thought she was dead-set against him armoring up.

"You're the one who said you didn't want everyone to know how bad he hurt you."

"I heard about that," Pal said. "How bad is it?"

"He's not supposed to fight anymore, but he's a guy, so..." Joselyn shrugged with a sigh. "I told him he can do pick-ups today if he takes it easy."

“Definitely an idiot,” Pal announced, grinning at Duncan.

“So... what else is going on?” The other man asked, trying to get the conversation off his apparent lack of intelligence.

“Did you hear about Crown?”

“What?”

“Well, you know the good Duke Marcus entered, right?”

“Yes...” Joselyn answered with a sense of dread. She’d seen the list of entrants, of course, and noticed her ex’s presence on the list, fighting for one of her former ladies in waiting. If he won...

“*Somehow* he found himself in a nearly all-Duke pool.”

“Oh really?” Duncan laughed, guessing where this was going.

“Oh yeah. And he got his ass *kicked*. And when he started shrugging shots, *they* started cup-shotting him. Only took three times for him to get the message.”

“Couldn’t happen to a better man,” Joselyn laughed.

“Shrugging shots in front of two kings during your duel was not his finest moment,” Pal announced. “And that whole ‘flat’ bit... yeah, there was no way he was going to win Crown.”

“That’s one thing I never understood, how did Their Majesties know I was a knight?” Duncan asked.

“It wasn’t me,” Joselyn said, too familiar with the question. The first time he’d brought it up, he’d accused her of it. She’d finally convinced him she hadn’t, and neither had anyone she knew of, but the question obviously still lingered.

“I may have mentioned it after you challenged him,” Pal admitted.

“Hey, I’ve seen his type before and knew he was going to be a dick about it, so...”

“So you arranged for them to be our seconds.”

“Actually, that was their idea,” The older knight said. “I just told them about it. Not that I was complaining. Alric was less than pleased with Marcus and made sure Thomas and all the rest of the knights knew that they *really* didn’t want him to be the face of Lindow anymore.”

Joselyn snorted.

“And after Anne saw his performance at Crown, she let him know he wasn’t welcome in her court anymore,” Pal continued.

“She banished him?”

“Not officially, but he’s sure not going to get called up before court anytime soon,” Pal said and chuckled. “I hear the king went to the event in Avery last month and Marcus was the only knight there. Apparently, Thomas propped the Sword of State against his throne for the whole court.”

“Really?” Joselyn said. Tradition said that a knight would - not was supposed to, *would* - hold the Sword of State during royal court, to refuse him the right was tantamount to denying his knighthood. “How’d he take that?”

“Not well,” Pal answered.

The morning was given over to the fencers, which meant Duncan had plenty of time to get his leg working again and the best way to do that was to use it. So, after he and Joselyn said goodbye to Pal and shared a leisurely breakfast, they decided to go wandering. The site was on an island, connected to the mainland by a single bridge, and it felt like they'd left the real world far behind. They walked down the tree-lined path that served as the site's main thoroughfare, passing by still slowly-moving camps on their way to the central square that would hold most of the day's activities.

The fencers were there, warming up and they watched as Maire, Bran and the rest of the goon squad went through their paces.

"Is she wearing a greave?" Duncan asked when he noticed a glint from Eva's leg.

"Rian said it's so she can hear when someone hits her leg," Joselyn explained. "I guess she had some trouble with that at war last year."

"And it helps?"

"I guess so."

"Stupid question," he said a little while later.

"I'd expect nothing less from you," She smiled.

He grinned back, but continued on, unperturbed. "Your last name is Speer, but you don't fight."

"I think that's more of a statement than a question, but yeah. I didn't pick it, though. When I first started playing, there was another Joselyn in one of the other groups who used to come play with us a lot, but neither of us had come up with last names, so the baron started referring to us as 'the Great' - she was rather well-endowed - and 'the Spear' since I was so tall and skinny. The weird part was that I kind of liked the sound of it, and what with me being a history major at the time and all, I did some digging and - lo and behold! - not only was 'Speer' an actual period name, but it means someone who was tall and skinny."

"Did anyone notice when you made it official?"

"I'm not sure," She admitted. "But here's a fun fact, the other Joselyn changed her name. To Anne."

"As in..." Duncan began and laughed. "Now that you mention it... I wouldn't quite call them huge tracts of land, but they're certainly expansive."

## Chapter 21

Despite all his attempts to make it cooperate, his knee was just no match for the oncoming storm and fighting was not in the cards. But neither was sitting around the camp doing nothing, so with Joselyn's comments the night before floating somewhere through the back of his mind, he grabbed his guitar and a chair and set up in a corner of the town square.

It really was a nice day out - maybe a touch on the warm side, but nothing to complain about - and there was no bardic to worry about and all in all it was a great day to play the tapestry on the wall. He didn't even have to worry too much about whether his music was period or not, he could just play.

*"It used to make me so fed up, people always asking me what will you be when you grow up..."*

And like magic, Joselyn was there, grinning at him as he finished up. "Going home?" she asked, and he began to play.

*"Tell my mother she'll be on my mind, Tell my lover not to break this time..."* Joselyn sang.

They continued their impromptu concert, moving on to actual period songs for most of it before Duncan felt his oncoming crash and segued into one last song as she tapped her toes and whistled along.

*"Some things in life are bad, They can really make you mad. Other things just make you swear and curse..."*

#

"I thought you were going to fight," Joselyn said when they got back to their secluded encampment.

"What did you have to go into town for, anyway?" Duncan replied, blatantly changing the subject.

"Oh, Rian and Eva said I could set up my studio in their garage, so I figured I'd pick up some steel while we were here."

"Studio?"

"You must be tired. What do I teach?"

"Art history?"

"Correct. So, what sort of degree do you think I need to teach that?"

"Okay, I feel like an idiot," Duncan smiled and then frowned. "Did you say you had to get some steel?"

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, it's just... what type of art do you do?"

“I’m a sculptor. You know that lamp in my living room?”

“You mean the one that’s all...” Unsure how to explain, he twisted his hands together.

“That’s one of mine,” she said.

“You really are tired, aren’t you?” she asked and pulled her phone out of her pouch. “We’ve still got a few hours until anything’s happening, why don’t you lay down for a bit?”

#

The wind began to blow shortly after he lay down and Joselyn quickly cleaned their camp before heading out again. Duncan had thrown a wrench in her plans when he’d decided to play in the middle of Merchant’s Row. How were you supposed to buy something for someone when they were right there? Not that there was much of a Merchant’s Row, but what there was included both a leather booth and the tried and true *Pillaged and Plundered*, an SCA-specific consignment store where she never knew what she’d find.

And then there was the whole matter of buying supplies for the project without letting him know what she was doing *while* riding with him. Luckily, she’d talked to Rian, and they’d agree to transport them for her, what with it all going to their place anyway.

She figured she’d hit the leather booth last since it was the most straightforward of her stops - a hide, some strapping, a box of rivets and maybe a few other baubles that caught her eye. *Pillaged and Plundered*, though... It was two pavilions tied together filled with a maze of tables, shelves, and clothes racks with an inventory that was always changing and even though she was looking for something specific, there was too great a chance of finding some hidden treasure for her to skip over anything.

This was going to take some time.

#

“Duncan, Hon? It’s time to wake up,” Joselyn said, laying down next to him and gently rubbing his side.

“Five more minutes,” He mumbled happily and draped an arm across her.

“I’m not falling for that one again,” she said, but still scooted in closer. “We’ve still got to eat before court.”

“We could skip...”

Joselyn closed her eyes and shivered but didn’t relent. “I’m not having you disappear in the middle of the night again, okay?”

#

The wind turned to rain shortly before court, and continued to grow in intensity, leaving the attendants running for their camps after its end and even with their cloaks, they were both soaked by the time they reached their camp. From there, it was a mad dash to reorganize their pavilion’s interior to make room for their fire pit, giving them a dry place to warm themselves and each other.

No matter what the schedule might say, the event was done, and Duncan and Joselyn lay curled together in the fire light, listening to the staccato pattern of the rain on the canvas.

“You’re not going to cheat on me, are you?” she asked as they lay there.

“Never,” He replied immediately and propped himself on his elbow, meeting her eyes.

“What brought this on?”

“I don’t know,” She shrugged, hesitant to admit what she was thinking.

“I...” She began and shrugged again. “It feels like we’re going beyond, well, just dating.”

“So I really am your boyfriend? I like the sound of that.”

“Not that, it’s more... You’re my Lord? Does that make sense?”

He didn’t reply right away, and she wondered if she’d said something wrong.

“When we first met, you were my queen and I was content to play your bard,” He finally began. “And you went along with it. But as I got to know you better, I found myself wishing I were more... and that you were less.

“And then I kept hearing more and more about Marcus, and decided you needed a champion, not just some sword-jock who’d fought for the right because it would make them look better, a *real* champion,” He continued. “Someone who fought for *you*, no matter what you were. And for some reason, you let me.”

“As I recall, you didn’t give me much of a choice.”

“You could have told me no,” Duncan said. “You can always tell me no.”

He paused again, and brushed a still-damp lock of hair out of her face as he collected his thoughts. “Somewhere along the way I realized you don’t really need a bard though, or a champion but I... I still wanted to be a part of your life.”

“I’m still not sure why you let me,” He gave a light laugh. “Hell, I’m not sure why you let me do any of those.”

“Because...” Joselyn began, her turn to struggle with her words. “Because I think I knew that if I asked you to stop, you would.”

“Is there a but?”

“I’m not The Queen,” she told him. “And I don’t need a subject. I need an equal: a partner. Someone I can trust, someone who I know will be there when I need him. Someone who trusts me and knows that I will be there for him.”

“Is that why you were so mad at me?”

“I’d thought I could trust you...”

“No, you didn’t,” Duncan interrupted.

Joselyn studied his eyes. She kept forgetting that that incident had hurt both of them, not just her. “You’re right, I didn’t,” She admitted. “The thing is, you *were* there whenever I needed you. I *could* trust you,” Joselyn cupped his cheek. “Just not with my heart. But I could see myself doing that, and then...”

He covered her hand with his, letting her talk. “I don’t know if you know how much that hurt, knowing there was a big part of your life you didn’t think I needed to know. But... I *liked* you! Liked singing with you. Liked knowing I didn’t have to worry about putting up with Marcus’ bullshit,”

She sighed. “I liked having you there whenever I needed cheering up. And you...”

“And now?”

“And now I think I do trust you, and it scares the Hell out of me. I... I haven’t had the best luck with men, but... but I want you. *Here*. Next to me.

“I don’t love you,” she told him quietly and the words pierced Duncan’s heart. “But I can see myself falling in love with you, and... and it scares me. What if...”

They lay there, studying each other, looking for answers, and Duncan knew there was nothing he could say to reassure her. She was right; she did deserve to know. “I broke my end of the bargain.”

“What?”

“With my dad. The deal was that I go a whole year without revealing who I really was. If I couldn’t, I had to become king.”

The last - assuming he could become king just like that - was the height of arrogance, but after his performance against Marcus, she knew he had a real chance. The thing is, she didn’t want to be queen...

Did she?

“I need your help picking a consort,” he told her as if reading her thoughts. “I know how rough your reign was and I don’t want to put you through that again. But I also don’t want to pick someone you don’t trust. And, well, frankly, I don’t know all that many people. I was thinking maybe Eva or Rian - or maybe Maire - but none of them feel... right.”

