

The Gathering

The Ghosts of Culloeden Moor, #1

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Table of Contents

Dedication



Chapter 1 ...

Chapter 2 ...

Chapter 3 ...

Introductions.

The Meeting.

The Bonding.

Chapter 4 ... Discord.
Chapter 5 ... The Gathering.
Chapter 6 ... The Bargain.
Chapter 7 ... First.

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To Soncerae

*for that smile
those eyes
that joy of life...*

Chapter 1

Introductions.

The moors of Culloden never give up their dead... easily.

Oh, the place seems peaceable enough, and many find solace walking the trail that was once a road, visiting the stones they believe mark only the graves of their ancestors. They shiver and imagine all kinds of horrors at the Well of the Dead. And the young try to prove their mettle by treading across one portion or another in the black of night. But none, save a few of the keepers, knows what truly watches and waits...

But I do. And I'm no keeper—I'm a Muir witch.

My name is Soncerae and I've found a way to win back the lives of a certain group of young warriors—79 souls who refuse to leave their hallowed, forever-bloody ground. I can win back their lives, I say, but only for a time.

The trouble will be convincing them to make *the bargain*.

In springtime, some of the mosses send up a moist, fascinating shoot—a thin, brilliant sliver of green—straight into the air, as if shouldering their own weapons. Brief flashes of sunlight encourage the plants to take a sip of rain to see how it tastes. Soon, a warm breeze chases all doubt away and the turf gets drunk on melted snow. And it all dares to live again.

I must tempt these Highlanders in the same way—give them a taste, get them drunk on life and dare them to grasp what they can.

In summer, the gorse and heather fight for right of way. It's a colorful field to tread for those with eyes that can see the hues.

In the fall, the ghosts rise and stomp about, grumbling for the fact they will never see home or shelter again.

In winter, they shake and shiver as if they can actually feel the cold creeping into their bones—bones that have long since ceased to feel anything at all. I hear it all and it breaks my heart. I know them all and I am compelled to end their self-imposed Hell on Earth.

The moors of Culloden are wondrous. My heart and body are a part of them now. But oh, how I loathe them for what happened above ground... and what still happens below.



There are 79 of us.

We are young men, all.

We never gathered before the battle. Most of us were strangers, so we found it passing peculiar when the stramach was over and the lot of us stood apart from the rest. Apart, but together. Perhaps we were united in our need for vengeance, we doona ken. Perhaps there is something about a younger man's heart that can be stilled neither by bullet nor bayonet.

There were others of course. There *still are* others of all ages who haunt the battlefield, who cry out in a need to be remembered, who refuse to go on to whatever God has in store for them.

The women make things harder for us all. Mothers and widows wandering the swampy ground. Like mournful birds, they cry out for their sons and husbands, reminding us all that we were once loved by a mother, that we never had the chance to take a wife.

But they are somehow removed from us, blind to us, the 79. And since we have no interest in their painful reminders, we choose not to see them anymore.

Not everything is a choice, however.

We are the 79.

Until sixteen years ago, I thought we would remain Culloden's 79...

Chapter 2

The Meeting.

Sixteen years ago...

Over the centuries, few occasions could rouse all 79 of us at once. But that 1999 Summer Solstice was momentous indeed.

We stood together, blinking into the cheerfully pale, gray sky, wondering what had awakened us. I half-expected God Himself to arrive and summon us to stand before His judgment seat whether we wanted to or no. When nothing so impressive happened, we looked to the small white car entering the car park.

Those were the days before the Great Visitor's Center was constructed, and the little family forewent the tourist path and came straight onto the battlefield instead. The man and woman stirred nothing inside us, but there was something about the babe that pulled us like a magnet to her.

She wasn't much to see. After all, babes and wee ones rolled and toddled around the grounds nearly every day. And this one was naught more than bundled blankets and two wide eyes staring back at us as we peeked over the edge of her pram. She was not unique—many of the wee ones looked us in the face and smiled. Some cried. Some stared saucer-eyed and waited for someone to explain us.

But this bairn was different.

