

ONE

Malcolm – Confrontation

Edinburgh, Scotland, Spring 1705.

EI'd come the short way, the one through the rough patches from Torrport to Edinburgh and we were held up as they righted an overturned carriage to the sounds of cursing coachmen and frightened horses. The spring rains had predictably turned roads to mud, but it was better than the wet snow and chill winds we had last month. All I could do was sit and wait til the road was cleared and hope I could get there in time. Then another delay at the ferry across the Firth of Forth had me on edge even before I'd set foot in the city.

Edinburgh was wearing its usual soot-stained gray with that pervasive smell of horse dung and humanity. At least Beaton met me at the step, as I hadn't been to Liddell's infirmary before and this was urgent. They wouldn't have called me back so soon and I knew it had to be important. The coachman tossed my leather bag down, hitting stinking slop instead of step.

"Is this all you've got?"

"Aye, didn't have time to pack much."

Beaton and I were at medical school together at Leiden a few years ago, and I touted him for the position here with Young. It was always good to see him, like meeting a ruddy Scots cherub, always a smile and kind word, poles apart from me, obviously. But we made an effective duo as our friendship grew. Beaton picked up my bag and I decided not to tip the careless coachman.

"This way Forrester, they're waiting for us, but the patient died."

I didn't want to hear that of course. Live ones are more useful, but we'll take what we get. He led me up the worn stone steps into a large wood paneled room then down the stairs on the right to the cellar. It was stone, dirt floor, a few torches in wall sconces for light, the sickly-sweet odour of death competing with the astringent smell of vinegar disinfectant. I saw them as soon as I entered the large central room at the bottom. There was Liddell and Young and two others I didn't know.

"We need a decision soon." It was Young.

The body was on a metal table at the far end of the room, everyone staying as far as...well, you know. We were all scared of this. Beaton introduced me to the two new men: "This is McLean, Surgeon, and you may already know Cameron, Advocate."

McLean was short, dark-haired, serious. "Malcolm Forrester of Torrport, pleased to meet you." I offered to shake hands, but he declined. Understandable considering, but still.

"That's your practice two streets over, McLean?"

"Aye."

He was making me nervous. Not sure why he was here, physicians and surgeons were at each other's throats lately over that rushed *Pharmacopeia* publication by the College a few years ago.

"We can use your perspective and skills, McLean. This affects us all."

He grunted and looked away. Getting nothing further from McLean, I tried Cameron.

“I hope we don’t need your services, but after that debacle last fall, I can see why Beaton and Young wanted you here.”

Cameron was one of those all too calm types that don’t seem to understand risk, and there was plenty in this room. Touch the wrong thing, breathe the wrong way and you’re dead. We knew contact with infected humans or materials was key but not exactly how it worked.

“I’ve dealt with the College before in cases, so if there’s any trouble, carefully record everything and contact me immediately.”

He was at least trying to be helpful in his precise reassuring way. I decided to fill him in on the basics.

“You see Lister published a report in the Royal Society Proceedings a few years ago that suggested a method to induce immunity to smallpox. The English ignored it, came from India, not much credibility. We know from experience that those who survive smallpox seldom get it again. This new method may work. We tried it last fall, but in the middle of an outbreak. It didn’t go well but we want to try it again, this time under more controlled conditions.” I let him think about it.

“I remember well. Several died, we heard something happened at the College. Many are still grieving for the sick and dead.” Cameron forced a smile, but his eyes betrayed him.

“My sister Agnes was one,” he said calmly.

I listened feeling his sorrow as he told us about her and how she died. Smallpox is not a kind way to go.