“None of them are me.”

“Well, yeah. It’ll feel weird, not having you by my side.”

Not would, will. Not only was he assuming he’d win, but he was also assuming she wouldn’t let him fight for her. “You really did have trouble with the whole humility thing, didn’t you?”

“Believe it or not, this is a lot better than I used to be.”

“And you won’t cheat on me?”

“Never.”

“I think we can figure something out,” she told him. Did she want to be queen? No... but she *could* see herself sitting at his side. “I’m not moving in with you, though.”

Duncan blinked. Where the Hell had that come from?

## Chapter 22

“He’s going for crown?” Maire asked in obvious surprise. “For real? He’s really going to try and win? And you’re okay with it?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Robin asked, her focus remaining on the hunk of wax she was working on.

“Well... you had so much fun being queen last time.”

Robin looked up at her. “And who said I would be his queen?”

“But...”

“I said *he* was going for Crown, not that *we* were...”

“What’d we miss?” Melissa asked, interrupting the other two as she and Aria entered the garage-cum-studio with drinks in hand.

“Nate’s going for Crown,” Mary answered. “But Robin’s not going to be his queen.”

“Then who is?” Aria asked with raised eyebrows.

“His first choice was you,” Robin said, pointing a dental pick at the auburn-haired woman. “Followed by you, Mel, and then you, Mary.”

All three of the other women shared a glance and blinked, trying to process the news. “Can’t be me,” Mary finally said. “I’m Charlie’s consort.”

“And why me?” Aira asked. “Or Mel, for that matter?”

“Well, you’re safe.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I know nothing’s going to happen between you and him...”

“So, because we’re lesbians?” Mel asked.

“No. I mean, well...” Robin began and shook her head, clearing it. “I *trust* you. I know you know there aren’t any strings attached, and I don’t have to worry about you and Nate...”

“Not sure you’re helping things,” Aria said.

“No, I think I get what she’s saying,” Mary interrupted. “You’re not safe because your lesbians, you’re safe because you love each other. *And* because you know that she’s going to be there, even if she isn’t queen.”

She paused and turned her attention to Robin. “That’s one thing you’re going to have to figure out if you can be Nate’s... I’m not sure what you’d call it - His consort? - *without* being his queen? Can you let Aria or Mel do it? I mean, *really* be his queen without having to worry about you trying to run things from behind the scenes? Because if all you want is a figurehead, you’d be better off finding some newbie who doesn’t know any better.”



Robin sighed. “And there’s the problem. I’m not sure I *can* not be his queen if he wins. Even if I’m not on the throne, you - or whoever we decide on - are going to be stuck with me sticking my nose in your business for the entire reign. That’s part of the reason I like one of you...”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Mel interrupted. “It’s my senior year and I’m going to be *way* too busy before graduation. And after... who knows if we’re even gonna still be here, or if I get a job out of town.”

She glanced over at Aria. “And then there’s going to be the whole planning the wedding thing, and...” She shrugged.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Robin said, returning to her work, not overly surprised or disappointed at the news. At least not about their turning down her offer. The planning a wedding part was new, though. Maybe not a surprise - not really - but still new.

#

“So, what do you think?” Nate asked as his sister handed him the sword she’d brought.

“You want *me* to be your consort?” she asked in disbelief, sitting in the chair next to him on the balcony. “That has to be one of your most idiotic ideas.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Hi! I’m the guy who was pretending I wasn’t a knight until I had to kick a Duke’s ass and now, I’m going to be your king,” she said. “And oh, by the way, your new queen’s my newbie sister none of you’ve ever met before.”

“You’re not a newbie,” Nate pointed out.

“Oh, that’s even better - I picked a viscountess from another kingdom who hasn’t played in fifteen years to be your new queen,” Karen told him. “How many times did Dad hit you in the head, anyway?”

“If you’d have come in admitting who you were from the beginning, or if you really were what you’d pretended to be, it might work, but you didn’t. You came in all sneaky-like until it fitted your mood and then, bam! Insta-knight. They’ll think you’re an arrogant bastard trying to prove how much better than Lindow Bastion is, and I’m not even sure how much of that’s true. Arrogant, definitely.”

“Aren’t you the pessimist?” Nate said, studying the blade in his hands. It was his sword, the one that had been in storage for the past ten years. The one that had obviously gotten wet some time in that period and whose blade was covered in rust.

“You really do need a local consort. I knew who I’d recommend...”

“Yeah,” He sighed, sliding the sword back in its sheath.

“But you’re not going to ask her, are you?”

“She doesn’t want to be queen again.”

“She told you that?” Karen asked.

“Well...” Nate paused, mentally replaying his conversation with Robin.

“Did you ask her?”

“Well...” He began playing over the discussion in his mind and discovered that, in fact, he hadn’t.

“You are *such* an idiot.”

#

“Well Mel, Aria, and Mary are out,” Robin said, laying on the couch in his living room and propping her head on his lap.

“Same with Karen,” he said, resting his arm on her stomach. “What about your project? How’s that coming?”

“It’s coming,” She answered non-committally. Considering the fact that they’d brought some of the supplies back with them from their last event in *his* truck, *and* he’d helped haul the rest from Mary’s place to her new studio, she couldn’t exactly hide the fact that she was working on *something*, but so far he hadn’t asked what it was. “And don’t worry, we’ve still got four months. We’ll find someone.”

Nate didn’t say anything, and she got the distinct feeling he was trying to work up to something. “What?”

“Do *you* want to be my consort?”

“What?” Robin blinked, caught completely by surprise.

“Well, you are my Lady. I probably should have asked you before I started looking for someone else.”

“That probably would have been a good idea, but...”

“I know. It’s just I don’t know all that many women in the SCA and finding one in the next four months who won’t think this is just a way of getting in her pants and that people won’t think I picked just so I could fight...”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“Well... yes. Which is why it’s going to be so difficult to find someone.”

“Does it have to be the next Crown?” she asked after some thought.

“No, but I want to get the whole thing over with.”

Robin blinked at that and sat up. “You want to get being king over with.”

He blinked back at her, aware that he’d obviously said something wrong. “What?”

“So the only reason you want to be king is because of some bet you made with your father?” she asked, standing up.

“Well... yeah.”

“Nate,” She sighed in disappointment, looking down at him. “I’m not going to be your queen, and I’m not going to help you find a consort.”

“Why not?”

“When you figure that out, let me know,” She picked up her purse and left.

## Chapter 23

“And she won’t talk to you at all?” Pal asked over his beer as the two men shared a corner booth in the pub where Nate and Robin had performed. “Not even at work?”

“She’s either been eating in her office or off campus. And she won’t answer her phone, either.”

“I’m obviously missing something. I mean I can understand her saying no, but walking out on you like that and refusing to even talk to you? What, exactly, did you tell her?”

“Well...” Nate paused, trying to remember his words. “She asked me if it had to be this Crown and I told her I just wanted to get the whole thing over with.”

Pal practically choked on his beer. “You told her what? No wonder she won’t talk to you.”

“What?”

“You really are an idiot, you know that?” The other man said, shaking his head. “You told the woman who agreed to be a consort because it sounded romantic and then spent her entire reign as a piece of regalia for a king who was strictly there to become a duke that you wanted to be king because your daddy told you you *had* to? Christ, Nate, I thought you had at least *some* sense.”

Nate fell silent at that.

“Did you even *ask* your dad if you’d broken your part of the bargain?” Pal paused only briefly before continuing. “I didn’t think so. You just assumed that because Joselyn outed you that it was over, and you had to become king. And then you assumed that you *would* become king, first time out, with a knee that *might* be healed by then? I thought the purpose of this whole thing was to teach you humility, not give you an even bigger head.”

“I...”

“Christ, Nate, grow up,” The older knight said and walked out.

Nate watched him leave, beginning to realize how big a mistake he’d made. Hadn’t he been the one who always looked down on fighters who entered Queen’s Champion because they thought they had to to become a knight? And here he was doing the same thing, but on a much grander level.

No wonder Robin was pissed at him.

He continued to nurse his beer as he tried to figure out a way to make it up to her, and knowing it wouldn’t be an easy task. An idea finally came to him and a moment later, one that felt right, and he realized it didn’t matter if he got her back or not, he had to do it.

Not for her. Not for his father. For himself.

He pulled out his phone and dialed, hoping they’d answer. “Hey, it’s Nate,” He began when the other person did. “No, wait! Please, just give me a minute.”

He paused, listening for a moment as they replied. "Yeah, I was an idiot. Any chance you could get her to go to Tourney of Champions?"

He paused again while they talked. "Please? I want to tell her I'm sorry."

#

"You're still working on that?" Mel asked, watching Robin carefully pour the molten brass into the mold. "I thought you two'd broken up."

"I guess I'm an optimist," The other woman said, carefully setting down the crucible and wiping her forehead while she waited for the metal to cool. "Besides, if he doesn't come to his senses, I can always sell it, or keep it for myself."

She snorted. "Or turn it into a hammer and beat him with it."

"I still don't understand why you decided to make it in the first place."

"Because I'm a romantic?"

"For all the good that does you. At least he didn't cheat on you."

"I almost..."

"No you don't," The younger woman said, not allowing any room for argument. "Okay, he might be an arrogant son of a bitch who doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut, but at least he respected you enough to stay faithful."

"For the whole five months we were together," Robin sighed.

"The real problem is that Nate really is a nice guy," Mel said. "Even if he is an idiot."

"I know," The other woman said sadly. "And I thought..."

"Hey, enough about the idiot," She interrupted, her voice becoming lighter. "What you need is a break from all this. Tourney of Champions is next week..."

"I don't think..."

"Rumor has it..." Mel began leaning forward to whisper conspiratorially. "That Aria's supposed to get her Light there."

"I thought she already had one?" Robin said, pretty sure she could guess where this so-called rumor had begun and knowing it wasn't such a thing.

"Nope," The younger woman grinned. "That was her Splendor. You can camp with us, if you want."

"Does Mary know?"

"About Aria? I'm pretty sure she does."

"Do you think it would be okay if I made the medallion?" Robin asked. She still didn't know Aria as well as the others, but she continued to like what she saw. "I never liked giving people the regular off-the-shelf awards."

"Actually, I think that's a wonderful idea," Mel told her. The idea had never occurred to her, and she was suddenly glad that her excuse for getting Robin to the event was true.

Not that it would have mattered. She didn't have any sort of idea what Nate had planned, but Robin really needed to decide what to do about him one way or the other and - whatever the outcome of their upcoming meeting - this had the makings of one Hell of a show.

#

“What do you think?” Nate asked, handing the other man a beer.

“Honestly?” Pal said. “I think it’s about damn time.”

“Oh gee, thanks.”

“Really. I don’t think you realize just how big of a dick you’ve been, and I don’t mean about Robin. Ever since you started fighting, you’ve been trying to outdo your dad; authorized on your sixteenth birthday, becoming Queen’s Champion as soon as you turned eighteen, getting knighted when you were nineteen...”

“And that makes me a dick?” Nate asked defensively.

“No, but *that* does.”

“What?”

“Throwing how great you are in everyone’s face, challenging anyone who doesn’t think you’re God’s gift to the SCA...”

“You’re dad was right, you really do need to learn some humility and I thought you were getting there but then...” Pal shook his head.

