



*To win her hand,
he must free it first...*

*Bedding
the Enemy*

MARY WINE

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Chapter One

Red Stone Castle, McQuade land, Scotland, Spring 1604

Laird...

He'd never courted the title. Never considered it something that might be his. Keir McQuade walked through the hallways he'd covered a thousand times in the last year alone but today it felt like he crossed the polished stones for the very first time.

Today he was Laird McQuade.

An uneasy peace had settled on his father's land. One that Keir did not trust. Everyone was watching to see what the new season would bring. His father had wielded power ruthlessly and his two elder brothers followed their sire absolutely—moonlit raids on their neighbors that had resulted in his only sister being stolen away.

Keir snarled softly. Bronwyn was the only member of the family that he held dear. He missed her now that she was wed and that was no mistake. He did not lament the loss of his father or brothers, only the fact that they had been so filled with greed that they could not remain among the living.

He'd run his brother Sodac through with his own hand after he'd tried to help their eldest brother poison their sister.

And for what?

To deny her a dowry that her mother had settled on her long ago. Keir shook his head. Three months later, he was still slightly amazed when he opened his eyes in the morning and recalled the events that had left him to inherit the title of Laird McQuade.

He neared his chamber and frowned. Footsteps scuffed on the floor and two younger lads came around the corner with a heavy trunk between them.

"Laird." They both ducked their heads, unable to tug on their bonnets or drop their burden. But they both looked at the top of the trunk, avoiding his eyes.

A maid came next with her arms full. "Pardon me, laird." She dropped a curtsy without breaking her pace and ducked around him in a flash.

Keir frowned. Covering the last few steps to the doorway of his chamber, he stared inside. The shutters were wide open to allow the new spring air inside. A hint of new plants was in the air but all he felt was a tightening between his shoulder blades.

"What goes on here, Gwen?"

His mistress was standing near the bed. She tensed, the hand resting on the bedpost tightening. He heard her sigh before she turned to face him.

"It is time, Keir."

"Is it now?" He swept the room with his gaze. All of her personal belongings were missing. "Except that I dinnae recall when we decided that ye should leave."

"We didna decide because ye avoid the topic every time I bring it up. I decided." She sounded resigned but at the same time there was a core of strength in her that he

admired.

“Ye got yer monthly courses, didn’t ye?” He stepped closer, reaching for her, but Gwen moved away from his touch. A soft shaft of pain went through him. “Things have changed. Stop taking that concoction of yers and we’ll marry now that my father isna here to tell us no.”

“You canna marry me, Keir.” Gwen offered him a genuine smile. “Dinnae talk that way.”

“Ye love me, Gwen, and I will wed with ye. I’m laird now and I dinnae answer to my father any longer. I only refused ye a babe because my father would have seen it born a bastard.”

“But you do not love me.” Her eyes glittered and she drew a deep breath. “You are correct, my monthly courses have come and it’s time for me to go. Before I lose the strength to do what I know in my heart is right.”

“I didna say any such thing.”

Gwen lifted a small hand up to silence his words. Hard resignation drew her face tight. “You will not say it because you know I love ye and ye’re a good man. So it falls to me to speak the words we both know need saying.”

“Gwen...”

She interrupted him. “You are the laird now. Just like your sister, it falls to you to marry for the benefit of every McQuade. I bring ye nothing.”

“Ye’re a fine woman, Gwen, and ye’d make a good mistress of Red Castle.”

She smiled, soaking up the praise, but her resolve never faltered. “Thank you. But it remains that you do not love me.”

Keir hissed but couldn’t deny the truth of her words. Lying about such a thing would cause so much more pain when he was found out. “I wish it were otherwise, Gwen. Truly I do.”

She moved toward him, reaching up to cup his jaw in her small hands. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears and his throat tightened.

“I know that, dear one, but you cannot change what fate has decided. You have treated me so kindly and I was nae pure when I came to you.” Her hands shook and she backed away before allowing him to comfort her. “I’m nae sorry for that, either. I enjoy life and will nae lie about it. I follow my heart for better or worse.

“My sisters have married and my mother will be happy to have me under her roof again.” Gwen moved toward the door. “If ye’re going to marry a lass that ye dinnae love, Keir, find one that brings good things to the McQuades.”

“I think ye will bring plenty of good things to this clan as my wife.”

Gwen paused in the doorway. “Nae, Keir. I have never been a coward. Ye would have become bored with me in a fortnight if that were so. I do love you and even though it hurts to part with ye, love is sweet enough to send me looking for it. When I swell up with my first child, I want to see love in the eyes of the father and nae just the tenderness that ye give me. But I thank ye for it and love ye enough to set ye free to try and find a lass that yer heart softens for. Love is nae something to miss in this life, if ye can help it.”

She stepped back, into the doorway. “Remember that, Keir. Remember that I only want the best for us both. I have to leave ye because ye’re too kind a man to set me out and I’ll nae be the mistress that ye leave a noble bride for. She’ll have little choice in

the matter of who she weds. No one should be unkind to her. When ye bring a bride here, this room should be waiting for her.”

