

Excerpt Christmas Dreams

MAGGIE:

Finn eased Maggie onto a wooden bench, propped her up, and sat down beside her. Usually, he could sense when a mortal's resistance faded away. It seeped out of the human aura like mist to drift away. He felt no such sensation now. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on creating events that would allow her mind to accept how she had come to be here. The process was always risky, even when he had full access to a mortal's memory. He had no access to Maggie's. Fae law forbid taking control over a human and allowed only the use of illusion and suggestion. Again, he couldn't be sure his thoughts were transferring. Opening his eyes, he could only hope Maggie would accept the scenario he had created and believe the year was 1815.

"Why did ye bring her here?"

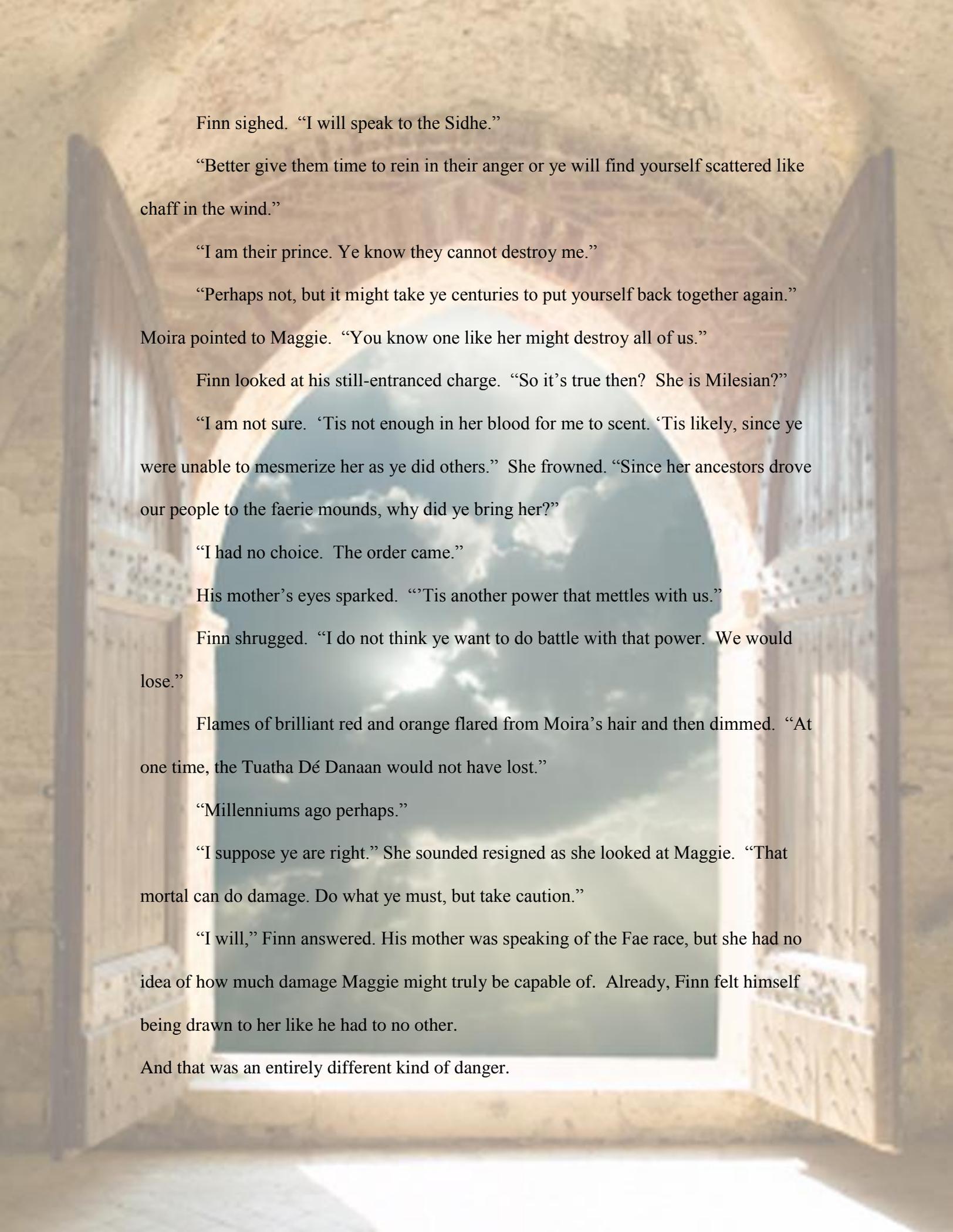
He didn't have to turn to know who had spoken behind him. Only one voice could sound so soft and yet so disproving. Moira, the Faerie Queen and his mother.