“But do you think it’ll work?”

“That depends on what you mean by work. Will it get her back...?” He shrugged. “One thing though - if you do it, don’t do it in court.”

“Any chance you can talk to Their Majesties about it?”

“Now *that* is a good idea. They’re still not too thrilled about your last little surprise at Coronation and I’d hate to see what they’d do if you dropped something like this on them unannounced. I’ll talk to them for you, but it’s going to be up to them what happens.”

## Chapter 24

Duncan sighed and crawled out of the Wal-Mart special he'd pitched in its little tucked-away corner of The Company's encampment, dressed in his full knightly regalia. He would have preferred camping by himself in some little abandoned corner of the site, but Pal and Gregor had double-teamed him, insisting that that was just because he wanted to sit around and mope, although the two men assumed different reasons for his depression. But, he supposed, there was nothing saying he couldn't hide in his tent the whole event. At least until - or if - their Majesties summoned him. He didn't know what Their Majesties had decided about his idea, or when it would happen if they let him do it, but he wanted to be ready.

Until then, he planned to content himself with staying inside his tent. Of course, that was before he was forcibly reacquainted with the joys of a nylon tent on a sunny June day. At least the camp was empty, though. The fighters were off enjoying a day of melees while the rest of the camp were attending classes, camp-hopping, or simply wandered Merchant's Row, looking for things they couldn't live without.

He sat on a bench near the unlit fire pit, surrounded by solitude with his guitar on his lap and let himself flow through his music.

There were no words at first, his fingers wandering the instrument's strings in search of truth, but after a while, they found what they were looking for and he began to sing.

*"Some nights, I stay up cashing in my bad luck, some nights, I call it a draw..."*

#

Joselyn listened to Duncan's familiar voice fade into the distance as she sat in camp, working silently on her yet-to-be-abandoned project, her heart breaking. It wasn't just the sorrow in his voice, it was also her desire to go to him, to join him.

To forgive him.

But she wouldn't do that, not until he saw what he'd done, but it was so hard. Even if he never changed, she couldn't deny his siren song. He was...

*"First time I saw your face I knew I was meant for you..."* He began in the distance and Joselyn fled her heart.

Again, the music faded, but this time Duncan was interrupted before he could move on.

"Hear ye! Hear ye! There will be a Peer Circle for all knights and masters of arms in the royal encampment beginning in five minutes," A herald called before continuing down the lane. "Hear ye! Hear ye!..."

With a sigh, Duncan put away his guitar and rose. He was still a knight - at least for now - and he would continue to do his duty, no matter his feelings.

#

“There you are!” Rian called, catching a hold of Joselyn’s arm as she wandered blindly down the path. “I was just coming to get you; The Queen wants you.”

“This really isn’t...”

“Come on,” The younger woman said, pulling her along.

“But...”

“Come on!”

#

Duncan took a weary seat among his fellow knights, still too lost in himself to really pay attention to the conversations around him or the odd, concerned looks he drew. It was his first circle since coming to Lindow and - crown willing - would be his last. The announced five minutes soon became ten and then fifteen as knights and masters of arms trickled in from the battlefield, half still wearing their armor.

“Their Majesties approach!” Someone finally announced and they all stood and bowed as a one.

“Please sit,” The king told them before examining his assembled peers, his eyes lingering on Duncan perhaps a bit longer than on the others.

“I wish this was a regular peer circle, but unfortunately something has come up requiring Our immediate attention that We believe you should all be witness to,” he said in a somber voice just loud enough to fill the circle.

“Sir Duncan Harper, please step forward,” he said, focusing all of his attention on him.

Duncan rose and bowed to Their Majesties before walking to the center of the circle and kneeling. He didn’t kneel as most would, on a single knee, with the other raised confidently, nor did the king and queen ask him to remain standing in deference to his injuries. No. He knelt before them on both knees, arms falling at his side, his head bowed, the image of the penitent man.

#

“What... what’s going on?” Joselyn asked as she watched Duncan kneel before Thomas and Anne with no apparent concern for his injured leg. She’d sat through enough peer circles to know what normally went on, and this was not it.

“I’m not sure,” Rian said quietly, gently squeezing her hand.

#

“We have been told you wish to put your chain in abeyance,” The king said.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Duncan replied, not looking up as a brief round of whispers among the witnesses fell to silence.

“And are We to understand this was your idea?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“May we ask what brought you to this decision?” He asked.

“Because my actions do neither you nor my brothers and sisters honor,” Duncan answered.

The king and queen stared down at him with expressions matching the seriousness of the occasion. "And there is no other penance you can do?"

Duncan finally looked up at them, the pain obvious in his eyes. "I love..." He swallowed, trying not to lose his nerve. "I love The Society too much to give it up."

"And you would give up your chain, your belt, your spurs - everything - for this?" The queen asked, giving him the hint of a sympathetic smile, obviously understanding what it really was - who it really was - he didn't want to lose. "For her?"

The king and queen peered down at him and Duncan met their combined eyes. "Yes, Your Majesties."

"We have been told of the failings you wish to atone for and find your request to be an appropriate penance for your deeds," The king announced, again keeping his words for the circle only. "But We only have four months left on the throne, so We will find another worthy to keep the badges of your position until such time as your penance reaches its end."

Finally, the king and queen looked up and let their gaze wander across their assembled knights.

"Sir Duncan Harper is hereby stripped of all rank and honors he has been granted within the Society for a period of one year..." The king announced as the queen removed the chain from around his neck.

#

"What? No!" Joselyn cried when she realized what she was seeing and before Rian could stop her, she was rushing towards - and into - the peer circle.

Towards Duncan.

#

"You can't do this!" Duncan heard Joselyn object in a thick brogue that left her barely understandable from Their Majesties' side.

"This is not your decision," The King told her.

"But..."

"You will leave," The king told her sternly. "Now."

"It's all right," Duncan said, finally looking up to meet the horror in Joselyn's face.

"This isn't what I wanted," She began, unable to believe the acceptance she saw in his.

"Your Lordship Rian, please escort Her Excellency out of our camp," The queen commanded with a raised hand.

"Yes, Your Majesty," He replied and gently took Joselyn's arm, leading her away. "I'm sorry Joss..."

Still in the center of his one-time peers, Duncan watched Joselyn look back at him in obvious concern as she disappeared behind the camp's pavilions.



## Chapter 25

*They had no right to do this!* Joselyn screamed in her mind as she watched from just outside the royal encampment. They'd been removing Duncan's chain when she'd stormed in - that had been why she'd done so in the first place - and now they removed his belt, handing it off to a knight she realized was Duncan's supposed friend, Sir Pal, and then his spurs - the ones she'd given him. And then they continued, removing more tokens from around his neck until he knelt there, completely unadorned and denied the honor she knew filled him. Finally, apparently wordlessly, they dismissed him, and he limped away from the circle without a backward glance, Sir Pal following behind to no doubt ensure he obeyed.

"You idiot," She half-hissed, half-sobbed when he reached her. "You didn't have to let them do that."

"I asked them to," he said and when he met her eyes, she could see a calmness - a rightness - there she hadn't expected to find.

"Why?" she asked, slipping beneath his arm to help bear his weight.

"Because you were right," He smiled gratefully at her unoffered help. "I really was an arrogant jerk."

"Bastard," Pal corrected somberly, earning a glare from Joselyn.

"Son of a bitch?" Rian offered.

But Duncan laughed. "As long as I'm not an asshole."

"We'll see," Joselyn grumbled, putting an end to the discussion. "Come on, let's get you back to camp."

"I... don't really want to go back to my camp," he told her and she looked over at Rian.

"He's camped with The Company, a tent like you and Eva's, in the back corner," she said, earning a surprised look from Duncan. "Pack his shit and bring it to our camp."

"Yes, Your Excellency," He bowed and looked at Pal. "Come on, you can help."

"I'm sorry," Duncan finally told her once they made it to her camp.

"You idiot, you didn't have to do that," She grumbled before telling him to sit down.

He did as she said before answering. "I didn't do it for you."

"You sure as Hell better not have," She declared, diving into the kitchen tent before digging through totes.

Duncan smiled inwardly, she really would have made one Hell of a queen. "I'm not fighting in Crown," He added, his statement drawn from his thoughts.

"Good," She answered, emerging from the kitchen with a bottle of ibuprofen in one hand and a Gatorade in the other. She passed them to him. "So, what finally got you to see the light?"

“You, for starters,” Duncan answered and offered her a weak smile. “I pretty much got everything wrong with that one, didn’t I?”

“Except for actually - finally - asking me to be your consort, yeah,” she said, sitting across the fire pit from him. “But out of curiosity, what do you think you got wrong?”

“Well, there was the whole having to be king thing for starters. I got that about as backwards as I could, huh?”

“Pretty much. What else?”

“Assuming I’d win first time out, even though I’ve barely fought in the last ten years and have a game leg, to boot. Just a touch arrogant,” Duncan said, holding his thumb and forefinger a few inches apart and earning a smile from her.

“They would have eaten you alive.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I’m serious. You’re good but, like you said, out of practice. The main reason you beat Marcus was because he was overconfident and in full asshole mode. If he’d have gone into it like he does a real fight...

“Remember what Pal said about this last Crown and Marcus? They kicked his ass when he *was* on. If the dukes didn’t want you to win, you wouldn’t.”

“And given my performance this last year... yeah. I might have been able to do it - *might* - but I’d have probably had to shrug shots left and right.”

Joselyn snorted. “Still working on that whole humble thing, aren’t you?”

“And *that’s* why I offered to put my chain in abeyance,” he said, and Joselyn studied him.

“Yes, a certain arrogance is expected from knights, but I took it way too far.”

“It really was your idea, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” A woman answered and the two of them practically jumped out of their seats when they looked up to see Thomas and Anne standing at the camp’s entrance. “May we come in? And please don’t stand.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Joselyn said, managing to keep her seat.

“Where’s Pal?” Thomas asked, looking around, a wooden box in his hands.

“Helping the goon squad get my crap,” Duncan answered.

“Goon squad?” Anne asked, raising a bemused eyebrow at them.

“Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” Joselyn explained and gave Duncan a surprisingly - at least to him - fond smile. “I guess they look a little different from the other side of their blades.”

“Ah,” The queen replied.

“We hoped Pal’d be willing to try to explain things to you,” She continued. “But from what we just heard; it sounds like Duncan’s been doing a decent job.”

“Why did you let him give it up?” Joselyn asked, not having the patience for the polite build-up the situation probably called for.

“You want the whole list? We can talk about it later. Right now, we have some business to talk to you about.”

She looked at Duncan to see if he had any idea what was going on, but it was obvious he knew as little as her.

“We need someone to hold Duncan’s regalia,” Anne explained. “Would you be willing to do that for us?”

“Me?” The younger woman asked, her voice filled with surprise.

“You do seem to be his inspiration,” Thomas pointed out, smiling down at her.

Joselyn looked at Duncan and realized he was right. “But he’s my Lord, Your Majesty. Shouldn’t it be someone outside our house?”

“Are you saying we can’t trust a royal peer? If so, maybe you should join him...”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“And We know what we’re doing. We know you’ll keep it safe, and it might do milord Duncan some good to have a reminder of what he did and why. Will you do this for Us?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” She frowned when their words sank in. “Milord?”