She was right. Keir hated it, but she was correct. He’d never hurt her by putting her aside.

“All right, Gwen. Ye have always had a way of pushing me when I need it.” He followed her, noticing the shiver that crossed her fair skin. Reaching out, he stroked her cheek. She leaned her face into his hand, a soft smile turning up her lips. “But ye’ll take a pair of horses with ye....”

“I will not.” Her voice was hard as stone now.

“Ye will.” She narrowed her eyes but he grinned at her. Her spirit was something he had always been drawn to. “And ye’ll take a few other things, including some silver.”

“I am nae a whore.”

“I didna say ye were. I told ye I’d wed with ye, today if ye like.” She glared at him. Gwen never let his size intimidate her—another trait that he liked about her. She shook her head, refusing him.

“Ye’ll take the horses and some sheep, since ye’re set on this course of leaving me to find love. I’m going to make very sure that ye dinnae end up marrying because ye’re wondering how to keep food on the table.”

He rubbed her cheek one last time. “Promise me, Gwen, that ye’ll come to me if ye need something?”

She reached up and hugged him tightly, her body shaking just a tiny bit. “I will, Keir. I promise.”

She ducked out the door, her steps fading down the hallway. Keir clenched his hands into fists, forcing himself to turn around. The chamber was suddenly empty, more devoid of life than he’d ever thought it might be.

Oh aye, being laird was a burden, to be sure.

But it was also a duty, and Gwen was correct. He needed to marry for the clan—find himself a wife who came with powerful relatives and maybe even a good dowry. Love was for common men, most of them never realizing how rich they truly were to have the power of free choice. Being laird came with power but responsibility so heavy a man could feel his own knees buckle at times.

He would shoulder it. Looking out the window, he watched the McQuade retainers in the yard. Once more the clan colors might be respected. He would make the McQuades a clan to be admired instead of scorned for nighttime raids.

And he would begin by finding a bride who would bridge the gap between him and his neighbors.

The English queen was dead. James Stuart had inherited the English crown from the monarch who had signed his own mother’s execution order. The English nobles awaited their new king as spring drove away winter’s chill. The English court lowered themselves before the new king and queen.

Helena Knyvett moved through the court, taking care with her steps. She had learned at a young age to control her every action. Each of her hands was resting perfectly on the front of her skirts to display her long fingers. Her chin was level and

her expression smooth, no hint of disagreement. It was necessary to stop often in order to give deference to the nobles she passed. No matter, there was no place that she needed to be; in truth, her purpose was to represent her family among the other nobles of England. Her purpose was to mingle among them while being poised, educated, and well bred. Greeting them and making a favorable impression was the entire point of the costly silk damask gown she wore. The corset was stiff and the sleeves tight as fashion dictated, but all of that was something she was expected to shoulder without a single frown to mar her makeup. She needed to present the correct image so that a powerful man might offer for her. Her poise and ability to conduct herself well among other powerful people was what she would bring to a husband. Marriage was about a union between those of blue blood and those who understood how to gain the eye of other nobles.

At least that was what she had been told since childhood. It had been instilled in her every moment of her youth. Her purpose was to further her family. She was to represent her father, always considering what her actions might do for him.

In truth she was quite tired of the games played at court—the whispered schemes and plotting that didn't match the endless respect and greeting done in the middle of the great halls. But in the dark corners, nobles talked about one another in anything but kind terms.

“It took you long enough.”

Edmund Knyvett enjoyed court. Helena curtsied to her brother. He rolled his eyes and his lip lifted into a sneer that didn't look good against his velvet doublet and silk sleeves. The only son and heir to the earldom of Kenton, Edmund was lavishly attired and he stood poised on one foot with the other barely touching the ground. It was a courtly pose, one that was considered sophisticated.

“Enough, Helena; if I want polished manners I don't need to spend time with you to see them.”

She bored her brother. Her sibling preferred his friends and consorts to family. He often used her as an alibi for his lustful meetings. She would not lie for him but no one ever asked her. Edmund was her father's heir. One day he would be an earl. The court surrounding them dare not risk making an enemy of him. As long as there was a believable story, they chose not to question it. Besides, as his sister, if he suffered the ill will of the powerful men around them, so would she.

Such was court. Full of rumors and intrigue. She had no friends here—only the fear of performing poorly enough to earn the scorn of her brother. Edmund did not suffer silently. Her brother ensured that she understood everything she did that did not meet his standards.

“I came as soon as I received word that you summoned me.”

“Yes, yes. That doesn't matter.” Edmund began walking. Nobles made way for him quickly and with a slight lowering of their heads. They reached the end of the great hall and passed through to the inner rooms of the palace. Once they left the larger receiving hall there was privacy if you spoke in low tones.

