

THE LAIRD Excerpt:

Suddenly the door opened wide.

He blinked as light streamed in. Before them a wide staircase led down to a cavernous hall. Immense soot-laden beams held up a ceiling of what appeared to be tightly packed straw, and the walls were timber pylons reinforced with mud or clay.

A fire roared in a fireplace large enough to roast a whole cow. Two large soot-encrusted pots containing what smelt like some sort of stew hung over the fire. Peat blocks were stacked up at one side of the hearth and enough wood to keep a fire going for a week was piled up on the other side.

People sat around on stools or rough wooden benches. It was impossible to estimate at first glance how many there were. Everyone stopped talking at once, and a sudden eerie silence filled the hall as they all gazed up at them. Liz crumpled in a heap at Andrew's feet.

"Liz, for heaven's sake!" Andrew went down on his haunches beside her, pulling her into his arms. The boy who'd opened the door stood with his mouth agape, staring at them as if they were apparitions. A giant of a man slowly lifted himself from one of two throne-like chairs that flanked the fireplace and, taking the steps two at a time came to tower over them, mouthing words Andrew couldn't understand.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to speak English." Andrew wondered how he'd managed to get the words out, as picking Liz up, he went down the stairs and looked about for a soft place to set her down. The man followed him, and then faced Andrew, his hand on a deadly looking dagger-type weapon that was thrust through his belt.

The only likely place Andrew could put Liz was on a wide bench. It didn't look much more comfortable than the floor, which was strewn with heather, lavender stems and rushes. As Andrew set Liz down he glanced up. The man's scowl was ferocious as he scratched at his dark head.

His mass of thick black wavy hair reached past his shoulders, and his beard was just as black. He babbled on in the same strange tongue, and the rest of the crowd began to mutter and whisper, moving closer and doing little to disguise their almost childlike curiosity.

They were dressed in an odd assortment of clothing. Andrew had never seen anything quite like it. The men wore a sort of kilt without pleats. They all had leggings or bindings around their calves. Some, including the giant, wore shirts, others a sort of sleeveless vest. Most of the women wore ankle-length long sleeved shift-like dresses, belted at the waist. The children, even the boys, sported similar knee-length shifts, tied about the middle with cords or leather thongs. None of the children had shoes on, but the adults all appeared to be wearing soft leather moccasin type slippers.

A tall woman rose gracefully from the other high-backed chair.

Liz stirred, opening her eyes, muttering, "He wants to know what the blazes we're doing in his home. He seems to suspect we're more spies sent by some enemy or other. A guy named MacGriers. And he thinks you're my bodyguard." She giggled. Andrew sensed a touch of hysteria in her laughter. This certainly wasn't amusing. "He's telling the tall woman with the grey hair that you're an odd-looking sort. He's wondering where you got such fine footwear and that skirted garment. He can't make out your trousers. He reckons they're like nothing he's seen before."

"How the bloody hell can you understand him? I can't." Andrew glared at the man, whose strange kilt had a large clump of gathered material flung over one shoulder. The garment was cinched at the waist by a belt with a buckle bearing a design similar to the one on the cape Liz had draped round her shoulders.

"He's talking Gaelic," Liz said. "The woman is his mother." Sitting up, she put her fingers to her head. "I never faint," she complained as she straightened her hair, which had sprung loose, and was streaming about her shoulders. Andrew was awe-struck. He'd never seen her hair loose. She always wore it in a demure pleat at the office or on their dinner engagements. The change in her appearance astounded him. The giant seemed to be just as impressed, if his gleaming devil's eyes were anything to go by.

Coming to lean over Liz the Scot demanded, "What, may I ask, were ye doing in my round tower?" His stance was threatening; his long muscular legs apart, his fisted hands on his hips.

Liz stared at him in awe. This was incredible. Unbelievable. This great hulk was the image of the Travis in the portrait downstairs in the castle hall. She blinked a couple of times.

"This is a joke, right?" She let out a small nervous laugh. "You have a secret passage in the castle, and you sort of changed the walls about like they used to in—" Turning to Andrew she asked in English, "What was that TV program where walls used to change shape and rooms disappear?"

"I don't believe this. We're stuck here in God-knows-where, with this odd-ball character, and you're wondering about a TV show," he said, shaking his head.

"Well, that's what I think must have happened." She flicked her hair back. "We sort of went through some kind of barrier into another dimension. Or it's a big joke your Uncle Lawrence is playing on us." Even as she spoke she knew she was clutching at straws.

"I somehow doubt that crusty old devil on his deathbed would have the humor, let alone the energy, to pull a stunt like this. No, Liz, there's got to be another explanation."

The crowd moved closer, muttering amongst themselves and staring in blatant interest. But they didn't appear to be threatening in any way. At least that was what Liz told herself, while trying to ignore the flutter of fear inside her chest.

"What is yon fool saying?" the big man asked. His heavy brows lowered as he gave Andrew a look full of menace.

“He’s not a fool. And he’s wondering how we got here, and how we came to be shut in your tower,” Liz explained. “And, as a matter of fact, I’m wondering the same.”

“Dinnae play games with me.” He tugged on his short uneven beard, and pointed a thick accusing finger at her. “Ye’ve been hiding out in yon tower. Who sent ye to spy on me? How is it ye’re dressed so oddly? What explanations have ye for invading my home? How did ye get in? There’s but one way in an’ that is across the bridge an’ into my bailey. I will send for my guards to draw forth their excuses. Someone will pay for his behavior this day. And what of this one?” He gave Andrew a taunting once-over. “He is yer body servant, aye? Or yer personal protector? I must say he seems a bit dim in the head. The fool cannae understand the simplest of words.” He tapped his temple.

Liz couldn’t help it, she spluttered. Then her hackles went up. “Now just a minute.”

“What the hell’s he going on about?” Andrew tugged on the waistband of the kilt, and then looked down. Liz saw the remorse move across his face when he realized he still wore the plaid garment over his trousers.

Andrew strode away a few paces, and the crowd stepped back to allow him a path through. This brought him to one of the long narrow slits in the outer wall. A curtain of plaited rushes kept out some of the cold wind howling about the building. He pushed this aside, and then exclaimed, “Good God, Liz. Come and take a look.”

Liz kept one eye on the big man and went to join Andrew. The Scot looked rather savage, even if there was sometimes a twinkle of amusement at the back of his eyes. “I don’t believe it.” She gaped. They were in a high building, but the view outside was nothing like the one from the castle they’d been in a short while ago.