We all must have felt the same thing, for after each of us finished looking the lassie over, we turned and nodded to our brothers, pretending to understand, but in truth, knowing nothing more than we were united once again.

We needed her.

Most folks who come to the battlefield at Culloden Moor are looking for... something. Whether it be peace, or a brush of wind from days long gone, or a feeling of family that goes back to Adam, they're expecting something from the ground they cross. Some even come hoping for a ghost to rise and greet them.

On days of remembrance, some come bearing gifts and tokens to honor the dead. But until the lass came, there had never been anyone from whom we've all... expected something. Perhaps she is our peace. Somehow. Peace for those who refuse to be fully at peace. It's a quandary.

It was a lucky thing we were patient young men—a virtue learned over 254 years—because it was obvious we would be waiting until the lassie was old enough to tell us just what the devil we were supposed to need from her.

A year later, she came again. But this time, we were surprised when the one we usually look to as our leader, Number 79, hurried to the child's side and stayed there for her entire visit. It was difficult for the rest of us to get a close look at her, what with him lording over her. But he allowed us a quick look, one at a time, before a flare of his nostrils signaled our turn was at an end.

The next year, even *he* kept his distance.

Most two-year-olds are on the cusp of greeting and wailing any time of the day. With 79 scraggly warriors staring at them, the wrong twitch of an eye can send the worst of them into a screaming fit. Our lass turned out to be a bit more composed than others, but still, our tall silent leader guarded her from a distance and used one sweeping, dark stare to warn us to stay back. We didn't mind so much, though, now that we knew the parents would be returning with her every year.

The following summer, the sober, intense mob of us turned into a pack of grinning fools when we heard the lass laugh. She reached out to touch Number 79's short beard and he pulled back so suddenly, it shocked her. In the blink of an eye, she was giggling so hard she could barely catch her breath. Begrudgingly, he stepped aside and let us all have a chance to impress the lassie.

Number 23 taught her how to wink while she sat on a stone bench beside her oblivious mother. Number 4 tried to teach her how to whistle and we all stood stock still when we realized she was able to hear him. After that, the men sang and spoke to her, but had to stop when the three-year old started speaking back. It was clear her mother was beginning to worry.

She blew us kisses over her father's shoulder while he carried her to their car. We grinned on and off for a month, then started grinning again as the next Summer Solstice neared.

The fifth time she came, she was over four years old and far too inquisitive.

„What's yer name?“ she boldly asked 79 while her parents looked at the empty air before them. „Can you not see him, Da? The big one, with the golden hair?“

„No, Soni. Do you see someone?“

„Aye, I do.“ Her wee brow furrowed. „But he wilna give me his name. Will you ask him?“

Her father shook his flushed head. „Since I canna see him, lass, I doubt he'd hear me.“

„Seventy-nine,“ the warrior blurted. Then he looked about like he was confused by his own answer. We'd all forgotten our names from time to time. But 79 was none too happy at the lapse and he stomped off and vanished, never to reappear that day.

The next June, to our dismay, she didn't come. The big blond was fit to explode like a keg of gun powder. And in the following week, we kept our distance while he stomped around the car park more than a hundred times as if he could summon her to him. But it was no use.

That year passed slowly for us all.

When the lass was seven, she hardly noticed us. She had a purple plastic purse with puzzles and games inside it. All we could do was look over her shoulder or peek up into her face for a heartbeat or two before we were shoved out of the way by the next man.

But at least she'd come, and we knew she was alive and hale. You never know with children. It wasn't so long ago that a cold Scottish winter could steal the breath of many a bairn, and the graveyards were scattered with small square stones. But those days had been washed away by Penicillin, and we thanked God that our lass hadn't been born before that miracle.

Our lass.

Soni, we called her, as did her parents.

When she was eight, she left her parents' side, strode straight over to 79, and took his hand. For the whole of her visit, she walked the battlefield with him, chatting his ethereal ears off. He looked uncomfortable with some of her questions and glared at anyone who came near enough to eavesdrop, but he never pulled his hand from hers. And when the afternoon waned and her parents called her back to them, she seemed content enough.