“They put all my awards in abeyance,” Duncan explained, squeezing her hand comfortingly.

“The Hell they did,” Joselyn growled and fixed her gaze on Anne and Thomas. “I gave him his AoA and I get to say whether he keeps it or not.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“I don’t give a fuck about how it’s *supposed* to work,” She replied, her brouge again coming to the forefront as she stood. “Go ahead and take all his fighting awards, if you want - I don’t give a rat’s ass about those - but he is *my* Lord. *I* made him and *I* decide whether he gives it up or not. And I say no.”

The others blinked in surprise at her vehemence before Anne finally bowed to her. “Forgive us for overstepping our bounds, Your Excellency,” she said and turned to the man still sitting before the unlit fire.

“And forgive us, Lord Duncan. We misspoke. We will make sure the others know.”

## Chapter 26

“Where should we put this?” Rian asked the pair shortly after the king and queen left, followed by Pal and a train of knights.

“His guitar, garb and that sort of thing in my pavilion,” Joselyn answered before Duncan could say anything. “Just pile the rest somewhere, we can sort it out later.”

She could feel Duncan’s surprise and took his hand as she sat next to him. “You heard Their Majesties - I’m in charge of making sure you don’t do anything stupid, and I don’t intend on letting you sneak off.”

“That’s not what...” He began before realizing just how useless his objection would be. “We can argue about it later.”

“Can I see that?” she asked as one of the knights passed, carrying a sword. Even from where she sat, she could see both the pommel and guard were discolored with rust buried deep enough in the steel that it couldn’t be polished out.

He handed her the blade, and she drew it partly from its water-stained scabbard, finding what she’d feared. The blade was speckled brown with the same staining she’d seen on the pommel and guard, and she gave Duncan a disapproving look. He shrugged apologetically.

“I’m going to hold onto this, too,” she told him, mentally revising her plans. It’d mean abandoning most of what she’d done so far, but she had a feeling the end result would be worth the lost time.

“Wise lady,” Pal said, stopping to offer Duncan a bow. “Milord.”

“Lord,” Joselyn corrected absently.

“Excuse me?”

“You really don’t want to get on her bad side,” Duncan said with a lop-sided grin.

“Obviously not. Something tells me you’re not going to win that argument, Lord Duncan.”

“Wise man,” Joselyn smiled and watched as knight after knight approached them and bowed; not to her, to Duncan.

“Maybe you did the right thing after all,” she said after the last knight left.

#

“Out of curiosity, where were you born?” Duncan asked as they explored Merchant’s Row. It had taken some work, but he’d finally convinced Joselyn that he really did need to stretch his leg to keep it from cramping up. And perhaps even more impressive, he’d even convinced her he didn’t need a living crutch - no matter how cute she might be - at least as long as he used his cane and still allowed her to snuggle up against his uninjured side.

“Minot North Dakota,” She answered, laying her head on his shoulder with an innocent smile that screamed he’d asked the wrong question. That was another thing that had caught him by surprise, the way things had nearly returned to how they’d been before she’d walked out on him. It wasn’t one of those flip-the-switch things, but it was progressing a lot faster than he’d expected.

“Okay, smarty-pants, Ireland or Scotland?”

“Shannon Ireland,” she said, intentionally letting her brough run free. “Dah was stationed there for a few years when I was growing up.”

“Is that how you got interested in the SCA?”

“Kind of, but mostly it was because of a cute guy who looked good in tights.”

“Does that mean I should start wearing tights to keep your eyes from wandering too much?”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it. You are a musician, after all. The great thing I’ve found about dating musicians is that they’ve got such talented fingers,” she said in all apparent seriousness. “Well, except for drummers...”

Duncan laughed and squeezed her close. “Maybe tonight I can work on my fingering exercises...”

“I have to admit this feels weird,” he told her a few steps later.

“What? Me snuggling with you?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. Kind of. I mean you weren’t even talking to me yesterday, and now it’s almost like the whole thing never happened.”

It took Joselyn a few moments to answer. “Did you know Rian and Eva drew up some ground rules for their relationship when they started dating? Pretty basic things, really, but it helped make sure they were on the same page, relationship-wise. I think they’re up to fourteen or fifteen now, but they started with ten.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t remember all of them, or what number’s what rule, but there is one that I do remember - that even if I’m mad at you, it doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

Duncan stopped in his tracks as her words sank in. He turned to face her. “Love me?”

“Yeah,” she said shyly, her green eyes meeting his. “I think I do.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one,” Relief filled his face as he wrapped his arms around her waist. “I was so scared I’d lost you.”

“I almost gave in when I heard you singing this morning.”

“You heard that? I didn’t think I was singing that loud.”

“Our camps weren’t that far apart. And, well, I missed hearing your voice.”

“I know the feeling,” He looked around them. “I should have brought my guitar with us.”

“You’ve only got two arms. I think *Pillaged and Plundered* might have one we can borrow, if you want.”

The guitar Joselyn pointed out to him wasn’t what anyone would call high quality, but it was better than Duncan would have expected for its twenty-five dollar price tag. Not only did it still have all of its strings, but it stayed relatively in tune and its tone was... adequate.

Joselyn stood, smiling fondly down at him as he went through his pre-performance warm-up ritual. “Think that thing is up for some Santana?” she asked when he finished and - somehow - he fell into exactly the song she’d been thinking of.

Maybe Rian was right about the whole Musashi thing.

*“Tell me just what you want me to be...”*

The two of them continued to play and sing, losing themselves in each other’s voice much as they had during the open mic at the Irish festival. They flowed from song to song without any worries about time’s passage or whether the songs they shared were period or not, they just sang. Somewhere along the way they heard another guitar join in, followed by a flute and a pair of drummers and finally a familiar soprano voice with a fiddle player at her side.

But finally, the pain Duncan had begun to feel in his fingers faded to numbness and he knew it was time to wrap things up if he wanted to be able to hold a fork, let alone any late-night finger exercises. He paused between songs just long enough to kiss Joselyn’s hand before looking over at the rest of the Grangemont Bardic Guild - plus a few others - and counted out the beat. But before they could even play a note, Joselyn began, singing a song she’d learned half a world away, half a lifetime before, leaving the rest of them to follow along.

*“Chuaigh mé isteach i dteach aréir, is d’iarr mé cairde ar mhnaoi an leanna...”*

## Chapter 27

“That’s a new look,” Nate said when he let Robin in. Her usual teacher uniform of blouse and skirt had been replaced by bib overalls and a long-sleeved t-shirt. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen artists in that particular costume, but he was pretty sure all the other times had been on TV or in movies.

“Had to use one of the studios at work,” She explained. “Didn’t want to get my work clothes dirty. Can I use your shower real quick?”

“Need help?” he asked with a grin, not really expecting her to say yes. He had to admit she did need a shower; with the exception of where her safety glasses and some sort of hood had been, she was covered from head to toe in a fine black powder that he assumed was steel dust.

“I think I’m good,” she said, returning his smile and disappearing into the small guest bathroom.

“What’s for dinner?”

“I was figuring sandwiches,” He replied. “It’s way too hot for real cooking. Wine or beer?”

His last was lost in the sound of the shower turning on and in what was practically becoming a tradition in their relationship, decided to punt.

“Nate?” Robin asked when she found him on the balcony.

“I figured we’d eat out here,” he said, leaning back in his chair to enjoy the view. “It’s just too hot to eat inside.”

“Good idea,” She agreed and picked up the beer set at what she assumed was her place.

“Damn,” He sighed as he watched her roll the cool bottle across her brow before sitting across from him.

“What?”

“I told you about that, didn’t I?” He answered. She’d traded her earlier outfit for shorts and an oversized tank top. And nothing else - at least from the waist up.

It took her a moment to realize what he was talking about, but she finally smiled. “Well, if you’d gotten someplace with air conditioning, I could wear real clothes.”

“Who said I was complaining?”

#

“What are you working on?” Nate asked as Robin settled against his side. The heat of the day was finally retreating and his apartment had dropped to a more bearable temperature - somewhere in the mid-eighties.

“So, what are we watching tonight?” she asked, not objecting to the feel of his hand against her bare side beneath her shirt as she took a sip of wine, a chocolate-infused red Aria had introduced her to.

“*In Like Flint*, if you don’t answer my question.”

“And if I do?”

“*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*.”

“Well, in that case...” She snuggled closer, giving him a peek down the front of her shirt in the process. “It’s a surprise.”

“*In Like Flint* it is.”

“Don’t you dare,” As much as she was beginning to admit she really did love him, his taste in movies was atrocious. “It’s for you, so no, I’m not going to tell you.”

He met her brilliant green eyes before kissing the tip of her nose and pressing play on the remote.

“You know I hate that,” She grumped, shifting until she was curled up against his side again. “Makes me feel like a little girl.”

“I know.”

“I guess that means you don’t want me to spend the night,” She teased before shivering as his fingers trailed up her side. “Stop that,” She grinned, lightly slapping his chest before settling in to enjoy the movie.

“My place Friday?” Robin asked. As the movie went on, Nate’s teasing touches had faded until they sat in comfortable stillness, but the damage had been done.

“Can’t,” He answered, giving her a gentle squeeze. “I’ve got a gig.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, resisting the temptation to ask why he hadn’t invited her to join him. “Where at? Maybe I can come.”

“Alton,” He answered, bringing her up short. Even if he took the shortcut through Bixby, it was still at least a six-hour drive. Figure in time to get over the drive and get warmed up and he’d have to leave pretty early.

“Maybe you could come over Saturday night,” She suggested.

“Actually, I’m probably not going to be back ‘til Sunday.”

Robin sat for a bit, digesting the news.

“The gig’s Saturday afternoon,” He explained into the silence. “So, I wasn’t planning on taking off until after work on Friday, crash at some friends’ place when I get there, do the gig, and then drive back Saturday night.”

“You know, this is probably something you should have told me before this,” she said quietly.

“You weren’t talking to me, remember?” Nate said without sounding accusing. “And you’ve been so busy with your project, I’ve barely seen you since we got back.”

“I suppose you’ve got a point. Still...”

She looked up at him. “I could go with you.”

“You haven’t seen where they live. Two of them in a studio apartment half the size of this place with only one bed, which *they* get. *I’ll* be on the floor with the ferret.”

“You’ve probably got a point,” Robin admitted. “Call me when you get back?”



“How about I text you when I get back and call you when I wake up,” He suggested. “And hey, this’ll give you time to work on my surprise without worrying about me interrupting you.

“Besides, you can always stay here tonight.”

“I’d like that.”

#

They ended the evening with a cooling shower before soaking themselves in sweat again as they overwhelmed the small air conditioner in the bedroom window with their combined heat.

“Stay,” Robin said with a sleepy, child-like voice when Nate got up sometime before dawn for what was rapidly becoming his nightly stretching routine.

“I’ll be right back,” he assured her and kissed her lightly before sliding out of the bed. He really couldn’t stretch his leg much without going outside, but that would require clothes which, in turn, would require turning on the bedroom lights and he didn’t think Robin would appreciate that.

Or, now that he thought about it, him being gone that long. It was the sort of thing he could imagine Mark doing back when the two of them were dating and he didn’t really want to worry her any more than his upcoming trip obviously had. So, he settled for stopping by the guest bathroom before completing a single lap of his apartment and finished with a quartet of ibuprofen washed down with a bottle of water.