"I needed the extra magic of the hawthorn arch," he replied. "The woman's will is strong."

"I have no doubt of that." His mother materialized in front of him in a burst of radiant colors that flashed like lightning in the small space. Her pale hair swirled around her shoulders like a cape and her silvery eyes shone like shards.

"'Tis no need for such an entrance, Mother."

She raised slender arms to still the commotion and then smoothed the silk folds of her tunic. "I have heard nothing but a string of complaints from our people all day for bringing one such as that through one of our portals."

A stone archway with two wooden doors leading to a landscape with a large tree and a body of water.

Finn sighed. "I will speak to the Sidhe."

"Better give them time to rein in their anger or ye will find yourself scattered like chaff in the wind."

"I am their prince. Ye know they cannot destroy me."

"Perhaps not, but it might take ye centuries to put yourself back together again."

Moira pointed to Maggie. "You know one like her might destroy all of us."

Finn looked at his still-entranced charge. "So it's true then? She is Milesian?"

"I am not sure. 'Tis not enough in her blood for me to scent. 'Tis likely, since ye were unable to mesmerize her as ye did others." She frowned. "Since her ancestors drove our people to the faerie mounds, why did ye bring her?"

"I had no choice. The order came."

His mother's eyes sparked. "'Tis another power that mettles with us."

Finn shrugged. "I do not think ye want to do battle with that power. We would lose."

Flames of brilliant red and orange flared from Moira's hair and then dimmed. "At one time, the Tuatha Dé Danaan would not have lost."

"Millenniums ago perhaps."

"I suppose ye are right." She sounded resigned as she looked at Maggie. "That mortal can do damage. Do what ye must, but take caution."

"I will," Finn answered. His mother was speaking of the Fae race, but she had no idea of how much damage Maggie might truly be capable of. Already, Finn felt himself being drawn to her like he had to no other.

And that was an entirely different kind of danger.

ELIZABETH

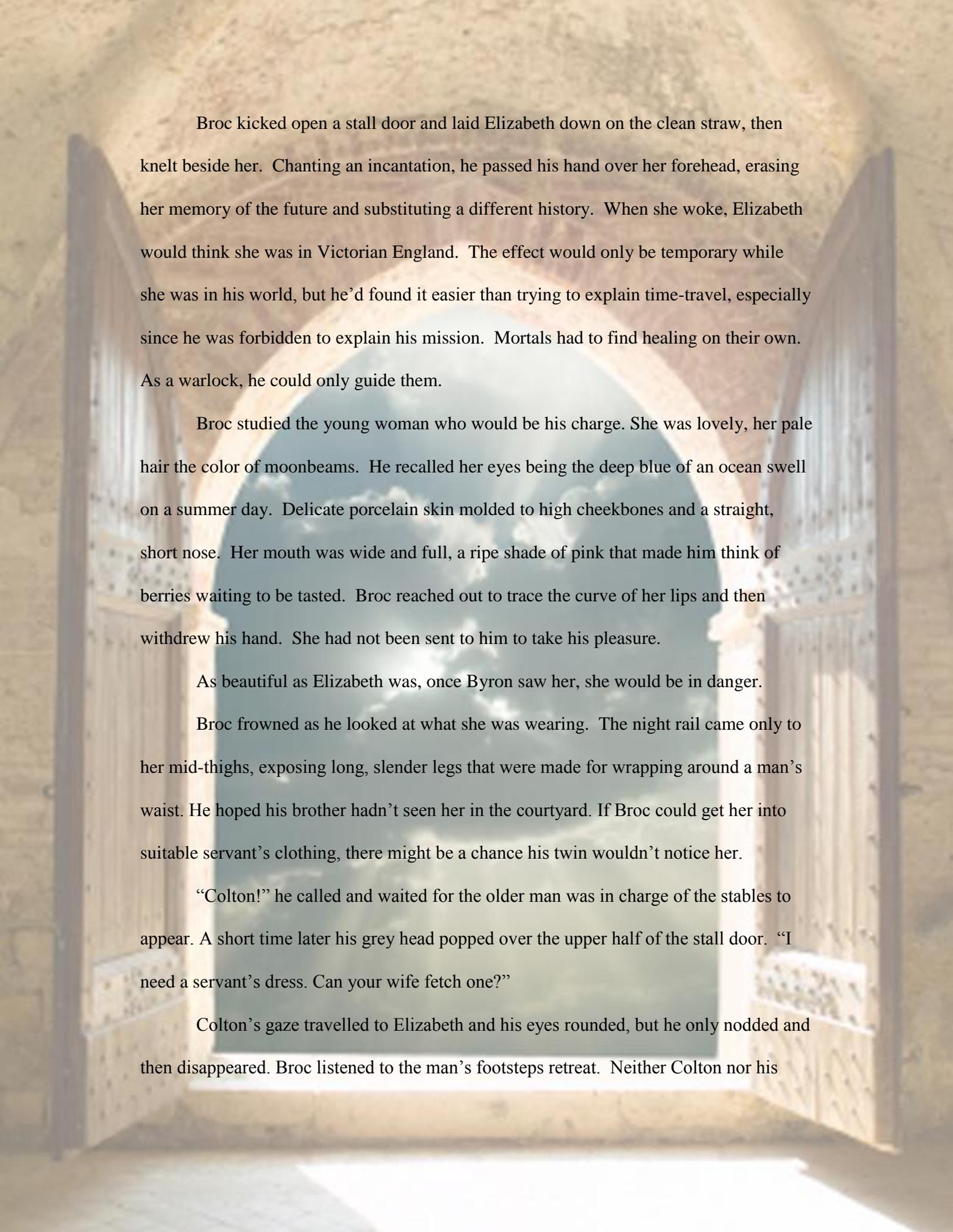
Damnation. He'd already nearly botched this assignment and it hadn't even begun. Broc Hadon tossed his dark hair out of his eyes and swore an oath under his breath as he carried Elizabeth away from the courtyard, toward the stables and out of sight of curious, prying eyes. He was supposed to have been waiting for her when she floated through the sleep portal into this world, but his fraternal twin brother—the high-and-mighty Duke of Chadworth—had sent him on an errand that turned out to be fruitless.

