

Flaming Wench 3 - Home Coming

It was nearing mid-day and the Flaming Wench Inn, usually filled with boisterous laughter by this time, was ringing with the moans of wounded men and women. The frazzled inn mistress, Eleri Forsyth, used a free hand to shove her long curling red hair out of her eyes before finishing the bandaging she had been doing. Flinching as the wounded soldier groaned, she finished bandaging his broken ankle and handed him a flagon of ale to dull the pain. Stepping away she let her green eyed gaze wander the room and, seeing that everyone had been taken care of, stepped outside for a breath of fresh air

Pressing her hands against the small of her back she stretched to relieve her sore and stiff muscles. Masculine hands joined her own, gently massaging out the kinks. Moaning Eleri leaned into those hands, her own arms coming up to wind around the neck of the man standing behind her. Closing her eyes she inhaled deeply of his scent, her eyes suddenly flying open as she realized who it was. Spinning on her heel she stared into the impossibly blue gaze of her dearest friend and Cousin Drakan Forsyth.

"Drakan! You're back, you're safe! Oh thank the gods!" Throwing her arms around his shoulders she pressed herself against him, breathing deeply of his beloved, comforting scent. Unnoticed by Eleri Drakan winced and shifted their combined weight off of his wounded leg.

Looking over his shoulder she saw her friends; Alyeeanna Blackthorne, Sarrin Karmana, and the rest of the McCready Clan. Overjoyed Eleri shrieked and tried to hug them all at once. Calling to Traveric and Jayden, her assistants, to bring ale and refreshments Eleri told the main group of mercenaries to go to the tavern to be taken care of and for the leaders of the group to follow her to her suite.

As they ascended the stairs, Eleri noticed Drakan's limp, the blood caked in Sarrin's hair, and the haunted, lost look in Alyeeanna's eyes. Laurein Blackthorne was leaning heavily on her lover, Brandon Blackthorne's arm. Brandon, who's right arm was in a sling across his chest.

In Eleri's room six children were playing on the floor. Three; Robert, Devon, and Harmony belonged to Breylynn and Jorell McCready. Two, Rob and Tamara, were the children of Laurein Blackthorne. The final child, a little girl with long blonde hair and blue eyes, was named Alenna and was Drakan's daughter.

At the sight of the children Alyeeanna burst into hysterical tears, clasping Devon and little Harmony to her chest. Wailing over and over, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so very sorry."

All around them Drakan was hugging Alenna tightly, and Laurein was clinging to Rob and Tamara. Robert came running to Eleri and flung his arms around her waist, clutching him close she walked over to Drakan who was standing, holding his daughter, at the window.

Looking into his eyes, Eleri whispered. "Where are they? Drakan, where are Breylynn and Jorell?"

Tears welled up in Drakan's clear blue eyes and Eleri's breath caught in her throat. Fighting tears, and smiling bravely for the children, Eleri turned and walked over to Brandon. "We need to get the children out of here and to get all of you seen by a healer. You have to help me get Devon and Harmony away from Alyeeanna."

Passing Rob off to Laurein, Eleri told her to take the children to their room to play. For a moment Laurein looked like she may argue and Sarrin leaned down, looking her in the eye, and said in a commanding tone, "You will do as you are told Laurein Blackthorne, these children do not understand what is happening and they are getting scared."

Without another word Laurein and Brandon, who had collected Alenna from Drakan, took the children into the next room. Kneeling down next to Alyeeanna Sarrin wrapped her arms around her, whispering into her ear. For a moment Alyeeanna shook her head "no" then paused to look down at the children. Seeing their tear stained faces Alyeeanna whispered, "I'm sorry." and turned into Sarrin's embrace.

Eleri collected Devon and Harmony, carrying them into the children's rooms and set them down. Instructing Rob and Robert to watch over them she returned to her suite and the adults. Upon her return she found the healer examining Brandon's arm and Drakan struggling to remove his boots. Kneeling at his feet Sarrin was trying but her eyes kept losing focus. Eleri called Sarrin and Alyeeanna over to the wash basin and instructed Alyeeanna to cleanse Sarrin's wounds.

Eleri knelt at Drakan's feet and slowly, but gently removed his boots for him. He drew in a breath through his teeth with a hiss of pain. Eleri brought over another wash basin and began to cleanse the blood from his knee, calf, and ankle. Looking at his leg she could

have sworn she saw it start to swell before her very eyes. Flinching in sympathetic pain she stood and gently kissed his forehead. "I'm so sorry Drakan."

Taking her face in his hands, Drakan smiled sadly and pressed his lips against her temples. "Don't be. We won the battle."

Alyeeanna jerked upright and stormed across the room to look him in the eye. "We won! We won! Breylynn and Jorell, our leaders, lay dead on that battle field and you say we won! What sort of winning is that! Now we have to find some way to tell their children that-"

Alyeeanna's rampage was cut off by Sarrin's hand across her mouth. In a deadly voice Sarrin spoke softly, "Those children need the news broken to them gently; they don't need to hear you screaming it at the top of your lungs."

Eleri's breath caught in her throat again and her lips began to tremble. She found herself wrapped in Drakan's arms as she started to weep. Struggling for breath to speak she whispered, "What happened?"

Taking a deep breath Drakan began to tell the tale. "It was storming out when the battle began and everyone was on edge from the lightning and thunder. We all sat on our battle lines and waited for them to attack. We wanted them to come to us. Finally they came at us and all hell broke loose. It was obvious that we had the superior force and we were beating them back to their lines. Suddenly Laird MacDougal, our employer, was on his back with an enemy soldier standing over him. Breylynn was nearby and she threw herself in front of the blade. She was struck down. When Jorell what happened he skewered the soldier and fell to his knees next to her. He let out an unholy howl of torment that sent the rest of the soldiers running. We dispatched the stubborn fighters and went to see what happened. When we got there we found Jorell lying slumped over the body with a sword impaling both his chest and Breylynn's head."

By the time he had finished everyone was weeping in heartbreak. Clinging to each other they wept, for hours. Finally Eleri climbed out of the pile of arms and legs and washed her face. Turning she looked at her friends and smiled resignedly. "We have grieved my friends, but we have to tell the children, and we have to tell the soldiers. We have to plan and hold a wake and build the funeral pyres. Come, stand up, refresh yourselves and rest. I'll take care of everything."

Slowly turning Eleri walked out of the room to let the wounded tend to each other. Quietly closing the door behind her she rested her forehead against it for a moment. Allowing herself one shuddering, sobbing breath, she straightened and dried her eyes. Walking down the stairs she saw that the clan surgeons had ordered the hospital erected and removed all of the wounded from the tavern common room. Making her way to the kitchen she cleared her throat and was promptly swept up into a hug by her dear friend Roak Tallis. Roak was one of the clan healers as well as being one of Eleri's assistants in the brewery and a clan defender. She and Alyeeanna had drawn straws to determine who would stay home to guard the inn. Roak had lost. Calmly, slowly, Eleri told her the entire story. Quietly Roak shed a few tears with Eleri before clearing her throat and asking, "What do you need me to do?" "Would you please help me clean up the portraits Breyllynn and Jorell had done of themselves. I'll hang them over the hearth and keep some candles lit in mourning. Then we need to get the word out to all the wandering McCreadys, they'll need to be here by the next new moon. We'll have to order more alcohol and meat. And..." Putting her hands on her forehead Eleri closed her eyes and let out a drawn out groan. "We have to tell the children what happened. How do I tell those children that their Mommy and Daddy aren't coming home? My Gods, what do I do?"