One winter day, when we were all shivering up against our stones and our memories, our despair was interrupted by a surprise visit. Soni's trusting mother stood by their car while the lass hurried over to the monument and her mob of loyal warriors.

„We are on our way to Inverness and my da said I could stop for a mite!“ She shivered and wrapped her scarf tighter around her head, then pulled the edge down beneath her chin so we could see her quickly-reddening face. „Have any moved on since I was here in the spring?“

79 frowned and shook his head.

„Moved on?“ asked Fraser. „And miss a visit from our Soni come June?“ He laughed and the others laughed with him. But it was clear we were all a bit unnerved by her question.

The lass didn't laugh. „None of you? Ye're sure?“

„Aye, lass.“ 79 put his hands on his hips. „It's no child's place to tell a man when he should go and when he should stay, aye? I told ye, I'll go when I've been heard and not before. The rest feel the same.“

She smiled hopefully and rushed forward. „But don't you see? *I've* heard ye.“

79 patted her head and I could almost imagine the scarf moved beneath his insubstantial touch. „Ye canna understand. It's Prince Charlie that needs to hear me, to hear all of us. We'll stand our ground until that day. No mistake.“ He twirled his finger and pointed to the car park. „Now go before ye catch yer death. Not one of us is worth yer takin' ill.“

She strode away as she'd been told, but shook her head as she dragged her wee purple boots. „Ye're wrong, Simon McLaren.“ A dozen yards away, she turned to face him. „Ye're worth as much as all God's children. I asked.“ The look she gave him seemed oddly confident for a girl of eight. And while we all contemplated her words, she climbed in her car and left us.

From then on, Soni came twice a year. At Samhain and Summer Solstice. In 2007, The National Trust for Scotland built the Great Culloden Visitor's Centre. In the spring of 2008, we were all on tenterhooks when the lass went inside. One man volunteered to accompany her—the only soul willing to brave the place—Ewan MacFie.

It took her a good long while to walk through the exhibit, Ewan reported later. But when she went inside the battle room, she'd burst out the door in less than a minute. Ewan himself was so taken aback by the skirmish replaying around him, he failed to follow her. But others were peeking through the thick glass and saw her run past the weapon displays and out the exit.

Tears poured down her young pink cheeks as she passed through us and ran into the grassy field. 79 followed the distraught lass and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Together they strolled away from prying eyes while the rest of us waited for Ewan to tell us what he'd seen.

It sounded quite a horror, and though I had been a wee bit curious in the past, nothing could have tempted me to enter the building afterward.

By the time Soni's parents came outside, she had recovered enough to join them. Together the family walked around the field with their new-fangled headsets lecturing them on how the battle had unfolded. We'd eavesdropped often enough to know what they were hearing. And while the lass listened to dramatized

accounts, she eyed us all through a thick curtain of tears. At the end of the strolling tour, she was stunned and spent, and had to be led back to the car park by her troubled father. We truly wondered if the man would ever let her visit again.

Not if he were wise, he wouldn't. But deep down, I prayed the man was a fool.

Chapter 3

The Bonding.

At the tender age of ten, our lassie began studying us. She wanted our names and patiently waited for us to remember them. Some could recall their lives before we arrived at the battlefield. Others had to wait another eight months or a year to bring it to mind while the lass was on the grounds, so they could be recorded in her special notebook.

Her parents were an odd couple of ducks. After the age of eight, they began treating her differently, allowing her to have free rein of the place as long as she stayed within sight of them. It was obvious they knew of her gift, that she was able to see us. But remarkably, they didn't mind it. They certainly didn't act as though she should be committed to a hospital simply because she could see spirits. And they didn't seem to worry that we might cause her harm. After all, it was only the exhibit and battle immersion room that had upset her in the past.

When she was thirteen, she braved the building once more. By the time she emerged, in tears yet again, we were all standing just outside the doors, ready to brave the place ourselves if she hadn't shown herself soon.

If we'd had our druthers, we'd have never come so near the exit, of course. For Ewan MacFie had come out far whiter than when he'd gone in, and that was saying something for a dead man. In the end, we reasoned, there was nothing inside we didn't already know. So all were happy to avoid the place.

