

Finn walked back into the hospital and stopped just inside the hallway leading to the large operatory ward. Edith had entered a few minutes before to allay suspicions, although her swollen, just-kissed lips and flushed cheeks were a dead giveaway to what they'd been up to. He was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to go back to his tiny bed in his tiny room in Scutari and sleep for a week. Instead he twisted his neck to the side until he heard a satisfying pop and then began walking purposefully towards his duty. Patients came first, doctors second. "Dr. Harper," one of the nurses said in a flat monotone. She looked and sounded as exhausted as Finn was. "We have a broken arm that was set in the field. It's been several days. You'll need to see if it was set properly. It didn't look right to Miss Nightingale."

"Is that it?" Finn asked in surprise, relief washing over him. He could do a broken arm in his sleep. Which might very well be the case if it took too long.

"And a gunshot wound to the arm," she said, shrugging. "Just a flesh wound, in and out. The arm is sore and weak and swollen, but he's still got some use of it."

"I'll see the gunshot wound first," Finn told her. "It might be infected if it's swollen."

"They're together," she said. "Brothers, if you can believe it, from the 93rd Highland Regiment. Insisted on everyone else being seen first. They're just as brave as the stories say." She actually sounded girlishly dreamy for a moment.

Finn stopped in his tracks, shock making him immobile. "Brothers?" His tone had the nurse taking a step back. "Fletcher? Is their name Fletcher?"

She nodded with wide eyes. "Yes, doctor. A captain and a lieutenant, I believe."

"Where?" Finn demanded harshly. Could it be Ham? Finn would never forgive himself if Ham lost his arm because Finn had kept him waiting.

The nurse pointed soundlessly to the end of the ward. Finn could see them now. One man was leaning over the other, who lay on a surgery table. Both wore the Black Watch kilts and scarlet jackets of the 93rd. He couldn't tell in the distance and dark if either of them was Hamish. He jogged down the aisle between the cots filled with moaning, pain-wracked men, calling out behind him, "Send me Mrs. Lambeth!"

At his shout he saw the man bending over the cot straighten abruptly. It was Ham. He could tell from the width of his shoulders, the curl of his too-long hair, the way he turned his head to the side as if he were listening, like a deer in the forest, but he didn't turn to look. Ham had ever been like that—wary, but not revealing it if he could help it. Everyone else took him to be uncaring, almost foolishly so. Slow to alarm, slow to arms, slow to take action. But he was ever vigilant. If you'd needed to know what was going on and with whom in the village near his home, Ham would know. He knew everyone's business and kept the knowledge to himself.

Finn skidded to a stop just behind him. "Ham?" he said breathlessly.

It seemed as if the world stopped as Ham slowly turned to face him. He looked older, a little careworn, but still handsome as sin as all those damn Fletchers were, with his red-hair and full beard and eerie light blue eyes. Even bedraggled and stinking of sweat and mud and sick he nearly brought Finn to his knees. No other man had ever done that. Finn didn't think any other ever would.

“Finn,” Ham said in that soft voice of his. He sounded pleased in that sort of private way they’d always had. Finn had forgotten that in the last ten years, forgotten Ham’s voice. He unexpectedly teared up, and glanced down at Ham’s splinted arm to hide it. He took it gently in his hands and examined it, turning it this way and that. Miss Nightingale was right. It had been set wrong. “It’s only a broken arm, Finn,” Ham said. He didn’t sound as calm and collected as he usually did and Finn glanced up. He was caught by the intensity in Ham’s pale stare. “It’s only a broken arm,” Ham whispered again. Then he dragged Finn into his one good arm and hugged him tight.

Finn was overcome with emotion. He hugged Ham back, not wanting to let go, homesickness, relief, and a strange sort of grief swamping him for a moment.

“What about me?” came a weak, petulant voice from the cot. “Don’t I get a hug and a how do you do? I’m the one who got shot. He tripped.”

“I didn’t trip,” Ham said gruffly, his face pressed to the side of Finn’s head. “I was knocked down by a carelessly handled rifle. I’m lucky I didn’t get gut shot by that damn boy.”

At the horror of the image, Finn’s hands fisted the back of Ham’s jacket. “Have a care,” he warned, his voice too rough by far. He cleared his throat as he self-consciously pulled away. “You’ll be bringing bad luck on your head.”

“Only good luck now,” Ham said, smiling at him meaningfully.

“Dr. Harper?” Edith said behind them, curiosity in her voice. He watched as Ham glanced at her over his shoulder, his eyes warming at the sight of her. He had always had an eye for the same sort of woman that Finn was attracted to. Their friendship had grown out of a jealous fight over a silly girl. Soon enough, neither of them had wanted the girl. Finn turned to Edith, frightened and confused by all the strange emotions coursing through him as he stood between her and Ham.

“Mrs. Lambeth,” he said, trying to sound cool and calm. “These are the Fletcher brothers, from the infamous Ninety Third. Old childhood friends of mine.”

Edith smiled. “How do you do?” She was a tiny thing with her pale blonde hair and slight frame. She looked almost fairy-like next to both he and Ham.

“Ma’am,” Ham said. “Captain Hamish Fletcher. And this,” he turned and waved at his brother, “is my brother, Lieutenant Conall Fletcher.”

“How do you do, lieutenant?” she said.

“At last,” Conall said, “someone acknowledges me, lying here bleeding.” He sounded like any other disgruntled patient.

“Ach,” Ham scorned. “You haven’t bled in days, you puling babe.” He looked gravely at Finn. “He’s hot to the touch,” Ham whispered, “and that arm is right swollen.”

Finn nodded, recognizing Ham’s concern. “All right.” He feigned exasperation. “Let me have a look, Conall. You always were a delicate boy.”

“Ah, Finn,” Conall said. “Don’t be like that. Can’t you see I’m hurting? Why don’t you let the pretty nurse patch me up?”

“Well, I’m no doctor,” Edith said with a small smile as she crouched next to Conall’s cot, “but I can offer a hand to hold. Will that do?”

“I need a hand,” another man’s voice called out, his meaning clearly inappropriate. Before Finn could find the offender and admonish him, Ham turned a baleful eye on the ward.

“Any more of that,” he said in heavy voice that carried, “and the hand you’ll be getting will be my fist in your mouth. Hush it and mind your manners around the ladies.”

“Aye, Captain,” several voices called out weakly.

Finn poked at Conall’s arm and his newest patient jerked away and writhed on the bed. “Well, you’ve gone and gotten it infected,” Finn told him in disgust. “You Fletchers were always for overdoing when you ought to be lying low.”

“Lying low?” Conall said weakly. “And how was I supposed to do that, traveling across the steppes in a wagon and one of only a handful of men who could still walk?”

“I’ll get you patched up,” Finn said. “Never fear. And then I’m going to force you to take it easy. You and Ham.” He glanced up at Ham as he spoke and the look Ham gave him in return was so heavy and full of heat Finn felt himself flush. He knew exactly how Ham wanted to take it easy. The question was whether Finn wanted to go there again. He glanced at Edith, who was watching them closely and he had no idea what he was going to do.