Byron didn't approve of the altruistic assignments they were given. Three hundred years ago, when their mother had been burned at the stake for witchcraft, he'd refused to accept any more. At the time, Broc didn't blame him, since their mother had been innocent. It was their father who had escaped the flames, using his warlock powers.

Over the centuries, Byron had turned cold and heartless. He began using his powers for hedonistic pleasure and quickly turned cruel to anyone who stood in his way. Luckily, Broc could keep his brother's powers contained to the manor house by using special wards. The downside was Broc couldn't enter the manor himself without breaking those bonds.

Byron hated Broc, accusing him of acting like Sir Galahad and banishing him to a life in the stables. Yet, Byron couldn't kill Broc. The ultimate Master from whence these assignments came, wouldn't allow it. Byron had tried once, only to find himself disfigured like Richard III for over seventy mortal years. He hadn't tried again since he valued his golden-haired, Adonis-like beauty too much.

But that wouldn't stop Byron from attempting to hurt this young American woman who'd been sent to Broc to heal.

A stone archway with a view of a cloudy sky. The arch is made of light-colored stone and has a decorative pattern on the sides. The sky is blue with white clouds. The archway is set in a wall of similar stone.

Broc kicked open a stall door and laid Elizabeth down on the clean straw, then knelt beside her. Chanting an incantation, he passed his hand over her forehead, erasing her memory of the future and substituting a different history. When she woke, Elizabeth would think she was in Victorian England. The effect would only be temporary while she was in his world, but he'd found it easier than trying to explain time-travel, especially since he was forbidden to explain his mission. Mortals had to find healing on their own. As a warlock, he could only guide them.