“It is time to place you closer to the throne.” Edmund paused, looking through an arched opening in the wall. Queen Anne was in the private garden with two of her children. The new queen was still enchanted by the palace, excitement sparkling in her eyes.

“Have I been offered a place?” She hoped not. Gaining any position among the new queen’s ladies would trap her at court while her family interrogated her for every detail she overheard.

“No, but I plan to change that.” Edmund looked across the garden toward one of the queen’s maids of honor. “That one with the golden red hair. Raelin McKorey. Rumor has it half of Scotland thinks she’s a witch due to some nasty business with a laird getting impaled on a royal pike over her. Getting her dismissed should prove simple enough. All I need do is give the queen a suitable reason to dispense with her. I’ll tussle her tits and rumple her maidenly skirts in the hallway. That should suffice to disgrace her enough to be dismissed, leaving an opening for you.”

Helena’s eyes rounded. Her brother had little compassion in him. She knew it from personal experience. The girl in question was dressed in the queen’s colors of gold and cream. A scar marred her creamy skin on one side of her face, but she smiled at the young prince and princess. The young princess took her hands and began swinging around in a circle. Raelin’s eyes shimmered with happiness and she swung the child higher until both their skirts billowed out like flags on a jousting field. They didn’t stop to worry about what others thought of them. Raelin simply kept turning in a circle with the princess holding onto her hands and her feet flying through the morning air.

It was a pure delight to see. To simply play. Now there was something she missed. It seemed so very long ago that she was permitted to indulge in such moments. Such was the burden of noble birth. Image was more important than childhood.

“Get out there and charm those royal brats. Before I disgrace Raelin, the queen must know your face. Or she’ll pick some other girl to be her maid.”

Helena ached for the Scots girl but she didn’t dare voice an argument. Edmund could often turn cruel toward her, doing the very thing she begged him not to just to smother her in his authority. Instead she secretly hoped that Raelin McKorey was wiser than Edmund gave her credit for.

That was entirely possible.

Her brother was like many men, in that he didn’t believe women might be clever. She walked silently, gliding around the edges of the garden. The sound of laughter was infectious because it was honest for a change. Not the theatrics often heard at court. The new queen was still getting settled into her new home and often didn’t post guards around herself. A pair of burly Scots eyed her when she came closer. Helena lowered herself gracefully and deeply, remaining there.

“Yes? What do you want?” Queen Anne sounded mildly annoyed to have her time with her children interrupted.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. The sound of the children drew me forward. I but longed for the view of innocence.”

The queen smiled, her mother’s joy evident.

“Who are you?”

“Helena Knyvett, Your Majesty.”

The queen’s maids all watched her, but the guards dismissed her and returned to watching the archways for possible trouble.

“I feel we should all learn from children how to truly enjoy a spring morning.” Anne of Denmark cast a loving look at her children. She looked up, surprising Helena

because she hadn't expected the queen to desire a response from her. Court was full of powerful people who wanted to have their opinion heard and nothing else.

"That is very true, your majesty...."

The queen smiled. Helena found herself caught between two emotions. The children were a delight for her senses. They didn't know how to be calculating yet, hadn't learned about the sharper side of life. But she cringed as well because her brother was no doubt pleased with her now. Wherever he was hiding, she'd bet his mouth was curved up into a sneer. It was an expression she knew too well. That certainly made things much simpler for her, but she detested his schemes.

Still, the afternoon was nice and she had also learned to enjoy the moments that she might. All too soon her family would issue another demand. Such was the life of a nobleman's daughter. In truth, it was the fate of all children, even dictated by Scripture. Many said that even to think against your place was to question the will of God.

Helena didn't believe that. Fine, that made her a poor Christian, but it did not mean her dimwitted. She had a mind and didn't let it grow dusty. There was one thing that court had that she adored; a library to rival any in the entire country. Even more, there were learned men who longed for an interested ear and didn't care if that ear belonged to a woman. She spent hours in the library; the rows of books and instruments of science had become her haven. Even better was the laboratory that Dr. John Dee had begun during the old queen's reign. His students continued his work and sometimes she was allowed to watch silently.

"Helena, come join us in my chambers."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Queen Anne picked up her son, the young prince clutching her strand of pearls and popping them into his mouth. The princess Elizabeth skipped happily alongside Raelin McKorey, their hands clasped.

Helena followed the queen along with a party of maids of honor, ladies-in-waiting, senior maids, and royal guards. She didn't seem to notice them at all, flowing gracefully in her silk gown while her son chewed on a string of pearls worth a fortune. Anne had been born a princess of Denmark, and she was completely at ease being the center of so much scurry and scrutiny.

Helena had learned to live amidst it as well. She followed her queen into the royal chambers. Everything was lavish but not overly so. The former queen had enjoyed good craftsmanship, too, and many of the carvings in the woodwork were from the days when Elizabeth had hungered for art and commissioned some of the most talented men in the world to bring their craft to England. Theater, painting, and even glass blowing had become English arts under her rein, promoting the growth of the middle class.