It took years for the lass to interview us all what with the few days she spent at Culloden. But by the end of a cold Samhain visit, she had finished. When she came to visit that spring, she was fifteen. She left her tattered notebook in her bag and spent all her time with 79. And though we still wondered why the lass continued to affect us all so strongly, Wyndham suggested that the Good Lord had given her to us for a bit of companionship while we bided our time.

But no one should assume to know what The Almighty has in store...

Chapter 4

Discord.

Lachlan, Summer Solstice, 2015.

Something was wrong.

Throughout the cloudy day, the mood among the 79 grew into a sullen cloud of its own. Our Soncerae had not come. The sun set with all the traditional fanfare on the longest day of the year and still, our precious lass never appeared.

79 was physically ill—at least as physically ill as a spirit can be. I saw him retching in the gorse when he thought no one was looking. But we all watched him out of the corner of our eyes because we knew that no matter how disappointed we all were—and our disappointment weighed heavier by the minute—we knew it was somehow worse for him. There was something between this tall silent blond and the wee lass whom we'd all watched grow up.

„She would be sixteen this year,“ I mumbled and glanced in 79's direction.

Alan McHenish, to my left, tried to shove my shoulder but his hand went through me, my mood had weakened me so. „Dinna be daft. Sixteen is still a child these days. There can be nothing between him and the wee lassie, aye?“

„Oh?“ I pointed to the blond with my blade. „Tell that to him.“

McHenish snorted again. „Weel, it's not as if she's dead, is it? I mean, sixteen-year-olds dinna just keel over of a bad heart or die of the sniffles, now do they?“

The man's logic made me shake my head. „Ye just said she's a child. Now she's too old to die of the sniffles? Make up yer mind, for pity's sake.“

„Her parents didna come this year,“ someone said quietly. „Perhaps they've all gone on holiday. To the States, maybe. Can't just swing up to the Highlands for the day if ye're across the pond, aye?“ Wyndham was ever one to tell a cheery tale. But that day, it didn't help much. 79's mood always seemed to dictate our own, we were that tethered to one another.

The car park emptied of all but two vehicles. What with the Pagan holiday and all, it seemed the folks in the Great Visitor's Centre expected trouble and had kept on a pair of security guards for the night instead of just one. Because of the solstice, all 79 of us remained upright, still waiting for our semi-annual moment of cheer. I expected none would give up hoping until the sun found the eastern sky again.

If I had been alone, I might have wept, I was that sorry not to see her. Even if she would have spent the day walking about holding 79's hand, she would have spared us a moment or two. A little jolt of electricity, or whatever magic it was, always perked us up when she looked our way or passed her hand through ours.

As if they had given up hope, the clouds that had been dripping all day decided to greet like no one was watching. Perhaps they, too, felt the despair consuming Culloden's 79.

Slowly, reluctantly, men got to their feet and looked to their resting places. I lifted my face to the downpour and let my despair slip away. With no clear images in my head, I knew I would return to where my body had fallen that April day in 1745. And I would sleep almost peacefully until my mind began to fidget again. Until I woke, however, I would forget that I was face down in the mud with Alan McHenish draped over the backs of my calves. It never bothered me while I slept.

Peace. Give me a little peace—

The prayer was cut short by the flash of headlights. My heart jumped with hope that Soni had come at long last. After all, there had been only that one year we'd had to make do without her, when she was six...

But it wasn't our lassie. It was the security guards toodling about the grounds on the large ATV. They took a rise too quickly and the vehicle bucked, sending the rain between the small windshield and the roof. The men groaned as the water soaked them through. I smiled and thought their discomfort a small price to pay for getting my hopes up for no reason.

I faced the sky again, intent on finding my peace before the guards made their way back from the west end of the field. Another light caught my attention, however, and I looked to the small car park near the entrance. A truck had parked there.

Teenagers or tardy Wickens? I wondered.

Too late for Solstice.

Teenagers, then.

But suddenly the air stirred around me, and my brothers rose to face the same direction. 79 present and alert. It meant one thing.

Soni has come!