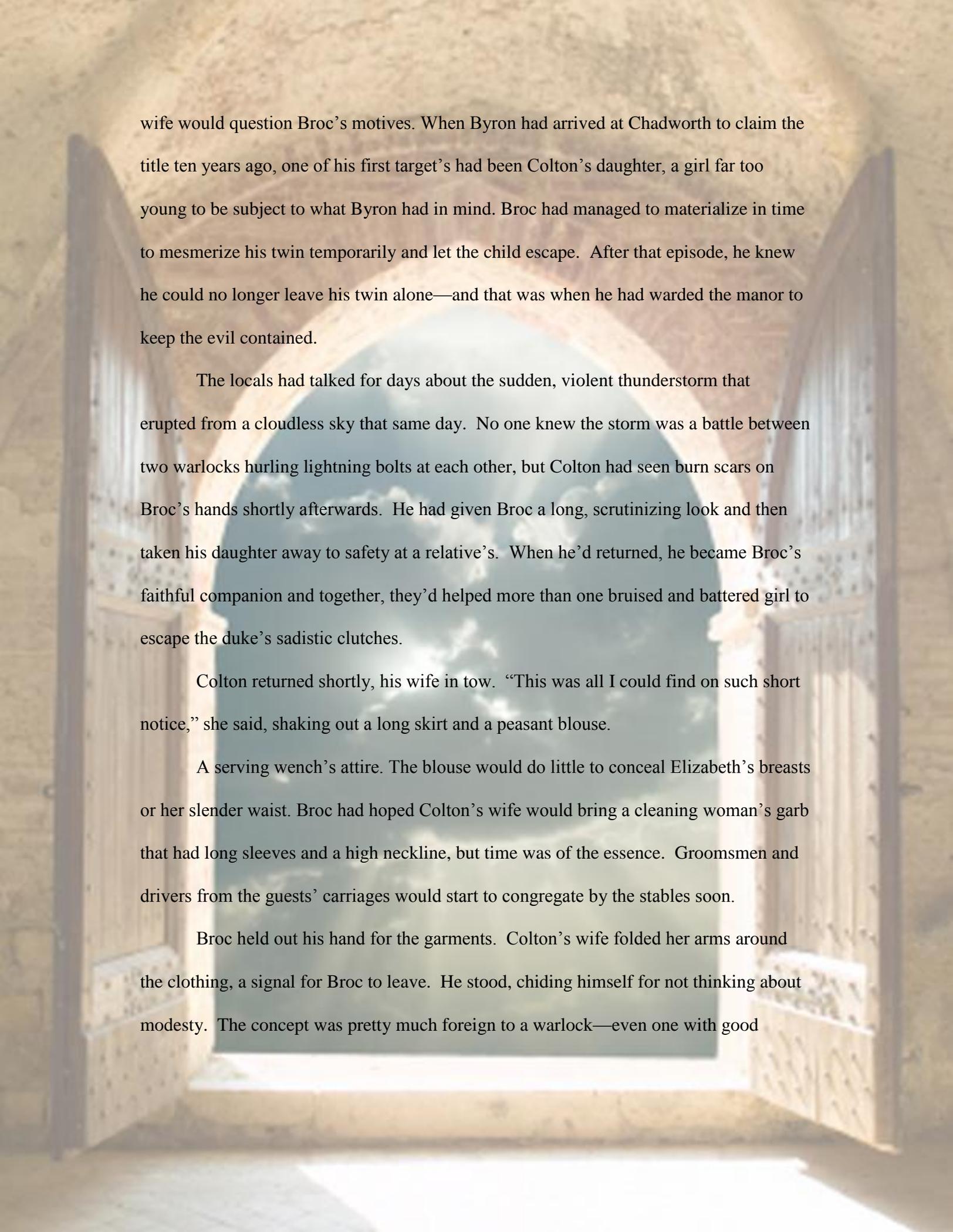
Broc studied the young woman who would be his charge. She was lovely, her pale hair the color of moonbeams. He recalled her eyes being the deep blue of an ocean swell on a summer day. Delicate porcelain skin molded to high cheekbones and a straight, short nose. Her mouth was wide and full, a ripe shade of pink that made him think of berries waiting to be tasted. Broc reached out to trace the curve of her lips and then withdrew his hand. She had not been sent to him to take his pleasure.

As beautiful as Elizabeth was, once Byron saw her, she would be in danger.

Broc frowned as he looked at what she was wearing. The night rail came only to her mid-thighs, exposing long, slender legs that were made for wrapping around a man's waist. He hoped his brother hadn't seen her in the courtyard. If Broc could get her into suitable servant's clothing, there might be a chance his twin wouldn't notice her.

"Colton!" he called and waited for the older man was in charge of the stables to appear. A short time later his grey head popped over the upper half of the stall door. "I need a servant's dress. Can your wife fetch one?"

Colton's gaze travelled to Elizabeth and his eyes rounded, but he only nodded and then disappeared. Broc listened to the man's footsteps retreat. Neither Colton nor his

A stone archway leads to a bright, cloudy sky. The arch is made of light-colored stone and is flanked by two wooden doors with intricate carvings. The sky is a mix of white and light blue clouds, suggesting a bright, sunny day. The overall scene is framed by the archway, creating a sense of looking out from a hidden or protected space.