Musicians began to play, hidden somewhere behind a tapestry. The walls were inset with carvings that were gilded and painted beautiful colors. Water flowed in one of the outside foundations, the open windows allowing the soothing sound inside.

"Do you enjoy music, Lady Helena?"

Raelin McKorey asked the question, while holding the young princess happily playing atop a wooden rocking horse. It was fashioned with a sidesaddle and a silken mane.

“Yes.”

The maid of honor came closer. “Do you play any instruments?”

“Yes, my father had me tutored in mandolin and the virginals.” Her father had considered music a necessary skill in a lady of the court.

Raelin smiled. “My father did as well, but I am atrocious.” A slight Gaelic accent clung to her words, making the girl sound unique.

“I doubt that.”

“Do not, I swear it is true.” Raelin laughed. “But dinna ye mind, no one is skilled at everything.”

The girl’s Scottish brogue was charming. Helena found herself enjoying it. Court had more Scots now that James Stuart was king, but to date she had only heard male voices speaking in the brogue. One of the other maids was listening in. She was a golden blonde with blue eyes that shimmered. She leaned in so that her words would not carry.

“Just make sure you dinnae play cards with Raelin unless you enjoy losing. Her brother taught her how to play like a privateer. She pillages everyone at the table.”

Raelin shrugged, a very odd gesture coupled with her formal, gold, maid of honor gown. “This is Catriona McAlister and she thinks that my brother Alarik taught me to play cards. I would hate to correct her; it might destroy her confidence.”

Catriona snorted softly. She cast a look about to make sure their conversation was not being listened to. “He did and didna tell me he didna. Yer brother is more privateer than not.”

“My maids seem to have taken a liking to you, Lady Helena.”

The queen’s voice silenced Raelin and Catriona instantly. She turned to look at them with a knowing eye. “Perhaps you would entertain us with your knowledge of the virginals.”

Queen Anne pointed toward a lavishly painted instrument. A maid instantly folded back the wood cover to expose the white and black keys.

“I would be honored, Your Majesty.”

A somewhat surprised look crossed the queen’s face but it was replaced by a pleased expression. Helena swept her skirts forward and the maid pushed the small bench seat beneath her. It was all done in a graceful motion that would have made her mother proud. The hours of practicing court manners she’d dictated for her daughter were paying off.

Helena took a moment to remove her gloves. Every ear was poised and waiting on her first few notes. It was a test of her honesty more than a true desire to hear her play. The hidden musicians had stopped to allow her to become the center of attention. But it was a challenge Helena was prepared for. Setting her gloves aside, she placed her fingertips lightly on top of the mother-of-pearl-covered keys. She began the first passages of “Greensleeves” and felt the tension in the room dissipate. Her confidence grew as the song progressed. Her music was not something her brother might use; it was a thing that lived inside her heart. She was never so happy as she was when bringing a sprightly song to life in the air. Her mood only turned somber when she struck the last notes and the virginals quieted.

Soft applause came from the queen and her maids. Even the princess Elizabeth clapped but stopped quickly to grab onto the top of her horse, which was rocking back

and forth.

“Delightful, Helena. I am pleasantly impressed.”

Helena rose and curtsied low.

“None of that here in my private rooms. Sit and play. Something happy.” The queen herself sat in a wide, brocade-covered chair. Two of her maids brought her sewing basket to her. Raelin carried over a length of cream linen that was half sewn into a man’s shirt. Helena was slightly stunned.

The queen smiled at her. “Yes, I make my husband’s shirts just like any other wife.”

Helena cast her eyes away, her cheeks coloring for having been caught gaping like an unpolished girl. To make a man’s shirts was considered a sign of affection.

Deep affection.

“How long have you been at court, Helena?”

The queen’s question startled her. Helena raised her attention back to her monarch. “A year, Your Majesty.”

“And yet you still blush. I find that promising.”

Helena turned and sat back on the bench. Her hands began moving on the keys before she really considered what she was going to play. Her memory offered up a soft melody.

Oh, she understood what the queen was hinting at...

But at the same time she was annoyed. There was so much dishonesty around her. Arriving at court had been the completion of years of practice and preparation. As far back as she might recall, all of her energy had been directed toward the moment when she would begin her days among the nobles and ambassadors of England’s court.

Disillusionment hurt. It was the cruelest sort of pain—one that dug into her like a dull knife. Each day she found it harder to scrape together enough hope to face the ritual of dressing. It took over an hour and that was considered quite modest. But sitting for her face paint and hair styling nearly drove her insane. What was wrong with the color of her skin? She didn’t understand why it needed so many powders and colors applied. Her own mother wouldn’t recognize her. Such makeup hadn’t been a part of her training.

Her fingers finished the song but she paused for a moment. Her gaze settled on Raelin McKorey and the fact that the girl wasn’t wearing the heavy face paint that the rest of the court clung to. The Scottish girl noticed her stare, raising an eyebrow in curiosity. The queen was working her needle but chatting with two of her older ladies-in-waiting.

