

Excerpt: Rogue Of The Isles

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What a pity Jamie MacLeod had to be such a good-looking man. Or so tall. With such broad shoulders.

Because he was quite the most annoying male Marissa Barclay had ever met.

He was doing it again. Mari tugged at the collar of her pelisse to cut the chill of the autumn air and sighed in exasperation as Jamie blocked the door to the carriage that the footman held open for her.

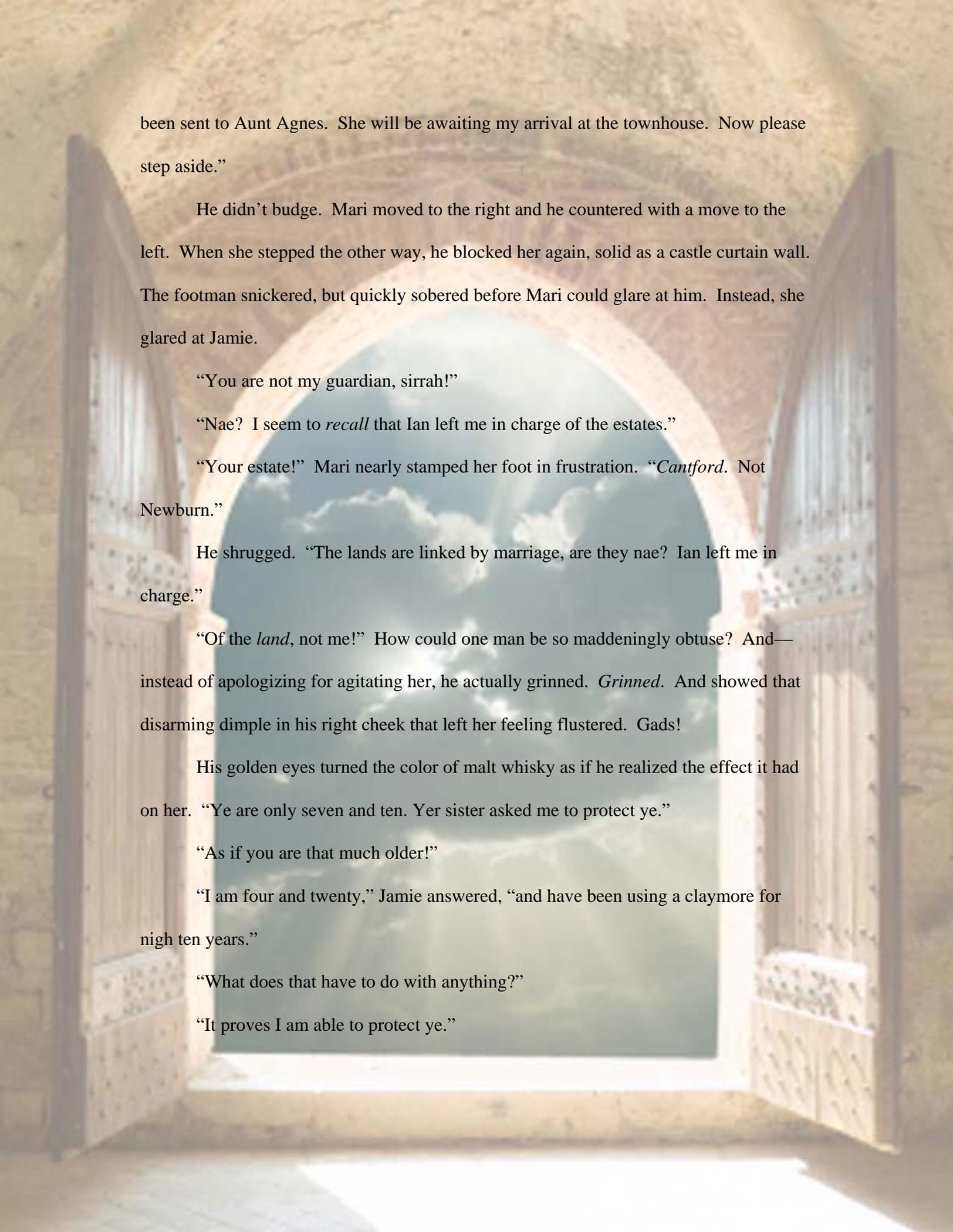
“I doona think Jillian will approve of ye leaving for London,” Jamie said.