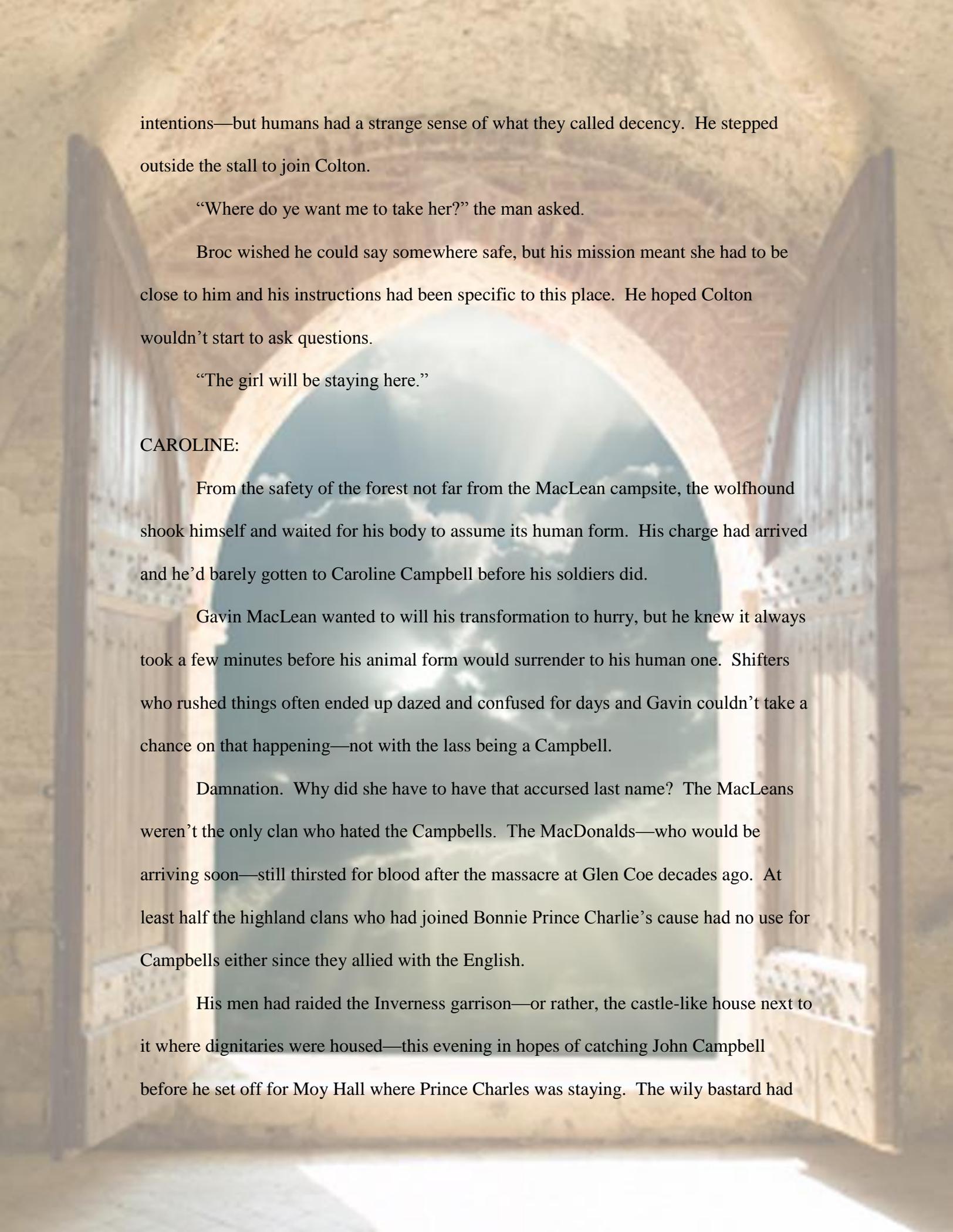
wife would question Broc's motives. When Byron had arrived at Chadworth to claim the title ten years ago, one of his first target's had been Colton's daughter, a girl far too young to be subject to what Byron had in mind. Broc had managed to materialize in time to mesmerize his twin temporarily and let the child escape. After that episode, he knew he could no longer leave his twin alone—and that was when he had warded the manor to keep the evil contained.