“Forgive me for staring.”

Fingering the keys, Helena tried to force her mind back to the music. Raelin moved closer, her skirts rustling.

“Were ye staring at my scar? If so, simply ask.” There was a hint of unhappiness in the girl’s tone. “I deplore the way everyone stares at it and then pretends it isn’t there.”

“Oh...no. Not at all. I was noticing how little face powder you use.” Helena’s fingers went still on the keys. She looked at the scar now. “Honestly, it’s not that big of a scar. Which was why I was noticing how little paint you wear. This makeup would cover it up completely if you wished to conceal it.”

Raelin studied her for a long moment. The musicians began playing now that Helena had paused.

“Why do you wear it?” Raelin studied her face. “It sounds like you dinnae care for it.”

Helena sighed. It was a tiny sound that slipped past the years of training. Raelin’s face looked like freedom. She simply couldn’t help looking at it.

“My family expects me to conduct myself according to court dictates.”

Raelin winkled her nose. “It doesna suit ye to paint yer face like the old queen did.” She suddenly smiled. “I know, we shall redo it. Catriona is very good with face powders.”

Raelin reached for Helena’s hand and tugged her up. The maid scurried in and pulled the little bench out from beneath her skirts.

“What are you two about?” The queen looked over her sewing at them.

Raelin curtsied. “Helena wants to try wearing less face paint. I thought I might help her.”

The rest of the ladies and maids of honor waited to see what the queen would say. Her face was smooth for a long moment before she smiled approvingly.

“I think that’s an excellent idea. I don’t understand these English families painting up their daughters to look like an old queen. You are a girl and should look more like one.”

The other maids of honor all smiled. They skipped to the edges of the chamber, returning with several items. Helena didn’t know where to look first. Raelin sat her down on a wide padded bench. Another girl shook out a wide piece of sheeting and draped it over Helena’s shoulders to protect her expensive court dress.

“Let’s clean this off first.” Raelin sounded so enthusiastic, as if she were about to begin some work of art, her fellow maids of honor all joining in the moment. Helena suppressed a tiny lament. This was what friends felt like. She felt their hands on her, wiping her face clean. Her skin tingled, enjoying the freedom.

Catriona opened a wooden box that had little trays that lifted out. Carefully sorted in the trays were powders and expensive horse-hair brushes. Two other maids of honor surveyed what was on hand. Their eyes sparkled with enjoyment but they pushed their lips into thin lines while they concentrated.

“You have such lovely eyes.” Raelin finished removing the last of the white powder from her face. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a dark-haired girl with green eyes.”

“My grandmother was half French.”

The girls all leaned in to listen, one of them pulling on her hair to release the high rolls it was formed into. As big as her fist, padded rolls were pinned beneath her hair. The girls removed them and replaced them with much smaller ones.

Raelin selected a brush and fluttered it against a cake of powder. She smiled and applied the first stroke to Helena’s cheek. The afternoon seemed to fly by because Helena was enjoying it so much. When Raelin was at last satisfied with her makeup, she carefully replaced all of the brushes and powders before allowing Helena to see her reflection.

“I hope ye approve.”

The girl’s brogue intensified when she was nervous. Helena didn’t wait to really

absorb what she looked like; she smiled brightly at Raelin the moment she got a glimpse of her face. It didn't matter if she liked the new style or not. Edmund would make her wear it to endear herself to the maids of honor among whom he hoped to place her.

At Raelin McKorey's expense.

Helena swallowed her distaste. There was little point in regretting one of Edmund's schemes. Her brother had scores of them. Far better to hope that he might lose interest or be satisfied that she had found some favor with the queen without his assistance.

"Dinnae placate me, Helena." Raelin placed one delicate hand on her hip. Helena stared at the informal pose, amusement tickling her nose.

Raelin pointed at the mirror. "Ye havena even taken a good look yet."

"But I already like the way my face feels so much better."

Raelin's eyes shimmered with emotion. "I didna think of that. But I suppose it was uncomfortable wearing all that thick powder."

She sat down and angled the mirror up so that it showed Helena a clear reflection of herself. Having the use of a mirror was quite unexpected because they were such costly things. She held it carefully, making sure to maintain a good grip on it, but just to be sure, she allowed it to rest in her lap. The polished surface showed her a very pleasing sight. You could see the color of her skin once more, only a little powder used to smooth her complexion. Her lips were painted, but with a lighter coral shade instead of the blood red favored by the late queen Elizabeth. Raelin had outlined her eyes in a thin brown that made them look a little larger, and there was a touch of rose on her cheeks. Her hair no longer rose so high above her forehead. Neat rolls parted in the center but they were no more than an inch thick.

A little sigh crossed her lips in relief.

"Now that's much better." Raelin clapped her hands together, her face shining with her accomplishment. "You and I shall be friends. I will help style you and you will play the music. Her Majesty adores the virginals."

"That is very kind of you."