“Just hold me,” Robin mumbled after humming something happy when he lay down next to her and pulled him tighter.

Chapter 28

With stops for gas, food and to stretch his legs, it took nearly 8 hours for Nate to reach Alton and another half hour to find his friend's place and he found himself an over-caffeinated zombie by the time he got there.

"So tell me all about this new love of yours," Mac grinned as he finished calling Robin to let her know he'd make it safe.

"Who said I love her?" He asked defensively and Mac raised an eyebrow at him.

"And how long did it take for you to fall in love with me?" she asked.

"Okay, fine. Yes, I love her," he admitted. "She's a professor at the college I work at."

"Musician?"

"Sculptor," he corrected. "But she does sing."

"I knew it!" Mac said triumphantly. "Alto?"

"Am I that predictable?" He asked, and she grinned at him. "I thought she was at first, but she has such an incredible range it's hard to tell."

"One of those, huh? And she's okay with you staying with your ex?"

"I... didn't mention that part."

"Uh-huh. And I take it you didn't mention we were performing together - on stage, I mean? You know that's the kind of thing that tends to set off girlfriends, *especially* if they find out after the fact."

"I figured I'd give her all the gory details after I got back on Sunday."

"Nate, Nate, Nate..." Mac shook her head at him. "When are you ever going to learn?"

"You're recording our gig, right? Any chance I can get a copy before I take off?"

"I suppose, but I'm not sure how much good that'll do, especially if performing together is you two's thing."

"Where's your computer?" Nate asked, surprising her.

"Right over there, why?"

"Can I jump on it real quick?"

"Okay..." Mac replied and watched as he pulled up a video of him and a tall redhead in what looked like a bar.

"This was us at the Irish festival last year," he said. "*After* we'd been fighting."

"This was our first duet," he said and pressed play.

"*She put him out like the burnin' end of a midnight cigarette...*"

"Shit," Mac whispered once the song ended and Nate scrolled ahead.

"And this was our last," He said, starting the video back up.

*“Lyin’ here with you so close to me, it’s hard to fight these feelings...”*

“Why the Hell did you take me up on my offer, if you’ve got *that*?” Mac asked wide-eyed, gesturing at the screen as they finished.

“We’d sort of broke up and... I missed it.”

“Sort of”? So, what’s that make me? Your side piece? Your... what the Hell’s the singing equivalent of a Fuck Buddy? Dammit, Nate, you can stay here tonight, but I’m kicking your ass out first thing in the morning and you’re *not* performing with us tomorrow.

“And when you see her, you tell her that I didn’t know you had a girlfriend when I invited you - which is true - and that the only reason I didn’t send you packing as soon as I...

“Actually, give me that,” she said, grabbing Nate’s phone before he could object and hitting redial.

“What’s her name?” she asked as the phone rang at the other end.

“Um... Robin,” He answered.

“Hi, Robin? Sorry to wake you up, but your boyfriends an idiot...”

#

Robin was wide awake as soon as she heard the woman using Nate’s phone. *“... but you’re boyfriend’s an idiot.”*

“Who is this?” she asked.

“Mac,” The other woman answered. *“And I’m so sorry, I didn’t know Nate was seeing anyone when I invited him to perform with us. If I had, I never would have done that, not without talking to you first. And I sure as Hell wouldn’t have invited him to stay with us.”*

“He’s staying with you?” she asked, realizing that he *had* told him that his hosts shared the apartment’s only bed.

*“Yeah. Sorry, I didn’t know. If you want, I can kick his ass out right now...”*

Robin blinked at Mac’s offer.

“No,” she finally said, surprisingly okay with the whole thing. “Tell him... No. Can you put him on?”

She heard the muffled sound of the other woman passing along her message followed by the very distinct sound of Nate saying, “Oh shit.”

*“Robin? You still there?”* He asked after he’d taken his phone from Mac.

“It’s okay,” She smiled into the phone. “Really. You guys have fun at the gig and I’ll see you Sunday, okay? Just Nate?”

*“Yeah?”* He asked uncertainly.

“Don’t do *Star of the County Down*.”

*“Never,”* He smiled through the phone at her. *“What did I ever do to deserve you?”*

“Good fingers,” She reminded him. “Love you.”

*“Love you too. See you Sunday.”*

#

“And you’re really okay with it?” Mel asked in obvious surprise as Robin recounted the story of her phone conversation the night before.

“Surprisingly, yeah. I am,” she answered, peering down the length of Nate’s sword blade. Even with the tools at the school, it had still taken the better part of a week to remove all the stains and most of the pitting from it and, in the end, it wound up a good four inches shorter and probably a half inch thinner, but it no longer looked like it had been tossed in some corner to rust away, even if that’s exactly what happened. “I mean I would have preferred it if he’d told me before he left, but...”

“So, you’re good with him staying with another woman?” Mel repeated, obviously not believing her.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Robin said, looking up with a playfully evil grin. “He *is* going to pay me back for this, but considering half the population’s female...” She shrugged. “It’s not any different than crashing at someone’s place at an event.

“And before you say anything, he’s *not* Mark. If he were, they wouldn’t have called.”

“Okay, who are you and what did you do with Robin?”

“I’ve been kind of wondering that myself.”

Chapter 29

“Good Morning!” Robin said far too cheerfully when Nate opened the door.

“What time is it?” He groaned, scratching his head.

“Assuming you went to bed right after you texted, you got exactly...” She paused, checking the time. “Three hours and seventeen minutes sleep.

“I brought coffee.”

Three hours and... that meant 8:00? 9:00? Somewhere around there, at least. *Way* too early.

“This is about Mac, isn’t it?” he asked, waving her in. She didn’t say anything as she followed him into his apartment, but given her too-innocent smile, he didn’t have any doubt about the answer. “You’re right, I should have told you.”

“Actually... I think you did the right thing,” She handed him a paper cup full of coffee that smelled of caramel. While he wouldn’t put it past her to give him decaf, right then he didn’t really care. “*This* time. You pull this shit again and no guarantees.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“I can’t say I’m happy about the whole thing,” she said, joining him on the couch. “But no, I’m not mad. I think if you’d told me beforehand, I probably would’ve freaked out, but with her calling the way she did... it was her idea, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“But you did tell her.”

“She was actually listening when I called you.”

“Well, at least you weren’t a complete idiot. If it had come up in other circumstances...” She continued and Nate winced.

“Hey, I know you’re not Mark,” She reassured him, placing a comforting hand on his leg. “I know you wouldn’t do that to me... at least most of the time.”

“I wouldn’t do that most of the time, or you know, most of the time, that I wouldn’t do that?” he asked, really wishing they were having this conversation sometime after he’d gotten at least double - preferably triple - the amount of sleep he was currently running on.

That at least got a laugh from her. “I know, most of the time, that you wouldn’t cheat on me, ever.”

“Never.”

“Now,” She began, slapping her knees. “You guys recorded it, right? Do I get to see?”

“Give me a sec,” he said, downing the last of his coffee and getting up.

“I didn’t mean right now. You go take a shower while I get the coffee going, and we can watch it after you’re feeling a little more human.”

“No decaf,” He warned.

“Would I do that?”

#

“Who’s Mac?” Robin asked after they’d finished their first set. They’d been good and it was obvious this wasn’t the first time performing together. And it was just as obvious there was a certain chemistry between her and Nate.

“My ex,” He admitted.

“As in ex-girlfriend, or...”

“Ex-wife.”

“Jesus Christ,” She muttered as she shook her head. “You really are an idiot, aren’t you? You did a gig with her after what she did to you?”

Robin chuckled dryly. “It really is a good thing you didn’t tell me before; I would have gone down there and kicked her ass.

“What the Hell made you decide to go down there in the first place?” she asked, still not entirely understanding what he’d been thinking.

“I wanted to make sure I’m really over her,” he said.

“And are you?”

“Yeah,” he said, his gaze lost in the screen as Mac began to sing and Robin could swear she was singing to Nate.

*“I saw someone again today who remembered me and you...”*

“So, what happened?” Robin asked as she continued her so-called revenge on Nate, this time in the form of *The War*.

“Hm?” he asked from his spot lying on the couch with his head resting on her lap.

“You and Mac. What happened? I mean I know what happened, but was it because she’s just a cunt in general, or...?” She trailed off as she felt Nate tense in her lap.

“You still love her, don’t you?”

“I still *like* her. I’m not sure if I ever really loved her or not...”

“We met in college, and it was your classic lust at first sight - dated all through college and got married right after graduation before heading off to grad school.”

He shifted on her lap until he could look into her face. “You remember what that was like - only taking a couple classes, but working your ass off? I tried to make time for her, but between studying and work, we hardly saw each other.”

“I remember trying to date in grad school,” Robin said. “It wasn’t easy.”

“To make things worse, I was working graveyards. Like I said, I tried, but...” Nate shrugged. “We actually made it through school, and I thought the worst was over, but we’d spent so little time together that we’d gotten used to being apart.

“That’s why we started the band, to try and get back together and it worked, sort of. But then Dave joined and... and they liked each other, and had similar interests, and...”

He sighed. "Before I knew it Mac was spending most of her time 'writing music' with him, and then she just stopped coming home. But I thought we could still make it work and so one night I went over to surprise her. Looking back, I think I knew what I'd find..."

"Oh Nate," Robin said, brushing his bangs out of his face. "I'm sorry."

He grabbed her hand and kissed it. "It's not your fault."

"And yesterday?"

"I think... I think we were saying goodbye."

#

Nate managed to survive most of Robin's 'torture' - from *The War* to *Fried Green Tomatoes* to even buying her a dress that looked like something Sandy would have worn in *Grease* at one of her favorite vintage stores when the mid-day heat drove them out of his apartment. His exhaustion finally got the better of him about halfway through *Steel Magnolias*, though, and he drug himself off his place on the couch.

"I'm off to bed," he announced and gave Robin a good-night kiss, leaving her unsure what to do as he disappeared into the back.

She was fairly certain he expected her to finish watching her movie - what kind of monster would make a person leave before Shelby's funeral, after all? - but after that? Was she supposed to go home? Stay the night? Usually, they didn't stay over on Sundays, but that was when classes were in session and this week they weren't as the school gave them time to reset for the last wave of classes before their summer truly began.

Finally giving in to her uncertainty, she turned the movie off and went to the apartment's sole bedroom. As she watched Nate sleep, Robin made her decision, shutting the door behind her.

## Chapter 30

Nate wasn't sure what he'd expected when his alarm went off that morning, but Robin curled up next to him in one of his old T-shirts wasn't it. Not that he was complaining. Unfortunately, he had his performance review with the department head that morning and couldn't enjoy his luck like he would have preferred.

"What time is it?" she asked when he turned off the alarm and crawled out of bed.

"Seven thirty," He answered.

"Is it this morning you're supposed to meet with Doctor Mahoney?" She propped herself up on one elbow.

"At nine, yeah."

She muttered something under her breath that sounded like a curse - apparently, she'd had similar thoughts of how to spend their morning as he had - before throwing off the light blanket. "You go get cleaned up and I'll get started on food."

Nate had yet to put on his dress shirt when he emerged to the smell of Robin's too-strong coffee and the sound of breakfast sizzling in the kitchen.

"Isn't that dangerous?" he asked her as she stood there, still dressed in only his t-shirt as she fried up the bacon, and planted a kiss on her neck.