I took a step, then stopped. Something was wrong. The pull that had tugged at my breast was gone. And in its place, opposition. *Stay back*, it insisted with no voice at all.

I found 79 beside the Memorial Cairn, standing before the wood bench upon which he'd been moping a few moments before. A fierce storm raged in his eyes as he watched the truck and I wondered if some demon were trying to keep us all from our lass. Or was our lass even there? Was something else able to bring us all to attention as she did?

Others began to back away, no doubt forming the same fears in their minds. Demons were nothing to trifle with. We were safe on Culloden soil. It was hallowed ground, dedicated and consecrated by a dozen different religions. And even if it hadn't been, we'd consecrated it ourselves a hundred times over. We'd been God-fearing young men, all. Nothing much could cause us dread.

But still, we were wary.

The driver's door opened and a woman stepped out into the rain wearing a long dark cloak. Her head was covered with a hood, but the steady rain didn't affect it.

She moved to the rear and opened the tailgate. With her back to us, we couldn't tell what she was unloading until she moved to the far side of a large trolley and began pushing it toward us.

Wood logs, piled high—a weight no small woman should be able to push, but she did.

We waited, breathless, resisting the mild, invisible force that pushed us back, still hoping our lass was near.

The cart caught on the edge of the walkway and the small woman stopped short. She waved one hand, rolling her fingers as she did so, and the cart moved of its own accord. When many of us gasped, she looked up and grinned. A fine wide smile full of mischief. There was no need to see the rest of her face. This was our Soni!

She'd come! I looked around to share relief with my brothers. 79's shoulders relaxed, but his face bore only worry. I wondered what he knew that the rest of us did not.

He took a step forward and raised his hands toward her. „No!“ His head shook furiously. „Don't do this!“

Even from a distance, we heard her clearly. „I must.“ Her voice carried easily enough through the curtains of rain.

79 turned in a circle and swung his arms at us, shooing us away. „Go! Be gone! Stay away from her!“ There was something in his voice that made us obey. The man was terrified. And if *he* was terrified, so then were we all.

He could have no true peace from us, however, and our only recourse was to flee to the distant edges of the battlefield. None would step beyond hallowed ground, but we would go as far as we could.

I walked backward for a piece, watching as I went. The lass continued toward the monument pushing her cart before her with nothing but the wave of her hand. Once she stood in the center of the space, she unloaded the wood and began to stack as if for a massive fire.

A low whirring came from behind me. The guards were returning. No doubt the lass would be in serious trouble for even considering making a fire on National Trust property, but there was little I and my brothers could do about it, even if there were 79 of us...

Chapter 5

The Gathering.

The ATV came up from the lower field with bright lights piercing through the still-heavy curtains of rain. I watched the faces of the two guards, waiting for their reaction at finding a civilian on the property so late. But surely they expected some trouble on Solstice. They were prepared, after all.

„Don't see her. Don't see her,“ I chanted. Dread and rain slashed through me as the vehicle started up the path toward the monument. *Impossible not to see her. Impossible.*

The lights shone directly on the lass as she continued to pile the logs. And all for naught. I waited for the red flash of brake lights, but they never came.

The headlamps moved on, shining along the path, turning toward the cottage. The ATV's small engine whirred along without slowing.

Perhaps they are drunk. For how else could they have driven by her unseeing?

The vehicle stopped at the old Leanach cottage and one man got out. With an umbrella opened over his head, he walked around the house. Perhaps he needed to relieve himself before coming back for a confrontation.

But the man did no such thing. He aimed his small torch through the window and took a look. He continued around the building and peered through another pane of glass. A moment later, he climbed back into the ATV and shook the water from his umbrella. The engine roared to life once more and the guards turned toward the car park as if it were just another night on the moor.

79 tilted his head at Soni. „What do you intend to do with a rain-soaked pile of logs, then?“

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders but continued her task.

„Don't do this,“ he begged. „We can continue as we have, surely.“ He moved close to her and she straightened. With his head bent, their faces were inches apart. „Please.“ He suddenly placed a hand on each shoulder and pulled her to him. Her hood fell back, but caught on the top of her head.