And it was. Raelin McKorey was a maid to the queen, so she didn't have any time of her own. Besides, her family had placed her there in the hopes that she would accomplish all of the things that Edmund wanted of her. Helena smiled at her, seeing so much of herself in the Scots girl, both of them trying to find their way in a world controlled by men and money.

Helena returned to the virginals, setting her fingers onto the keys with a happy heart. Her spirit felt lighter than it had in weeks. It was for certain that her face was lighter. The queen was nodding her head in time with the music while she worked her needle. It was so beautiful, Helena felt privileged to be a part of it.

Edmund could choke on his schemes.

Chapter Two

“Did the queen invite you back?”

Helena jumped, her mind foggy from slumber. Fear shot through her for a brief moment until she forced her eyes to focus on the yellow glow illuminating the doorframe of her tiny room. Edmund stood there, a sneer of impatience on his lips.

“Did she?”

“Yes.”

There was little point in berating him for waking her so rudely. Her brother might take that as a compliment to his ability to ruffle her feathers. His gaze wondered over her, lingering on her face for a long moment before moving down her body. Her fingers curled around the top of the blanket, clutching it closer. Disgust raked across her.

Edmund snickered at her revulsion. “Don’t flatter yourself, sister dear. I am merely trying to gauge just what manner of body you’ve managed to grow. You’re certainly not pretty enough to have the marriage offers piling up on my secretary’s desk.”

Helena pulled the blanket up anyway, his words giving her little reassurance. It bothered her to have him in her chamber during the night. Her skin itched with distaste.

“I’ve done what you asked, Edmund. Go on and let me rest.”

His face changed, his lips thinning into something quite ugly. She was accustomed to his schemes but this was deeper somehow. Greed shimmered in his eyes.

“I haven’t even begun to tell you what I want you to do. But I’m not surprised that you can’t understand what needs to be done for our family to succeed.” His eyes traveled down her length once more, his lips curling back in disgust. “You’re just a female, nothing but a bitch that can speak. It falls to me to give you direction.”

He left her doorway, the light of the candle fading down the hallway. It left her in darkness because her shutters were closed. Rolling over and reaching up, Helena found the inch-wide metal rod that secured them. She did it easily from hundreds of repetitions. Pulling it loose, she allowed it to hang by its chain, and propped herself up on one shoulder so that she might open the shutter.

Edmund would have a fit if he knew she opened the shutters at all. Her room wasn’t really a room but an attic. He’d had a set of steep stairs built when her parents sent her to join him in the London town house. Residences near the palace were costly and in great demand but she slept in the attic for another reason.

Edmund was selfish.

She smothered a giggle and pulled one shutter open. The night sky was magical. Well, only if one admitted to believing in magic. That wasn’t very wise. James didn’t seem to have the same zeal for witch hunting as some did, but there were men on his

privy council who did.

She pulled the blanket up to her nose to hide any reflections of the moonlight off her plain nightshift. Keeping absolutely still, she could look out over the rooftops of London. She only did it when the moonlight wasn't pointing toward her window. The night was beautiful. Searching the heavens, she located constellations she had first seen in books. Peace settled over her. This was the time that was solely hers. She treasured it.

The corners of her mouth twitched up just thinking about what Edmund might do if he knew how much she adored the tiny attic room.

She hoped nothing. He was her brother, after all. It was sad to think they would never like each other. She still held out hope that they might find some topics that they agreed upon, possibly even enjoy conversing on.

To date it had not happened. The moment she arrived in London, Edmund had begun telling her what he planned for her to do. What use he had for her. It was disheartening, to say the least. They were blood but honestly they were little more than strangers. Edmund had left their family estate at the age of six and she had been barely out of swaddling at the time. He returned from time to time but never for long. Her memory held brief recollections of him at different ages, but it was likely that she held those memories due to the paintings her parents commissioned of their only son. They were huge oil canvases, ones that hung proudly in the dining hall of their estate. She hadn't really known what to expect upon her arrival. What she'd found was a man who was a stranger to her.

Edmund wore lace and ribbons set with gold tips. Pearls adorned his doublet and his slops were full and round. His boots were always polished and freshly blacked. Lace edged the ruffles of his shirt. The thing that looked the most out of place on him was the sword he had strapped to his hip. The hilt was gilded and polished. Edmund had a habit of resting one hand on it, almost lovingly. He was every inch the courtier. His life revolved around the gossip. The first few days she had attended with him, she had stared in wonder while he made his rounds. He wasn't alone in that. Hundreds of people were crowded into court. They competed for appointments with the king. Bribes were frequent and high. Seating at banquets cost you a good amount of silver if you wanted to be seated next to the person of your choice. Edmund dictated every move she made. No one danced with her without his permission. She did not go where he did not bid her to go.

Just like today with the queen...

Raelin and the other girls who served as maids of honor came to mind. Even their dresses were uniform. In spite of having known her so short a time, Helena found herself liking the Scots girl. A desire to return to the queen's private chambers was growing stronger, but not due to any direction from her brother.