"Stop that," she said, trying to swat him away like a fly as she shivered at his touch.

"Coffee's ready," she told him, giving up on her protests when he began to nuzzle in earnest. "And the cream's in the fridge."

He smiled as he broke away to prepare himself some coffee. He gave it an experimental sip before setting it down and returning to her, wrapping his hands around her waist. "I wasn't expecting to see you this morning," He breathed into her ear.

"Be good," She smiled.

"I would, but..." He let his words trail off as he gave her ear a quick nibble.

"You're an evil man, you know that?" she asked over her shivers and grinned. "And you never said I *couldn't* spend the night."

"I didn't, did I?" Nate asked, his memory of the night before too fuzzy to know one way or the other. "So I guess I'm not in trouble anymore?"

"I wouldn't say that," she said, scooping the eggs onto a pair of plates. "I'm pretty sure you still owe me a massage..."

"You torture me so," He smiled and glanced at the clock on the wall.

"You know..." He began as he turned her around to face him. "I do have some extra time after all..."



“I did say I wanted you to be good, didn’t I?”

#

“How’d it go?” Robin asked. She wore the dress he’d bought her the day before and had even done up her hair to match, making him feel out of place as he sat across from her in the retro diner she’d chosen for lunch.

“I think it went well, but with Mahoney, you can never be sure,” Nate said. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” She beamed and took a drink of the milkshake - with two straws, of course - she’d ordered.

“You’re having fun with this, aren’t you?”

“Why not? It’s not every day a girl gets to dress up for her man.”

“So, what’s on tap for this afternoon?” Nate asked after they left the diner.

“Well... I wanted to swing by my place and pick up some stuff. And you still need to get me a key to your place.

“I’m going to keep my apartment, though,” She finished. “I hope that’s okay.”

Nate stopped and blinked at her. He *had* gotten her a key to his place as a matter of fact, but *need* to? And what was that about keeping her apartment?

“You...” He began before it all clicked together. “And you think *I’m* arrogant,” He laughed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, not liking the tone of his voice.

“When you figure it out, let me know,” He smiled and drew her against his side.

“Oh, and...” He fished in his pocket and pulled out the key he’d had made for her.

#

“We’re going to need a bigger apartment,” Robin said, hands on her hips as she studied the already-full closet in Nate’s - in their - bedroom.

“Hey, this was your idea, remember?” Nate smiled as he tried to consolidate his clothes into one half of the dresser that was all that would fit in the room.

“Shit,” she said after a moment and smoothed out her petticoats as she sat on the bed. She’d stayed in her dress throughout the day, even as she’d begun to pack - and now unpack - her stuff and Nate couldn’t understand how she could stand the late-afternoon heat in all those layers.

“That’s what you meant.”

“Yep,” he said, carefully pushing Robin’s skirts out of the way as he sat next to her. Unlike her, Nate *had* changed, but in keeping with the theme she’d decided on, he’d gone with jeans and a white T-shirt instead of his more usual shorts, giving him a faux-Fonzie look.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” she said, leaning against his shoulder. “I never even gave you a choice, did I? I just assumed...”

“Yep,” Nate agreed. “Lucky for you, I was thinking about the same thing. *And* lucky for you, I had the same thought about this place.”

“You did?”

“Yep,” Nate grinned. “Even has a garage so you don’t have to have your studio at Mel and Aria’s.”

“What has a garage?”

#

“What do you think?” Nate asked, grinning as they stood in front of a small house. An extremely small house.

“It’s...” Robin began, trying to decide where she wanted to start.

“It needs some work, I know.”

“That’s not it, it’s...”

“Let me see your key. And I’ll show you around. Hope you like shag.”

“What? Um sure,” Robin said, pulling it out of her clutch in a daze and handing it to him.

“I think your apartment’s bigger than this place,” She finally managed to get out. “Do I want to know how much it cost?”

“So, what do you think?” he asked again as he led her inside and flipped on the light. They walked into a sort of diagonal combined kitchen / living area with only a pair of doors - not counting the sliding doors that opened out onto the patio - leading off from it. The first - the closest - door proved to be the house’s sole bedroom while the second was the bathroom.

“How much...” She began.

“Come on, wait ‘til you see the view,” He grinned as he took her hand and led her through the sliding glass doors out onto the wrap-around patio with its view of the river below.

“Nathan Barr, how much did it cost?” She said, refusing to be drug one step further.

“Less than you’d think,” he said, and, from what she saw, he still probably paid too much. “You know Anderson?”

“From Psychology?”

“That’s him,” Nate said. “This was his place and part of the divorce settlement was that he had to sell it and give the money to his ex.”

“How much?” Robin prodded.

“Well, he still owed forty on it and he sold it to me for fifty. I think he said after closing costs, she gets like two grand.”

“That’s better than nothing, I suppose,” she said.

“I *was* figuring I’d take a week to muck out the basement and show you this next weekend.”

“Then why the Hell did you let me move all my stuff into your place if you were planning on moving in here to begin with?”

“Now that,” Nathan said, taking her in his arms and kissing her nose. “Was your idea.”

“And what did you mean, ‘muck out the basement’?”

“You really don’t want to know.”

“You’re right,” she said when she saw the hoarder’s delight filling the space. “I didn’t want to know. You have fun with that.”

## Chapter 31

“It is quite the view,” Robin admitted over her beer as she and Nate took a break on the patio. A couple of weeks had passed since he’d first showed her the house and despite his initial estimate, it had taken Nate a week and a half to haul away all the garbage, and another full day to clean it well enough for her to declare it liveable. Once that had happened, it had been another two days to pack up and move their stuff, but that was finally done and now they were in the process of unpacking and finding places for all their combined belongings. “And I was thinking... what about going for sort of a pub feel in the basement?”

“Too bad I couldn’t salvage the bar,” he said. That - like pretty much everything in the basement - had been a complete write-off; cheaper and easier to replace than to repair. “And I was thinking of maybe putting a recording studio in that back room.”

“That still leaves the rest of it.”

“I like the idea,” he said after a long draw on his beer. “The pub, I mean, with all that shag pulled out, we could do wood paneling and brick... beams across the ceiling... rip out the wood stove and put one of those big electric fireplaces in the corner...”

“Mmmm... big sheepskin throw in front of it...,” She sighed, picturing it all in her mind. “You’re thinking that corner where the bar was, right? Where’d we put the new one?”

“In front of the laundry room? That’d make it easy to grab drinks on our way out to the hot tub.”

“Now that’s an idea...”

“Of course, all that’s going to have to wait until we get the rest of it fixed.”

“Doesn’t hurt to dream,”

#

“I like,” Mary said, looking around the freshly painted living room. “It’s cute.”

“We’re calling it cozy,” Robin smiled, handing her guest a ginger ale. Given the size of their new place, they’d decided against an actual house-warming party, opting instead for a series of smaller, more practical dinners. “Nate says it sounds more manly.”

“*She* picked cozy,” He corrected, taking a drink of his beer while he slipped an arm around her. “*I* voted for efficient.”

“No, I gotta agree with Robin,” Mary’s husband, Jack, said. “Definitely cozy. Or maybe quaint.”

“But hey, at least you can use the basement for your man cave.”

“Garb storage,” Robin grinned.

“The garage?”

“Studio.”

“It’s *his* house,” Mary laughed. “You’ve got to give him *something*.”

“She says I get the laundry room,” Nate said, sipping at his beer. “Actually, there’s more than enough room for all our crap downstairs, so I was able to claim that back room.”

“Shag carpet and all,” Robin added. That had surprised her. Not the carpeting in the room - the whole basement had been filled with the stuff - but the fact that it had been salvageable. Although from what Nate told her, she probably shouldn’t have been; apparently the pile of crap in front of it had been nearly impassable. And since Nate was imagining it as his music room, it made sense to leave the horrendous carpet to help absorb the sound.

“You guys ready for war?” Mary asked as she helped clean up the dinner table.

“Sounds like it,” Robin said. “Nate assures me his truck’ll make it, so we’re planning on taking it instead of trying to cram it all in the car.”

“I told you,” Nate said patiently. “After I hear from Mahoney, I’ll think about getting a new truck.”

“I’m teasing,” She assured him.

“Were you wanting to camp with us, or were going to go with Grangemont?” Mary asked, steering the conversation back away from what seemed to be a sensitive subject.

“Actually, we’re planning on camping with... who is it?” Robin asked.

“Newham,” Nate answered. “With the rest of Harper’s Hall.”

“Your family?” Mary asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yep. It’s my dad’s sixtieth, so we’re planning a big party Thursday night.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Yep,” Robin agreed sarcastically. “A week and a half with a bunch of complete strangers.”

“What would you say about taking Nate’s tent with you guys? You know, just in case?”

“It’s not going to be *that* bad. I mean you already know Karen.”

#

“There you are,” Duncan’s dad greeted as he shook his hand.

“Yep, here I am,” He agreed. “And you remember Joselyn.”

“Your Grace,” Joselyn smiled, and it was interesting how the way she saw him had changed from the first time they’d met to now. Before, he’d been... well, he’d been Duncan’s dad, a witness to the duel. And now he was the focal point of their trip. And all she really knew about him - other than the fact he was Duncan’s father - was that in The Society, he was Sir Magnus the Great, super-duke of Bastion.

“Your Excellency,” he said, offering her his hand.

“Joselyn, please. Thanks for letting us camp with you.”

“Where else would he camp? He *is* a Harper after all. You guys can set up over there,” he said, returning to the cooler in front of his pavilion and grabbing a beer as he watched them unload.

“Isn’t he going to help?” Joselyn asked as she and Duncan began unloading.

“He says that’s what squires are for.”

“And since you don’t have any...”

“Exactly.”

#

“How’s prep for Crown going?” Magnus asked once they’d finished setting up their pavilion and changed into garb. “You two got your letter in yet?”

“I’m not going for it this time around,” Duncan answered.

“What about our deal?” His father asked. “I figured after playing whack-a-duke like that, you’d be a shoe-in.”

“No way I would win. Not with being so out of practice and hurting my knee again.”

“I heard about that. I also heard you let the kid get away with it.”

“He didn’t do it on purpose, Dad.”

“Obviously didn’t keep you from using it as an excuse to welch out of our bet.”

“Dad...”

Joselyn had gone into this trip planning on doing the whole don’t speak unless spoken to routine until she got a feel for things, but Magnus the so-called Great was really pushing all her buttons. “Duncan, I need to go check in with Winter’s Pass and let them know we made it. You want to come with?”

Duncan looked from his dad to her. “You go ahead,” he said. He was pretty sure he knew what she was offering, but she didn’t know his dad - it’d be much better for all of them if he got it over with. “Catch up with you later?”

Her eyes asked if he was sure, but she had enough of a sense of the situation to keep it unspoken. “Sounds good,” She smiled instead.

#

“You know the deal,” Magnus said, his eyes trailing the trim young woman as she left. “You don’t tell anyone who you are and pretend to be a nobody or become king.”

“Although I can see letting it slip so you could get in her bed.”

“Dad...” Duncan warned.

“You never could resist banging a royal,” His dad continued. “What’d you do? Use the old ‘you can’t tell anyone’ bit?”

“Don’t go there, Dad.”

“Or what? You going to challenge me? From what I hear, you really are a nobody these days. What the Hell made you think giving up your chain was a good idea?”

“I had to do it...”