She looked into his eyes for a moment, then closed her own. Her chin lifted slightly.

Don't do it!

The big blond lowered his mouth to hers and I realized they *could* feel each other. His hands had pulled her shoulders. His lips stopped where hers began!

But how could that be?

I thought back to all those visits. Why had I never noticed before? She'd taken his hand any number of times. They'd walked every inch of Culloden and 79 had held tight to her.

How? Did he feel so strongly for her? For when my emotions ran high, I was more substantial. Even Alan McHenish was able to give me a shove now and again.

How strongly 79 must be feeling at that moment, then, to have a living lass feel his touch!

The kiss ended, but neither of them stepped away.

„Please,“ he said again. „It's too soon.“

She shook her head sadly. „Our time has run out.“

He straightened but didn't release his hold. „I won't allow it—“

„Ye cannot stop me.“ Her chin quivered as she lifted her hands in the air.

His grasp slipped from her shoulders. Her sleeves billowed around her arms and a green light followed the path of her hands. Swirling. Twisting. The pile of wood combusted—a fire with oddly white flames. And between Soni and the warrior, the green light grew into a wide, slow moving ring. 79 jumped back as if the circle might consume him.

I stood rooted to the heather-covered ground. Our somber leader had ordered us away, but my willingness to flee was forgotten as shapes began to form in that green light. Shapes that moved separate from each other, but continued in the same direction. Shapes that walked, that glided, that stumbled... like people.

„Ye will not stop me,“ Soni repeated.

He put his hands to his hips and glared. „Ye're a witch, then?“

She only smiled. „Ye've always known it, Simon McLaren.“

He started at the sound of his name and began to back away from her. After a defiant shake of his head, he turned and began to vanish, but he never made it.

„Come,“ she whispered. Then that whisper became a wind that swirled around the edges of Culloden and pushed me and the rest toward the monument. *Come*. The force that had nudged me away while she set about lighting her fire had turned, and now it pressed at my back, reinforcing the summons of the wind. „I gather the seventy-nine of Culloden to me,“ her voice boomed. „Come!“

And one by one, we gathered. All.

Chapter 6

The Bargain.

Out along the English line, there stands a small square of layered stone topped with bronze—a marker for Clan Cameron. It was a good piece away and yet that was where 79 took a seat. Soni's summons kept him visible, but he was able to defy her enough to reach the formation. Whatever winds buffeted him, they could not move him. He faced southwest and became as immovable as that memorial. Eventually, the winds died down as if Soni recognized the futility and had to settle for the man being present, if only from a distance.

The rest of us knew no good reason to resist, I suppose, and so we did not.

We filled the clearing from the Cairn to the path and then to the clan stones in the grass beyond, there were that many of us. Since we rarely gathered together in one place, it surprised me how much space we filled. 79 is no small number. A significant assembly of young warriors who still, over two hundred and seventy years later, could only guess at the bonds that connected us.

„Welcome,“ Soni said, warm and friendly as the smile on her face. Her eyes were wide with excitement in spite of the exchange she'd had with 79. She pulled the hood from her head and laid it on her shoulders. Still a short lass at sixteen years. Still our precious lass that could see us clearly without effort.

Of course she was a witch. And like she'd told 79, of course we'd known it all along. But I'd never thought of her that way. She'd never done the odd things that self-proclaimed witches did when they walked across our hallowed fields. Soni was simply our tether to the living world, a deep breath of fresh, life-giving air we were allowed to inhale but twice a year.

Her earlier words suddenly repeated in my head. *Out of time*, she'd said. Then, as if there was a viable, beating heart in my breast, it felt near to bursting at the thought of never seeing her again.

I couldn't resist calling out. „Are you ill, lass?“

She searched for my face, then smiled and swallowed. „Not ill, no.“

Every one amongst us relaxed a bit. Apparently I hadn't been the only one to overhear her conversation with 79. I hadn't been the only one to worry.

„Then what time is it, that it has come,“ asked Number 8. We called him 8 because it had also been his age when he fell on the battlefield. The lad's dog had followed his father to Culloden and the child had followed the dog, to bring him home. There'd been no time to send him away before the cannons fired. Now that he would never be going home again, his dog remained at his side, comforting him on the rare occasions the boy awoke.