Mari refrained from rolling her eyes since it was quite unladylike. She might get by with such practices here at the Newburn country estate, but London’s *ton* would surely judge such action as boorish and common.

“My sister is in Scotland, happily married to your brother, Ian, in case you do not recall.”

A breeze ruffled Jamie’s longish, dark hair as he raised a brow. “Do ye think me daft, lass? I recall quite well that yer sister said she would return to chaperone your Season.”

“That was before she found out she was preg—with child!” Mari reminded herself she would have to watch her vocabulary in London. One simply did not use words like “pregnancy” in polite society. “I see no reason to wait for spring. The Little Season will do quite nicely for an introduction into society. Besides, a post has already

The background of the text is a photograph of a stone archway. The arch is made of light-colored stone and is set into a wall. A wooden door with intricate carvings is open, revealing a bright, sunny sky with soft, white clouds. The lighting is warm and natural, suggesting a bright day. The overall scene is peaceful and inviting.

been sent to Aunt Agnes. She will be awaiting my arrival at the townhouse. Now please step aside.”

He didn’t budge. Mari moved to the right and he countered with a move to the left. When she stepped the other way, he blocked her again, solid as a castle curtain wall. The footman snickered, but quickly sobered before Mari could glare at him. Instead, she glared at Jamie.

“You are not my guardian, sirrah!”

“Nae? I seem to *recall* that Ian left me in charge of the estates.”

“Your estate!” Mari nearly stamped her foot in frustration. “*Cantford*. Not Newburn.”

He shrugged. “The lands are linked by marriage, are they nae? Ian left me in charge.”

“Of the *land*, not me!” How could one man be so maddeningly obtuse? And— instead of apologizing for agitating her, he actually grinned. *Grinned*. And showed that disarming dimple in his right cheek that left her feeling flustered. Gads!

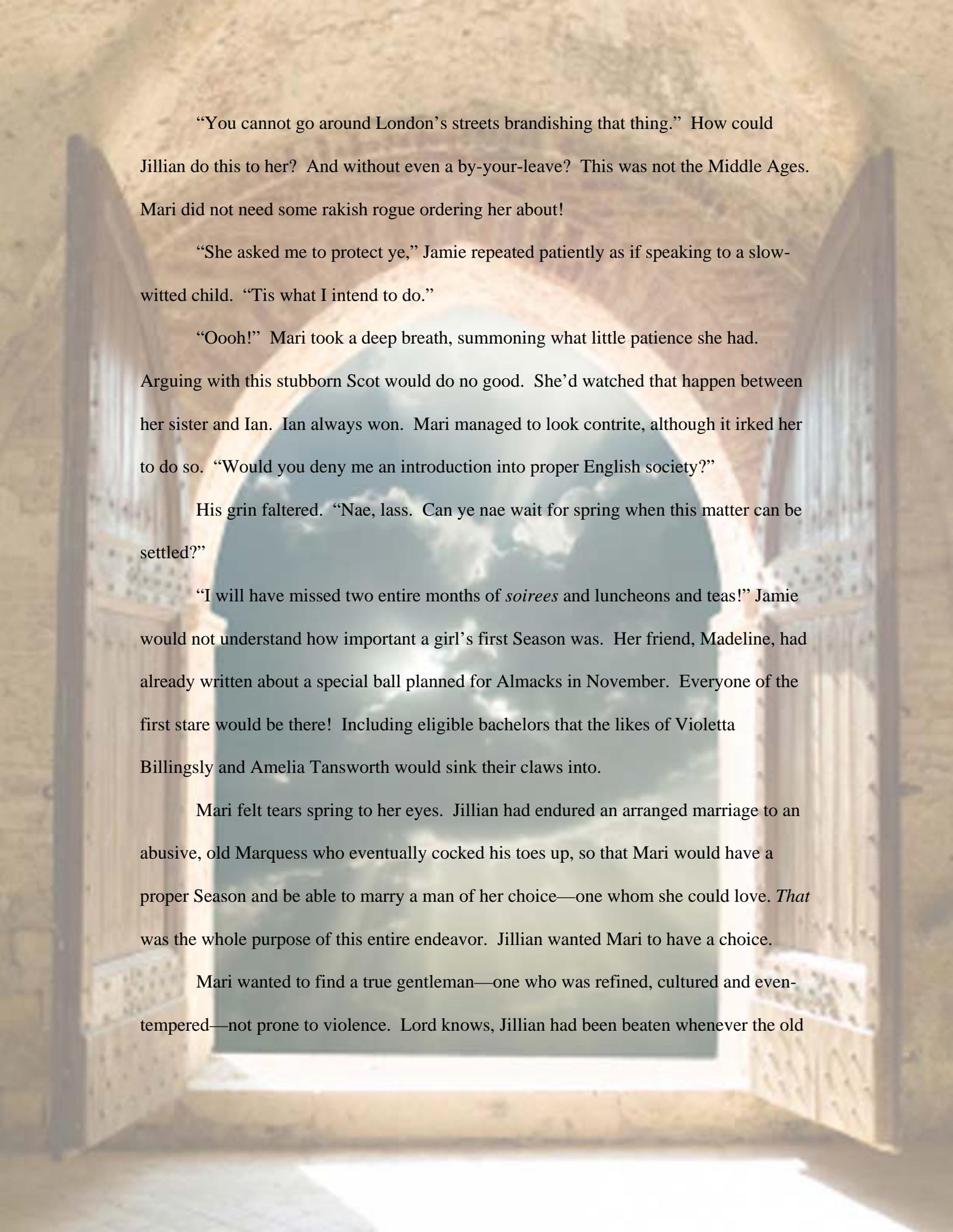
His golden eyes turned the color of malt whisky as if he realized the effect it had on her. “Ye are only seven and ten. Yer sister asked me to protect ye.”