“Why? Because your queen needs to be on top?”

“Christ,” Duncan muttered, shaking his head. “Are you *trying* to piss me off?”

“Ooh... there’s a threat.”

Reaching his limit, the younger Harper rose and began tearing down their pavilion.

## Chapter 32

“You left Duncan back at camp?” Maire asked in surprise as the two women worked to unload her stuff from the Suburban.

“Yeah, they were doing the whole ‘male bonding’ bit, and I wasn’t sure how much more I could take,” Joselyn said, dragging a tote out of the back. “He was in the process of explaining why he wasn’t fighting in Crown when I left.”

“And you didn’t stick around for that?” Rian asked, grinning.

“Bail for one person would be pushing it,” She answered. “For both of us? You’d have had to take up a collection.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Let’s just say I know where Duncan gets his manners,” Joselyn said. “His mother.”

“She’s here?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Think we should set this up?”

Joselyn studied the duffle bag. “Duncan really wants to camp with his family, but you guys can always use it for storage.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about setting up your spare tent,” Maire said as the assembled members of Winters Pass took a break from setting up their own.

“Oh?” Joselyn asked and turned to look at the road where a haphazardly packed, very familiar-looking truck pulled up.

“Oh no,” She breathed and got up to meet Duncan as he climbed out of his truck. “What happened?”

Jaw clenched; he didn’t answer. Instead, he began angrily pulling their belongings from the truck and piling them in an empty corner of the camp.

“Duncan?”

Still, he didn’t answer, but he also didn’t object to them helping him unload. Luckily, they hadn’t unpacked more than absolutely necessary for garbing up and so most of it was a simple matter of pulling out totes and stacking them to one side. The pavilion, not so much. It was obvious Duncan hadn’t done more than the bare minimum folding to get it into the truck, and calling what he did ‘folding’ was being generous. Wadding would have been a better description, and it wasn’t long until his attempts at untangling the mess got the better of him and he devolved to throwing the canvas in frustration.

“Duncan, love? Come here,” Joselyn said, dragging him away from the source of annoyance.

“They can get that,” she told him, volunteering their camp mates for the job.

“They’re not my squires,” He grunted angrily, but didn’t resist.

“No, but we are two Pelicans and their proteges, this is what we do.”

“Come on,” Joselyn said, pulling him towards the road. “They’ll take care of this.”

“I don’t...”

“Nate,” she said, cutting him off. “Let them work and you tell me what happened.”

#

“You want to talk about it?” Joselyn asked gently when they reached the abandoned castle. It was more of a keep, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in honor of the Spanish Conquistadors back before the land it sat on was sold in an attempt to bolster the state’s dwindling budget.

“He said the only reason I’m not going for Crown is because you liked being on top,” He said. The truth was, she *did* like it, but she was sure that hadn’t been what he’d been talking about. “And that the only reason I let you know I was a knight was so I could sleep with you.”

“Let’s see... where to start? One, none of it’s true... Two, even if you did win Crown, I’d still out-rank you... And three, you *didn’t* tell me, at least not until after I pretty much already knew.”

“You think any of that matters to him? He knows what he knows, and nothing we tell him’ll change that.”

“Oh Duncan,” She wrapped him in her arms. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault he’s a dick.”

They wandered the site, letting exercise and talk about nothing drain the anger from him before finally returning to camp. Winter’s Pass had obviously been busy while they were away and their camp - even their spare tent - was set up.

“Doing better?” Maire asked as Bran handed each of them a beer.

“Remind me to tell you about when Rian took me to meet her folks,” Eva said before either of them could answer.

“Hard ass,” The younger woman grinned.

“I don’t think that’ll work with Magnus,” Joselyn replied. She had heard the story of how Eva had bluffed Rian’s father before - a few times, in fact - but she’d never been in the military and she seriously doubted anyone, let alone an egotistical bastard like Duncan’s father, would find an art teacher intimidating.

“Yeah, not a chance in Hell,” Duncan agreed.

“So what are you going to do about the party tomorrow night?”

“We still have to go,” He sighed. “He *is* my Dad, and it *is* his birthday.”

“It starts at dinner, right? We can go, make an appearance, and then tell everyone we have to go to court.”

Duncan snorted. “Like he cares about that.”

“I’ll talk to Thomas,” Maire offered. “I’m pretty sure he *will* care about that.”

“I doubt it.”

“Just leave it to me,” She grinned.

#

Whatever Maire and Thomas had come up with, it wasn't necessary. Joselyn doubted anyone but Duncan's sister noticed their departure. Or rather, Loki noticed. Not that that got them off the hook with their machinations.

"Come one," The older woman said, meeting them on the road carrying Duncan's guitar. "Their Majesties want you two to perform before court."

The two of them looked at each other before she shrugged. "I'm game, if you are."

"What'll we play?" he asked, taking his guitar from Maire.

#

"Ah, there you are," The elderly woman in front of the crowd said when she saw the two of them reach the back of the pavilion. "Your Excellency, Milord, would you honor us with a song?"

"It would be our pleasure," Duncan replied, and they walked down the center aisle, bowing to the empty thrones when they reached the front.

"Milords and miladys, I am Her Excellency Joselyn, and this is Lord Duncan," She announced, giving Duncan time to quickly tune his guitar as they took their place before the thrones. "I hope you will forgive our appearance as this was sort of a spur-of-the-moment decision."

Joselyn glanced at her partner and dived into a brief bit of impromptu banter. "Are you ready, My Lord?"

"At your leisure, My Lady," He smiled back. "What should we perform tonight?"

She cocked her head from side to side in apparent thought before finally shrugging. "Surprise me."

"As you..." He began before catching the glint in her eye.

"Forgive me, Your Excellency," He quickly corrected, offering her his flourishing bow. "You are not Buttercup, and I am certainly no Westley.

"What I meant to say is that I will try to do what would please you, my dearest Amalthea," Duncan finished, pitching the last for her ears only before beginning at last to play.

"Then sing for me, my dear bard."

And so he did.

*"Let never a man a wooing wend that lacketh things three; a store of gold, an oaken heart, and full of charity..."* He began as Joselyn joined him on the harmonies. And, much as had happened at their impromptu concert at Tourney of Champions - and as if it had been planned ahead of time - they soon found themselves surrounded by a procession of the rest of the Grangemont Bardic guild.

As the song faded, Duncan could see the royals waiting to process at the rear of the tent, but he held up a single finger before once more beginning to play, this time giving Joselyn the lead.

*"You can hound me, now you've found me, but I'm far more cunning than you..."* She sang and the musicians smiled at the sight of the Queen of Bastion dancing to the music unnoticed



behind the crowd. As the song wound down, the musicians began to dance and spin and sing down the center aisle, their music fading with them as they passed out into the night.

Chapter 33

“You think you’re hot shit, don’t you?” An obviously drunk Magnus announced once all the royalty processed inside.

“Dad...” Duncan sighed as he put away his guitar.

“Didn’t think I’d notice you two sneaking off, did you?”

“Didn’t really care, actually. Their Majesties wanted us to perform at court so we had to leave. What are you doing here, anyway? The party can’t be over yet.”

“Somebody told me you were over here making a fool of yourself. So this is what you’re doing now that you gave up fighting?”

“I didn’t give up fighting,” Duncan sighed. “I’m just not going for Crown.”

“Same thing, isn’t it? You fighting in the melees tomorrow?”

“Just the tourneys.”

“See? And I suppose you’re not doing the Champion’s Tourney.”

“Hadn’t planned on it.”

“What about the unbelted tourney? I mean since you gave up your chain and all.”

“Doesn’t make a difference,” he said, not in the mood to try and explain his decisions.

“So not champions, not the unbelted, *definitely* not the knights, what else is there?”

“Well, there’s the torchlight, the dial-a-death, Fight for the Children, may try and find a team short a man for the three-man...”

Magnus snorted. “Like I said, not a real tourney in the bunch.”

“Well at least you don’t have to worry about me kicking your ass,” Duncan said, finally starting to get tired of his father’s abuse. “Again.”

“*There’s* the real reason you’re not fighting,” The older man laughed. “You’re afraid of me, aren’t you?”

“Really? ‘I know you are, but what am I’? Is that the best you can do? No hamsters? Nothing about elderberries? Not even the whores I rode in on? You must be slipping.”

“Duncan...” Joselyn warned quietly as she slipped an arm around him.

“You’d better be glad we’re not fighting in any of the same tourneys,” Magnus growled, glaring at her interruption.

“You could always enter one of my ‘not real tourneys.’”

“I might just do that.”

“Duncan...” Joselyn repeated, squeezing his side.

“You stay out of this,” Duncan’s father warned.

“Tell you what, how about the charity tourney on Saturday?” Duncan suggested. “I’ll even pay your entry fee.”

“You’re on,” Magnus said. “And we’ll see who kicks who’s ass.”

#

“Well that was fun,” Joselyn said as she curled up against Duncan and wrapped an arm around him. Between the drive the day before and all the drama with his father since then, the two of them had called the day a bust and disappeared into their tent shortly after nightfall.

“It got rid of him, didn’t it?” He sighed and pulled her in tighter. “I mean, I don’t know about you, but I really didn’t want to have to listen to him all through court.”

“I thought you handled it pretty well,” she told him, beginning to explore his chest. She wasn’t mad at him, more frustrated with his father than anything. “I don’t know if you noticed or not, but it looked like Their Majesties could hear him.”

“Wonderful,” He sighed again and rolled onto his back so he could look at her. “You know he wasn’t going to stop until I agreed to fight him anyway, so I figured I could at least make it for a...

“Joss, what are you doing?” He asked when he felt her hands wander below his chest.

“I just thought I’d show you how well I thought you handled yourself tonight. Besides, I told you what singing with you does to me...”

“We should do it more...” He began and then hissed as her fingers discovered a particularly sensitive area.

Any further demonstration was cut short as they heard a woman outside tell someone to get them, followed by a happy panting and the sudden appearance of Loki on their chests.

“Really?” Duncan called out.

“Hey, I *really* didn’t want to walk in on my brother... you know,” His sister replied. “Now are you two going to come out or do I have to be scarred for life?”

Duncan looked at Joselyn. They’d barely even started, so at most his sister’s arrival was more a delay of game than an actual interruption. “Come on in,” She called, reaching over to turn on a lantern. “We’re decent.”

“This better not be anything freaky...” Karen said, peeking inside before entering.

“Don’t get up on my account,” she said, sitting on a tote across from them.

“Hadn’t planned on it. So what brings you to the slums?”

“You know, when you piss off Dad, you *piss off* Dad.”

“We kind of guessed that,” Joselyn said, scratching Loki behind an ear.

“I don’t think you’ve ever seen Dad mad,” Karen told her. “Security came by and warned him to keep it down or they’d have to ask him to leave.”

“Oh no,” Duncan groaned.

“How’d that go over?” Joselyn asked.

“We managed to get him calmed down, but I’d recommend staying away from him if you want a chance to fight him. In armor, I mean.”

“That’s what we were planning to do anyway,” Duncan told her. “Is that the only reason you came by, or was they’re something else?”

“Nope. That’s about it,” She grinned at them and patted her lap to call Loki. “Just thought I’d stop by before I hit the road.”

“You’re not staying?” Joselyn asked.

“With Dad? Oh Hell no. You guys can enjoy roughing it if you want, *I’m* staying in a hotel,” Karen answered as she and Loki ducked out of the pavilion.