The locals had talked for days about the sudden, violent thunderstorm that erupted from a cloudless sky that same day. No one knew the storm was a battle between two warlocks hurling lightning bolts at each other, but Colton had seen burn scars on Broc's hands shortly afterwards. He had given Broc a long, scrutinizing look and then taken his daughter away to safety at a relative's. When he'd returned, he became Broc's faithful companion and together, they'd helped more than one bruised and battered girl to escape the duke's sadistic clutches.

Colton returned shortly, his wife in tow. "This was all I could find on such short notice," she said, shaking out a long skirt and a peasant blouse.

A serving wench's attire. The blouse would do little to conceal Elizabeth's breasts or her slender waist. Broc had hoped Colton's wife would bring a cleaning woman's garb that had long sleeves and a high neckline, but time was of the essence. Groomsmen and drivers from the guests' carriages would start to congregate by the stables soon.

Broc held out his hand for the garments. Colton's wife folded her arms around the clothing, a signal for Broc to leave. He stood, chiding himself for not thinking about modesty. The concept was pretty much foreign to a warlock—even one with good



intentions—but humans had a strange sense of what they called decency. He stepped outside the stall to join Colton.

“Where do ye want me to take her?” the man asked.

Broc wished he could say somewhere safe, but his mission meant she had to be close to him and his instructions had been specific to this place. He hoped Colton wouldn’t start to ask questions.

“The girl will be staying here.”

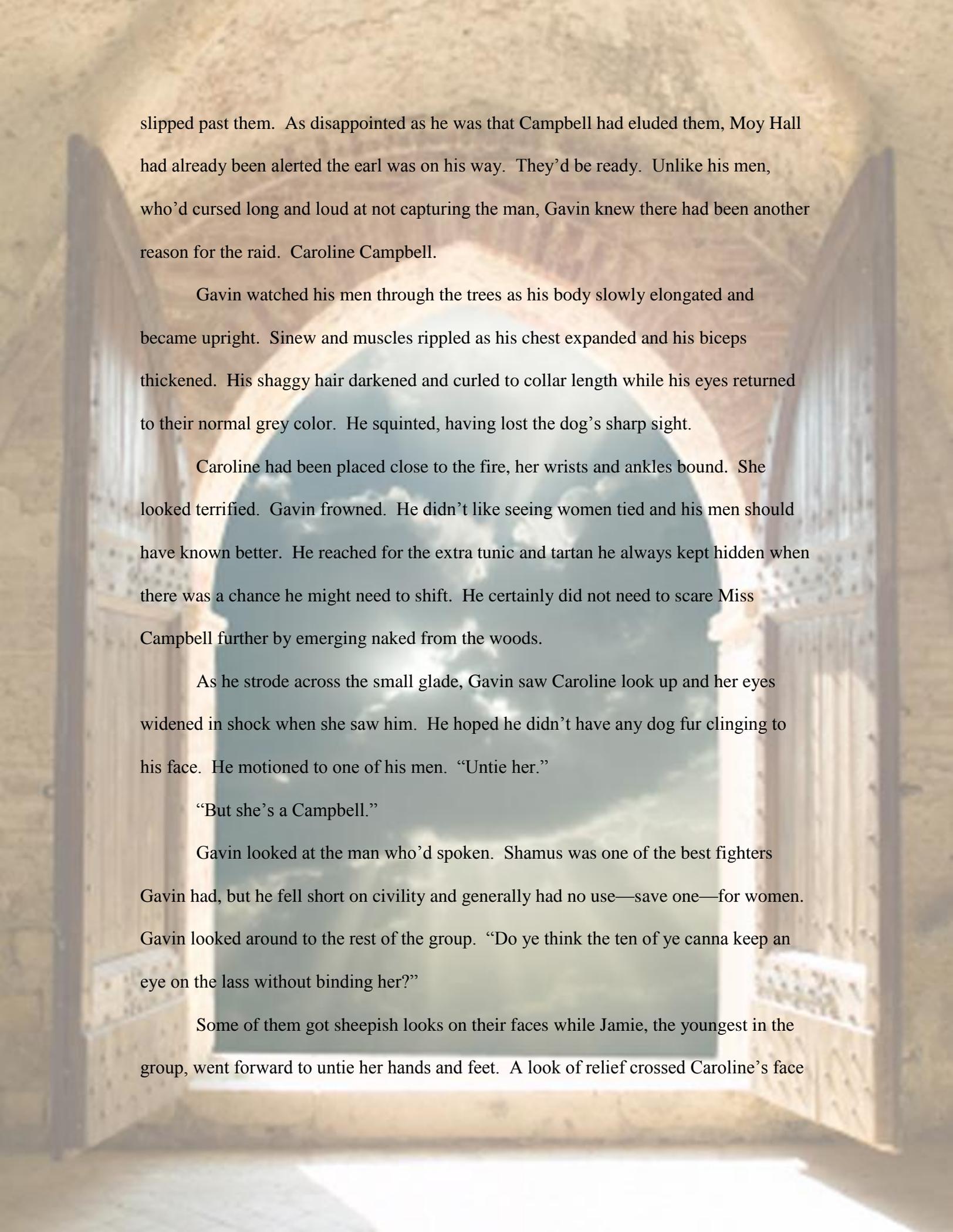
CAROLINE:

From the safety of the forest not far from the MacLean campsite, the wolfhound shook himself and waited for his body to assume its human form. His charge had arrived and he’d barely gotten to Caroline Campbell before his soldiers did.

Gavin MacLean wanted to will his transformation to hurry, but he knew it always took a few minutes before his animal form would surrender to his human one. Shifters who rushed things often ended up dazed and confused for days and Gavin couldn’t take a chance on that happening—not with the lass being a Campbell.

Damnation. Why did she have to have that accursed last name? The MacLeans weren’t the only clan who hated the Campbells. The MacDonalds—who would be arriving soon—still thirsted for blood after the massacre at Glen Coe decades ago. At least half the highland clans who had joined Bonnie Prince Charlie’s cause had no use for Campbells either since they allied with the English.

His men had raided the Inverness garrison—or rather, the castle-like house next to it where dignitaries were housed—this evening in hopes of catching John Campbell before he set off for Moy Hall where Prince Charles was staying. The wily bastard had

A stone archway with a view of a forest and a path leading to a castle in the distance. The archway is made of light-colored stone and has a decorative pattern on the sides. The view through the arch shows a lush green forest with a path leading towards a castle on a hill in the distance. The sky is blue with some white clouds.

slipped past them. As disappointed as he was that Campbell had eluded them, Moy Hall had already been alerted the earl was on his way. They'd be ready. Unlike his men, who'd cursed long and loud at not capturing the man, Gavin knew there had been another reason for the raid. Caroline Campbell.

Gavin watched his men through the trees as his body slowly elongated and became upright. Sinew and muscles rippled as his chest expanded and his biceps thickened. His shaggy hair darkened and curled to collar length while his eyes returned to their normal grey color. He squinted, having lost the dog's sharp sight.