“As if you are that much older!”

“I am four and twenty,” Jamie answered, “and have been using a claymore for nigh ten years.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It proves I am able to protect ye.”



“You cannot go around London’s streets brandishing that thing.” How could Jillian do this to her? And without even a by-your-leave? This was not the Middle Ages. Mari did not need some rakish rogue ordering her about!

“She asked me to protect ye,” Jamie repeated patiently as if speaking to a slow-witted child. “Tis what I intend to do.”

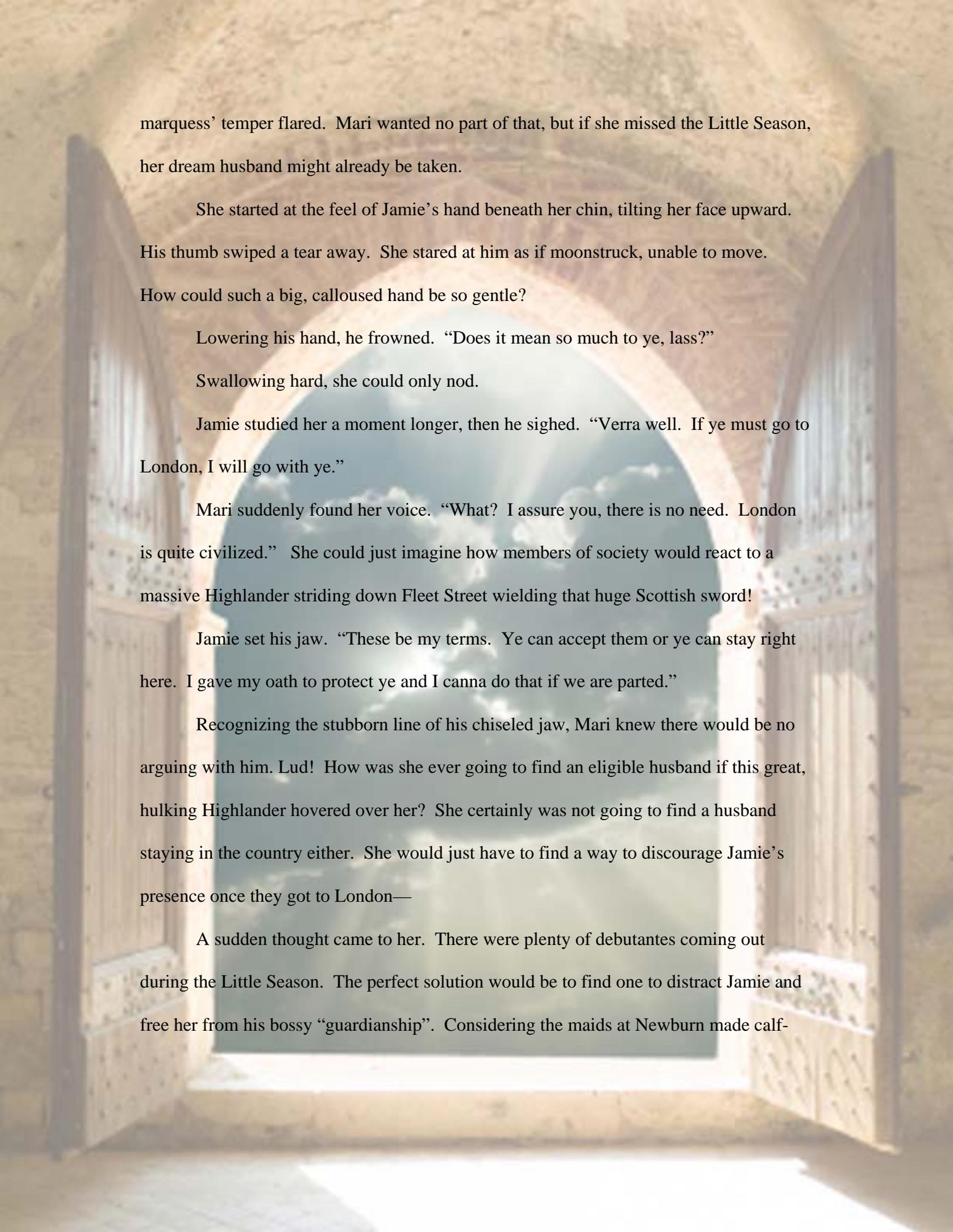
“Oooh!” Mari took a deep breath, summoning what little patience she had. Arguing with this stubborn Scot would do no good. She’d watched that happen between her sister and Ian. Ian always won. Mari managed to look contrite, although it irked her to do so. “Would you deny me an introduction into proper English society?”