“You two have fun, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. But if you do, I want pictures.”

## Chapter 34

“Okay mister music teacher, what’s that?” Joselyn asked groggily as the music wafted in. This was one of the traditions that she had mixed feelings about, the morning serenades by bagpipe.

“Smash Mouth,” Duncan answered after a few chords, pushing away the covers.

“Enjoy the show,” she said as he got out of bed and slipped on some pants.

“What?” He asked.

“Just wait.”

“How about some Iron Maiden?” They heard Eva call and the music suddenly changed.

Duncan stepped outside and grinned when he saw their auburn-haired neighbor bouncing on her crutches to the music in a tunic that barely covered the essential. A show indeed.

“Go put some clothes on,” Rian told her with bemused exasperation when she emerged a few moments later and to his surprise, the chemise she wore did cover her, he’d thought the younger woman was the less conservative of the two.

“What do you think?” Joselyn asked, catching him by surprise as she slipped beneath his arm.

“Doesn’t hold a candle to you,” He answered. “But you’re right - it is quite the show.”

“You should see it from the other side.”

“Oh, hey you two,” Rian said, finally noticing them. “Eva, you’ve got an audience.”

The other woman turned to face them, and he could see what Joselyn was talking about. The tunic she wore had to be open nearly to her navel and even tied shut and with her standing still, the sight was... impressive.

“Good morning,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant over her blush. “I didn’t hear you get up.”

“Pants,” Rian reminded her, and she hobbled back into their tent.

“Put your tongue back in your mouth, Dear,” Joselyn grinned. “I’ll get the coffee going.”

#

“Quite the performance you put on last night,” The king said as he gratefully accepted a mug of coffee. “Not the music, you sounded great. Although it *was* pretty ballsy making us wait while you finished up your set.”

Wide-eyed, Joselyn looked at Duncan. She hadn’t noticed that part.

“You didn’t.”

“And just so you know, the other crowns have decided to trade off who does the pre-court entertainment for the rest of the event.”

“So, I take it this is about me and Magnus?” Duncan asked.

“Can’t you go a single event without drama?” The king sighed.

“Actually...” Joselyn began but the king waved her off.

“I know,” he said. “It’s just that when he does drama, he *does* drama. You had to pick during court for your little quarrel?”

“It wasn’t my idea,” Duncan told him.

“Of course not. All you did was challenge *another* duke to single combat.”

“He didn’t...” Joselyn began, but this time she over-rode the king’s attempt to silence her. “He didn’t challenge him, he invited him to come fight in the tourney.”

“Which, of course, led to nearly having to call the police on Harper’s Hall,” The king pointed out. “Lucky for you, there were several witnesses to your little spat who actually stood up for you and even more who spoke less than kindly about Duke Magnus.”

Duncan winced inside at that. Much as he might be an asshole, he *was* his father, and he didn’t like hearing others speak poorly of him. Even if it was true.

Especially if it was true.

“So, what about this ‘invitation to fight?’” the king asked. “Why Fight for the Children?”

“Because I figured something good might as well come of it,” Duncan said.

“And the fight itself?”

“It’s a fight,” He answered, shrugging. “Doesn’t matter one way or the other, really. If he wins, he’s still big enough to kick my ass.”

“And if he loses?”

“Then his boy finally got good enough to beat ‘Magnus the Great.’”

“So, you’re really not going to push things?” Joselyn asked. Thanks to her distractions the night before, it was the first time she’d heard his reasoning.

“No more than any other fight, although I do kind of hope I win. Dad’s getting pretty up there and if I beat him, it might let him retire thinking he’s passed on the torch.”

“And has he?”

Duncan laughed. “Something tells me there’s never going to be a ‘Duncan the Great’.”

#

“You’re really not going to push things?” Joselyn asked after the king left.

“What’s the point? The harder I fight, the harder he will.”

“Are you going to throw the fight?” Bran asked as he cleaned up from breakfast.

“No,” Duncan snorted. “*That* would make things worse. I’m just going to fight him like I would anyone else.”

“Question,” The older man continued. “What if everyone else beats him?”

“Oh, I doubt he’ll mind the knight’s winning - they *are* knights, after all,” Duncan said. “And the squires... he won’t mind too much, I don’t think. He’ll announce them as ready for elevation and move on. The newer fighters...”

He frowned as he considered that. “If it’s just one or two, he’ll say they got lucky, more than that, I don’t know.”

#

The next day passed with nothing more eventful than Duncan trying cut and thrust for the first time. It was almost a middle ground between the more traditional fencing and armored combat forms, requiring less armor than the latter while adding blows similar to the same, but with the force and blades of the former and between the lighter hits and fewer armor requirements (and the chance to fight with steel blades) he could see it as a more knee-friendly alternative to his former fighting style. And all he'd need to complete his kit would be an appropriate sword and to have someone - Joselyn, probably - replace his current helm's grill with perforated steel.

But he still had one more tourney to fight before he could think of retiring from heavy and, his entry fee paid, he stepped onto the field one last time.

## Chapter 35

“Lay on!” The marshal called and Duncan stepped forward. The tourney was a combined round robin - both armored fighters and fencers, trading off fights as they worked through all the other fighters, and given the number of fighters, Joslyn knew that it was going to last well into the afternoon.

Which meant she couldn't know when Duncan and his father would face each other.

That didn't really bug her, though. Duncan's style might be frustrating, but it did make for good theater for the patients from the children's hospital that was to be the recipient of their donations.

In fact, it seemed everyone there was set on making the tournament as big a show for the kids as they could. She even wore her finest German gown and coronet, falling easily into the role of the Lady cheering on her Lord. Of course, the funnest part was watching Her Ladyship Eva joking and laughing with the audience in between fights, her artificial leg on full display in a real-life example that being disabled didn't mean not being able to have a life.

But watching Duncan fight came a close second. As she'd come to expect, he fought just a hair better than his opponents, drawing out the fights for the children and, win or lose, she'd meet him at the end of each fight and give him a single rewarding kiss on the cheek. It was a routine that soon became the standard and even those without a lord or lady present took part, choosing a child from the audience to fight for and gladly collecting their reward as they stepped off the field. What was even more surprising to her was that Magnus even joined in, apparently still enough of a knight to recognize chivalry when he saw it.

But the good cheer couldn't last - at least not for her - and the two Harpers finally faced off.

“In this round does Duke Magnus Harper, called Magnus the Great do battle with Lord Duncan Harper,” The Herald called out as the two of them stepped onto the list field.

“And yes, for those of you wondering, they *are* related,” The woman in motley standing next to the herald added. “Lord Duncan is Duke Magnus's son, and I'm told this is to decide who has to do the dishes for the rest of the event,” She added, lying for the crowd's benefit.

“So, who do you think will win? Duke Magnus?” She continued, eliciting cheers from roughly half the crowd.

“Or Lord Duncan?” She finished again drawing about half the crowd. This was also part of the show - drawing the children into openly rooting for the fighters.

“Sounds pretty close,” She decided. “I guess we'll just have to see, won't we?”



The marshal called lay on and the two men began. It was obvious from the beginning they'd fought each other many times before and they traded blows, each one blocking the other in a flourishing show.

It was Magnus who landed the first shot, slipping it between Duncan's sword and shield and catching him in the head.

"First blood, Duke Magnus!" The woman in motley announced and the children cheered.

They began again, trading blows until the older Harper's shield arm began to tire and slipped far enough for Duncan to reach his side.

"One for Lord Duncan!" The multi-colored commentator cried to the cheers of the children.

"That makes it one-one," She added in a stage whisper that easily reached the spectators. "Whoever lands the next blow wins. Unless it's a double kill. If that happens, their wins will be given to their queens."

The two men circled, sizing each other up before beginning a final flurry of shots that ended with the simultaneous ring of a helm being struck and a grunt of contact with the other man's side.

Duncan and Magnus stared at each other before they both fell to the ground, twitching dramatically.

"Victory, Their Majesties!"

"Well fought, My Lord," Joselyn said, kissing Duncan's cheek when he stepped out before smiling at Magnus. "And you, Your Grace."

"You still got it," Magnus said with a laugh, slapping his son on the back. "One of these days, you might actually beat me."

"One of these days," Duncan agreed.

#

Much to his surprise, Duncan won. Most of his other fighters had gone in like he did - knowing the tourney was strictly for the children - and fought for show instead of victory, but few had as much experience with fighting just good enough to win as he did, and he ended up winning nine of his sixteen fights.

Joselyn waited until the presentation of the awards was finished and they'd stepped beyond the eric before speaking up.

"If I may?" she asked, turning to their host.

"Of course, Your Excellency," She replied with a bow and Joselyn gestured to Bran.

"For those of you who don't know, I am Countess Joselyn Speer, former Queen of Lindow, and Duncan is not only my Lord, but my Champion as well," she said as Bran pulled out what was obviously a silk-wrapped sword from his armor bag.

"Unfortunately, he is a champion without a sword," She continued as she took it from Bran. "And that simply will not do. Lord Duncan?"

"Yes, My Lady," he said and knelt before her.

"Take this," she told him as she unwrapped the sword and held it before him. "It is yours. Please use it to fulfill your duties, both now and in the future."

“As you wish,” He answered, taking the sword and, for once, she didn’t try to correct his choice of words. It was beautiful, cast guard and pommel separated by an ornately carved ebony handle, but it was the scabbard that gave it away. It was dented and gouged, still showing the stains a much younger Duncan had caused.

It *was* his sword. Curious about just how far the transformation went, he drew the first few inches and found bright gray steel that shone brighter than it ever had. Making sure it was safe to do so, he drew the sword and planted it before her, his head bowed.

“It is yours,” He declared looking up. “For as long as you have need and as long as you’ll have me.”

“Rise, My Lord,” She smiled, reaching down to offer him her hand, which he kissed as the assembled audience - fighters and children alike - cheered.

“Now that’s the sort of drama I approve of,” King Thomas smiled. “Does it have a name?”  
“Amalthea.”

END

## Discography

Not too long ago, a friend told me that music was an important part of life and of any story we tell, and *The Unicorn* is no different. As you no doubt noticed I have quoted a somewhat eclectic collection of songs throughout. None of these songs are my own and, in the interest of giving credit where credit is due, I have listed all of the songs used - the story's soundtrack, so to speak - in order of appearance in the hopes that it might better allow you to understand my vision of *The Unicorn*.

- *Star of the County Down* - The High Kings
- *The Song Will Remain* - Steeleye Span
- *Star of the County Down* - Van Morrison
- *Take the Journey* - Molly Tuttle
- *Friend and a Friend* - Molly Tuttle
- *The Last Unicorn* - America
- *Gone Away* - Sandra Szabo
- *We Owned the Night* - Lady Antebellum
- *Whiskey Lullaby* - Brad Paisley and Alison Krauss
- *Finally Found a Home* - Huey Lewis and the News
- *Going Home* - Joanne Shaw Taylor
- *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* - Monty Python
- *Some Nights* - Tyler Ward & Alex G
- *Love They Say* - Tegan and Sara
- *The Game of Love* - Santana, featuring Michelle Branch
- *Nil Sé Ina Ia* - Clannad
- *You Were Never Mine* - Janiva Magness
- *King Henry* - Steeleye Span
- *The Fox* - Steeleye Span