8 was another mystery among us. What could he possibly have in common with the rest? What could have tied him so surely to our assembly?

He knelt on one knee at the front, one arm around the straggly dog and one fist grinding the sleep from his eyes. Soni took a step toward him, leaning down as she did so, but the ring of green kept her from reaching the laddie.

„It’s time to go home, Rabby,“ she said. Then she addressed us all. „It’s time for ye all to go home. And I have come to help ye on yer way.“

We couldn’t stifle our collective groan of disappointment. Though no one would have spit in our lass’s direction, most men shook their heads and turned away. Our wee witch was just like the rest of them after all, telling us to move on, that loved ones were waiting if we’d just look to the light.

I glanced back to see how Soni was taking her rejection, but there she stood in her great swirling ring of green, smiling patiently as if she’d expected nothing less. And to the west, 79 was watching too, his concern for her as clear as ever.

„Why do ye go?“ she called. „Ye still want yer *revenge*, do ye not?“

The grand exodus ended abruptly and all shoulders turned back.

She opened her arms. „A private word with the bonnie prince, perhaps?“

Fraser was the first to reach her and we all hurried back to listen. „Name yer price, lass.“

„Auch, now,“ she chided, shaking her head and tucking her hands beneath her cloak to rest on her hips. „Doona be offering yer soul to the devil when ye ken he’s in the market, aye?“

Many heads nodded, including my own. The lass was wise beyond her years and I wondered where she’d acquired that wisdom. A grandmother, perhaps. A grandfather? For it was a fact we didn’t hear such phrases from the younger tourists these days.

„Are ye sure it’s not the devil ye’ve made your bargain with, Soncerae?“ 79’s voice rang out around us even though his form lingered on the Cameron marker.

„He knows I haven’t,“ she muttered to the rest of us. Then she shouted over our heads. „Ye ken I haven’t!“

The forms in the green light paused and took notice of us all. Their faces turned menacing like dogs sensing danger. Soni quickly waved her hand and they went back to their circling. Now that I was closer, I noticed their mouths moving. *Chanting?*

I took a step back and Soni laughed.

„My ancestors, Lachlan. Nothing to fear. My da thought I shouldn’t come alone, though my biggest threat would have been a drunken driver on the A-9. I tried to tell my parents I had nothing to fear from you lot, but they wouldn’t listen. I had to sneak out of the house... Well, let’s get started.“

With another wave of her hand, the large white pyre expanded and the light of it illuminated the faces of her attentive audience. She murmured something we couldn’t understand and we waited.

„This is why she was brought to us,“ Mackay whispered. „I’ve always wondered.“

„Oh, aye,“ said another. „To bring us our revenge. I knew if we only waited long enough—“

„Shut it.“ Number 32 pushed his way closer to the lass. He was hard of hearing even after he was dead. On the few occasions we’d spoken, I quickly wearied of repeating myself and tried to tell him the defect was probably just in his mind, but he wouldn’t see reason. He’d been standing too close to a cannon when it had fired, and sometimes, when he woke, half his head was still missing.

„We’ll strike a bargain here, this first night of summer,“ Soni said. „If ye agree to the terms, ye shall have yer heart’s desire. A tête-à-tête with bonnie Charles Stuart

himself, or, if ye like, a few moments alone with him in a room where ye can speak with yer fists.“

The last suggestion was met with more than a few enthusiastic grunts.

„And what if he’s beaten to a bannock before I have my turn?“ shouted Number 68.

Soni smiled but I could tell she was uncomfortable with the idea of men beating each other bloody. Her generation seemed a squeamish lot, though, so it wasn’t the lass’s fault.

„Each of you can face a hale and hearty prince,“ she said, „if that is what you wish.“

Did she suppose we would want something else? If so, she’d be disappointed. From the reactions all around, it seemed our anger with Charles Stuart was indeed what had united us. And it sounded as if we would, at last, be heard.