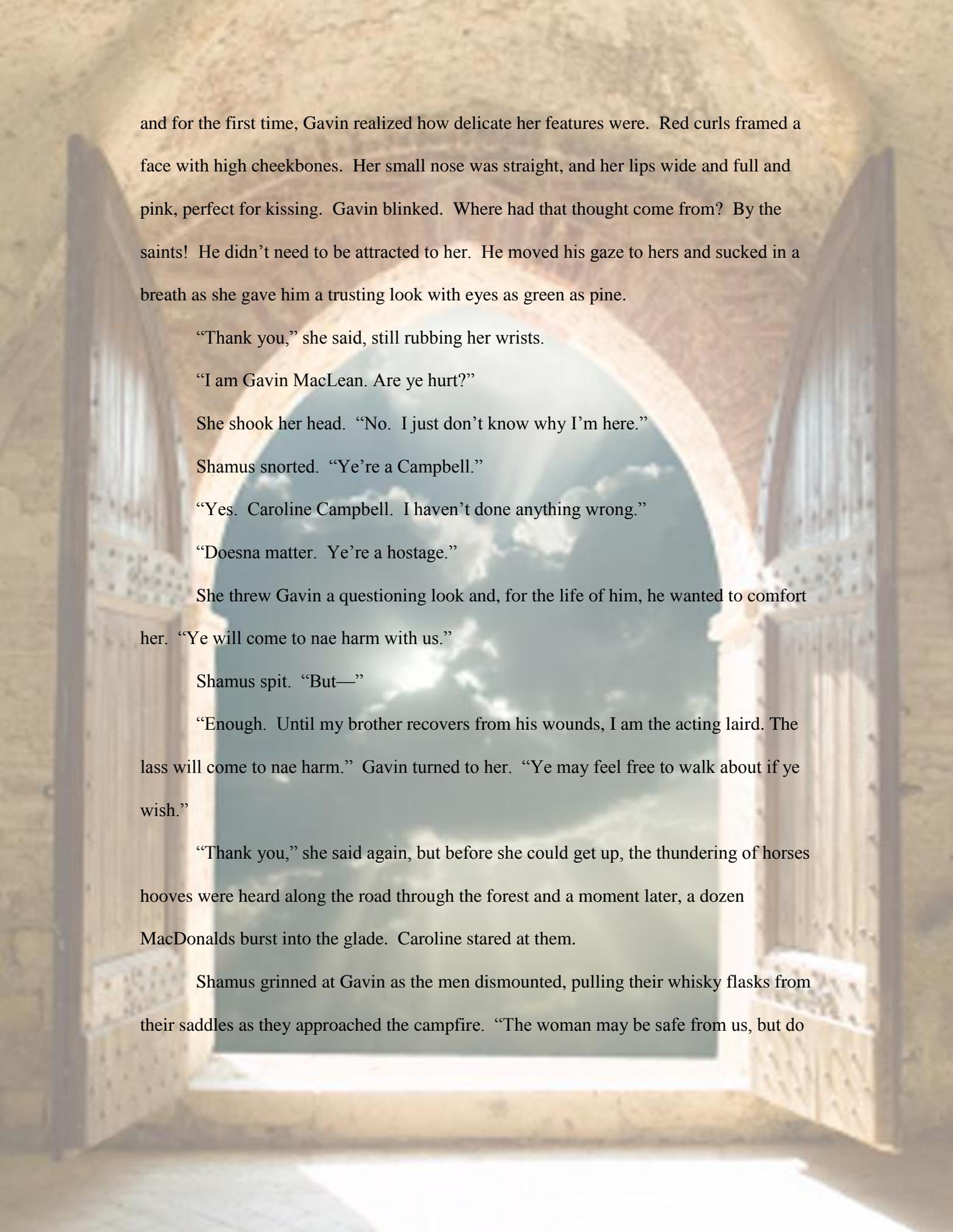
Caroline had been placed close to the fire, her wrists and ankles bound. She looked terrified. Gavin frowned. He didn't like seeing women tied and his men should have known better. He reached for the extra tunic and tartan he always kept hidden when there was a chance he might need to shift. He certainly did not need to scare Miss Campbell further by emerging naked from the woods.

As he strode across the small glade, Gavin saw Caroline look up and her eyes widened in shock when she saw him. He hoped he didn't have any dog fur clinging to his face. He motioned to one of his men. "Untie her."

"But she's a Campbell."

Gavin looked at the man who'd spoken. Shamus was one of the best fighters Gavin had, but he fell short on civility and generally had no use—save one—for women. Gavin looked around to the rest of the group. "Do ye think the ten of ye canna keep an eye on the lass without binding her?"

Some of them got sheepish looks on their faces while Jamie, the youngest in the group, went forward to untie her hands and feet. A look of relief crossed Caroline's face



and for the first time, Gavin realized how delicate her features were. Red curls framed a face with high cheekbones. Her small nose was straight, and her lips wide and full and pink, perfect for kissing. Gavin blinked. Where had that thought come from? By the saints! He didn't need to be attracted to her. He moved his gaze to hers and sucked in a breath as she gave him a trusting look with eyes as green as pine.

"Thank you," she said, still rubbing her wrists.

"I am Gavin MacLean. Are ye hurt?"

She shook her head. "No. I just don't know why I'm here."

Shamus snorted. "Ye're a Campbell."

"Yes. Caroline Campbell. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Doesna matter. Ye're a hostage."

She threw Gavin a questioning look and, for the life of him, he wanted to comfort her. "Ye will come to nae harm with us."

Shamus spit. "But—"

"Enough. Until my brother recovers from his wounds, I am the acting laird. The lass will come to nae harm." Gavin turned to her. "Ye may feel free to walk about if ye wish."

"Thank you," she said again, but before she could get up, the thundering of horses hooves were heard along the road through the forest and a moment later, a dozen MacDonalds burst into the glade. Caroline stared at them.

Shamus grinned at Gavin as the men dismounted, pulling their whisky flasks from their saddles as they approached the campfire. "The woman may be safe from us, but do

ye think she'll be safe from MacDonalds once the night wears on? 'Tis only one woman in camp—”

“The lass will be safe.” Gavin set his jaw when Shamus looked skeptical. “Miss Campbell will be sleeping with me.”