Poor Edmund. How would he deal with such devastating news?

She laughed at her own jest. It wasn't too terrible to tease her brother in her thoughts. Well, the church would argue about that. Still she didn't feel guilt chewing on her conscience. After all, Edmund made no attempt at all to be pleasant. A few ill thoughts were the least of his due. But she would not linger on them. The only person who would be upset was herself.

Reaching up, she closed the shutter. Dawn would arrive promptly, so best to rest

while she might. Edmund would likely have her dressed and in the carriage at daybreak. But she didn't mind, for it meant she might see Raelin again, and the idea of having a friend sent her off to slumber with happy thoughts.

"Welcome back, Mistress Knyvett." One of the queen's ladies-in-waiting waved the guards out of the doorway. Helena lowered herself before entering.

"Her Majesty is unwell this morning."

"I am sorry to hear such news."

The lady offered a small smile that confused Helena. The queen's illness was no reason for smiles, she would think.

"'Tis the babe making her ill. It will pass in a few more weeks."

Helena's face reflected her surprise. She had heard no rumors of the queen being with child.

"And you shall keep that knowledge to yourself, madam. Her Majesty does not need to be bothered with the endless congratulations and chattering of every soul who wants to advance themselves by wiggling into her good graces. Now is the time for quiet so that her body may adjust."

"Of course. I understand."

The lady waved her off, toward the circle of maids of honor. They smiled at her, Raelin patting a bench next to her.

"I'm so glad ye came."

Raelin kept her voice a whisper. "Dinnae ye worry, things will be right as rain by noon. Until then, we will have to behave."

There was a soft round of laughter from all the girls that they covered up quickly, and lowered their heads to peer at their sewing. Helena felt her eyes widen when she beheld what was sitting on the table in the center of their group. A small chest, banded with iron to make it secure, was there with its top open. Pearls in more colors than she had ever seen sat nestled inside it—cream, white, pink, gold, and even blue ones. They were sorted into different sizes and held in small silk bags that were all carefully untied so that you might see into each bag.

"Can you stitch?"

"Of course."

Raelin shook her head. "There is no 'of course' about it. The pearls are counted and recounted when removed. Make sure your stitches and knots are secure."

Raelin handed her a silk sleeve that was edged in velvet. Tiny chalk marks showed the design where the pearls were intended to sit. She also handed her a golden needle.

Helena marveled at the little needle. It was so smooth, no rough burrs to catch on the fabric. She rolled it between her fingers, simply enjoying holding such a fine item. The sleeve itself was beautiful and working on it was a pure delight for the senses. The girls whispered all the time they attached pearls. Helena felt Raelin watching her first few stitches but she did not become flustered. Her skills were very good and she knotted the thread with a practiced hand.

The queen finally emerged from her sleeping chamber, her face pale. Her ladies fluttered around her but she waved them away.

"A bit of fresh air. That is all I need."

She was wearing only a dressing gown and that was untied, allowing her chemise to be seen. Her hair was braided into one thick length that trailed down her back. But she still looked so regal. It was in the way she moved, commanding everyone around her.

“Helena, play something sweet.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Carefully setting her work aside, Helena rose and curtsied to her queen before sitting at the virginals. The queen looked out over the garden but her face lost some of its pinched look when Helena began to play.

“I heard ye were feeling poorly again.”

Helena missed a note as the king strode into the chamber. The queen turned and lowered herself. But the king reached for her hand, raising her.

“I am very well.”

James Stuart didn’t appear to believe her. His face was darkened with concern. Anne laughed at him.

“This is not our first babe. I will be strong and well.”

The king kissed her hand, lingering over it. He suddenly noticed Helena, looking straight at her.

“A new maid of honor, my dear?”

The queen smiled. “This is Helena Knyvett. I enjoy her command of the virginals quite a bit.”

“Then I am in her debt.”

Helena felt a smile brightening her face. There was no way to ignore the rise of satisfaction inside her. But it wasn’t due to some sense of family duty. The king might command the best musicians in the country to play for him. Pleasing his ear was an accomplishment, to be sure. She inclined her head to acknowledge his words, not wanting to lose the melody.

Servants entered with large serving platters that had silver domes over them. They set a table right in the middle of the chamber. The scent of fresh bread and newly cut cheese drifted to her nose when they lifted the domes. The king and queen began dining. Helena watched them from beneath her lowered lashes. It was a fascinating sight because, in spite of their positions, they appeared quite normal.

Not that she might ever dare to call them normal. Many still believed in the divine right of the monarchy. But it was almost an intimate setting, so far removed from the other times she had viewed the royal couple. At banquets, there were horns that announced the couple every time they entered the room. Each tempting and lavish tray was presented to them before anyone else. Earls and countesses served them, doing even the most basic of table chores, such as holding a bowl of wash water for the queen to rinse her hands in before she supped. The ladies of the chamber served the royal couple but it lacked the abundance of lowering and curtsies that was displayed by these very same women in the great hall. There was no lack of respect, simply a lack of pretense.