His grin faltered. “Nae, lass. Can ye nae wait for spring when this matter can be settled?”

“I will have missed two entire months of *soirees* and luncheons and teas!” Jamie would not understand how important a girl’s first Season was. Her friend, Madeline, had already written about a special ball planned for Almacks in November. Everyone of the first stare would be there! Including eligible bachelors that the likes of Violetta Billingsly and Amelia Tansworth would sink their claws into.

Mari felt tears spring to her eyes. Jillian had endured an arranged marriage to an abusive, old Marquess who eventually cocked his toes up, so that Mari would have a proper Season and be able to marry a man of her choice—one whom she could love. *That* was the whole purpose of this entire endeavor. Jillian wanted Mari to have a choice.

Mari wanted to find a true gentleman—one who was refined, cultured and even-tempered—not prone to violence. Lord knows, Jillian had been beaten whenever the old



marquess' temper flared. Mari wanted no part of that, but if she missed the Little Season, her dream husband might already be taken.

She started at the feel of Jamie's hand beneath her chin, tilting her face upward. His thumb swiped a tear away. She stared at him as if moonstruck, unable to move. How could such a big, calloused hand be so gentle?

Lowering his hand, he frowned. "Does it mean so much to ye, lass?"

Swallowing hard, she could only nod.

Jamie studied her a moment longer, then he sighed. "Verra well. If ye must go to London, I will go with ye."

Mari suddenly found her voice. "What? I assure you, there is no need. London is quite civilized." She could just imagine how members of society would react to a massive Highlander striding down Fleet Street wielding that huge Scottish sword!

Jamie set his jaw. "These be my terms. Ye can accept them or ye can stay right here. I gave my oath to protect ye and I canna do that if we are parted."

Recognizing the stubborn line of his chiseled jaw, Mari knew there would be no arguing with him. Lud! How was she ever going to find an eligible husband if this great, hulking Highlander hovered over her? She certainly was not going to find a husband staying in the country either. She would just have to find a way to discourage Jamie's presence once they got to London—

A sudden thought came to her. There were plenty of debutantes coming out during the Little Season. The perfect solution would be to find one to distract Jamie and free her from his bossy "guardianship". Considering the maids at Newburn made calf-

eyes at him—which he did not discourage—the task should not prove difficult. Mari gave Jamie her best smile.

“If you insist,” she said.