Helena was suddenly more content than she had been since leaving home. Behind all the polished manners and expected duties, there were people here. She enjoyed that.

Even Edmund and his schemes couldn’t tarnish her joy.

London...

Keir McQuade looked down on the town with a frown. He'd honestly never thought to travel so far into England. He liked Scotland and was quite content to run his estates.

There was yet another thing that had changed with his father's recent behavior. James might just leave him standing in the outer chamber for months, considering the last McQuade he'd had in his presence had needed running through by the royal guard. The only thing his monarch might be interested in seeing him about was the inheritance taxes due the crown. But the secretary of the privy council could collect that.

Yet it was his duty to wait for his king's attention.

Every new laird swore an oath to his monarch. It was a tradition that needed to be observed even more because of the way his father had disgraced the name of McQuade. Keir looked down on London and tightened his resolve. He wasna afraid of anything that would befall his own person. He was more worried about nae being able to restore his clan to good standing with his king. Being the McQuade laird, that was now his burden. Every soul wearing McQuade colors looked to him to maintain their honor. The men riding with him all wanted to be proud of the name they'd been born with, to wear their kilts with chins held high. His father had made that difficult with raids that cast a shadow over the honor of the entire clan.

He tightened his hand around the reins.

He'd make sure their sons could be proud of being McQuades.

"You're more clever than I thought."

Edmund was drunk, although her brother handled it expertly. There was only a slight slurring to his words and a pinch at the corner of his eyes that she had learned to recognize.

"Don't plan on getting married. I need you."

She bit her lip to retain the harsh words that bubbled up in response. What an arrogant fool her brother was. He mocked himself with his own words. One day he was ready to get rid of her, and the next he was warning her against thinking of marrying. The only thing his warning did was illuminate how little say she had over her own fate. Such knowledge was beginning to chafe, and being told that it was a woman's position to accept it, very old.

Her brother's hunting hounds appeared to have more choice than she.

"Lure Raelin McKorey out tonight."

"That isn't necessary. I am making my own place with the queen." She knew better but just couldn't stand idle while her brother threatened Raelin. The Scots girl was her only friend.

And she was a kindhearted soul as well. She deserved better than to be lured to her ruin. Especially by someone that she had been kind to. Maybe many at court considered that acceptable in the game of getting ahead, but it stuck in Helena's throat, refusing to be swallowed.

Edmund's eyes narrowed. He was an expert at concealing his true feelings, but she

had learned some of his expressions, mostly the ones that promised her the harsh side of his temper.

“A position of your own?” He snickered softly at her. “Any player with a bit of skill can do what you have done, sister.”

Edmund moved toward her, his gait as refined as ever, and stopped within reach of her.

“I will not repeat my instructions. Do it—once the king retires and his nobles have a chance to leave for the night.”

Or suffer his displeasure. She heard that clearly enough. But she refused to aid him in this scheme. Or any others, for that matter. For all his fine clothing, she suddenly noticed just how pathetic he was. Her parents might have spent endless hours drilling her duty into her but they had also taught her honor.

Edmund didn’t even seem to know such a trait existed.

“I will not assist you, Edmund. Raelin is not dishonorable.”

His hand struck her quick and sharply, her head turning with the blow. When she returned her gaze to his face, she clearly saw the flush discoloring his skin. Her temper itched to retaliate, but acting on such impulses had never turned out well for her in the past. She clasped her hands together to keep them from returning the blow.

“You shall do exactly what I tell you to do.”

Greed shone from his eyes, sickening her.

“I will not do anything to hurt Raelin. Or dishonor her.”

Edmund suddenly laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound, but one filled with mockery.

“Do you somehow believe she is sincere? A true friend of the heart, perhaps?” He pressed his lips closed but she could still hear him chuckling. “She’s like everyone else. Don’t think for a moment that her family didn’t send her here with the very same expectations that you have been given.”

He backed away from her, raking her with cold eyes. “You will do it or I will have to find a means of influencing you.”

Helena didn’t answer. A chill shot down her spine, warning her to let Edmund believe her bent to his will. She didn’t want to see the cruelty in his eyes, but it sat there glimmering with hot intensity. It sickened her. Sickened her even more to think they shared the same blood. Her throat felt as if there was a noose around it, tightening every day. But she refused to do what was necessary to be free. The only thing she had was her honor. It was the sole item she counted as her possession alone. Even her body would one day be bartered and used at the whim of Edmund. She could not betray the only kind person she had met. But she wasn’t sure how to keep her brother from hurting Raelin in spite of her refusals to assist him.

Being born female was a curse.

“A pleasure doing business with you, my lord.”

Keir folded his arms across his chest. The fop in front of him scooted back a step, his eyes watching the way Keir’s biceps bulged.

“I’ll be leaving you to your accommodations then.”

The man fled in a swish of his overpuffed pants. Keir snarled softly.