„I suppose,“ said Fraser, „we have to promise to *move on* if we’re given this boon? We must give up our field?“

Soni shrugged the shoulders beneath her cloak and I realized the lass was no more wet than we were. The rain falling from the dark heavens never arrived at her head though it splattered noisily at our own feet.

„Ye will move on, after yer boon. But first, ye’ll have to earn it.“

Wyndham snorted. „What’s it to be, lassie? A joust with prickly gorse branches? Or are we to play with the old weapons inside the Centre? Will only the champion enjoy his revenge?“

She rolled her eyes. „No. I have a particular test of honor for each man.“

I grinned at this, as did the man to either side of me. A chance to prove myself, after centuries of trodding the moor or sleeping face down in the mud. It sounded grand whether or not I got my revenge, but I wasn’t fool enough to say so.

„What if we choose not to face this test?“ asked young master Rabby.

Soni bit her lip and winked at the lad. Then she moved back toward her fire with her hands spread before her, as if the weather were chilling her to the bone. But since the rain couldn’t touch her, or any man among us—other than 79—I surmised that any chill she felt was from her own thoughts.

Finally, she faced us again. „Ye’ll face no test, Rabby. Nor the beast at yer side. As for the rest of ye, I’ll not compel ye to prove yerselves. That’s yer choice. But it will be yer only choice. I’ve already made the bargain on your behalf. You’ll all be moving on, regardless.“ She ignored the grumbling.

„Prove ourselves how?“ Wyndham asked.

„An act of valor. A single brave act.“

Number 68 laughed and looked about him. „The rare damsel in distress doesn’t seem to be out tonight. Or would you have me go back to the battle and try harder to kill an extra government man?“

The joke earned him only weak laughter as the lot of us still hoped for further details.

„Ye’ll be sent away for yer quests. Each quest suited to the man.“ She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. „Ye’ll be alive again, Cooper,“ she told 68. „Blood will run through yer veins with no holes for spilling out again. With only a day or two, at most, ye’ll have to perform an heroic deed—a truly heroic deed. Only

then will ye be granted yer boon. And after yer boon, ye'll find little reason to come back to Culloden."

The gathering had fallen silent the moment she'd promised that life would run through our veins again.

"We'll feel again?"

"Be seen again?"

"They'll hear us?"

A dozen questions were shouted at once, but one silenced us all.

"*But will Charles Stuart be able to feel pain?*"

Soni flinched at the query, and though her throat moved visibly with a difficult swallow, she didn't look away.

"Yes."

With the important question asked and answered, silence settled around us. On any other day, we would have slipped back into our resting places, but I assumed other minds were reeling as mine was. And even if we had been able to clear our heads, I doubted we could have walked away due to the pulling force Soni still held over us.

We were obliged to stay, but we wouldn't have left for the world.

And still, 79 sat upon the Cameron marker...

Chapter 7

First.

We knew the devil and his demons were out there, stalking the perimeter of our holy soil like a pack of wolves. And now, Soni was going to send us away from safe ground. So I asked her how she could expect it of us.

"The devil will have no right to you. I swear it."

32 snorted and it won him a few dirty looks.

"This is our lass," I pointed out. "I trust her word." Though it wasn't strictly true. It wasn't her word I counted on. I trusted she wouldn't send me to Hell if that was at all within her control. But I did trust the way I'd felt the moment her father had pulled his car onto the property with a three-month-old babe inside. My trust came from the small voice in my head that had announced that this... this *lassie* touched my destiny.

And now, here she stood, asking for my leap of faith.

She sighed and smiled into my eyes—a little wink of gratitude for daring to speak up. "Well, Lachlan MacLean. Will ye be goin' first, then?"

Revenge.

"Aye." I was more ready than I realized, and a wee bit embarrassed that I'd held onto that bit of rough land as long as I had. But my steadfastness was about to be rewarded—when my knuckles introduced themselves to a certain laddie's face for leaving us leaderless back in 1745. Just the thought of it had my anticipated blood a' boiling.

I stepped forward and the others moved aside, all but 32 who stayed close so he could hear what was said.

„Ye’re a brave man, Lachlan,“ she said. „Ye were brave long ago, and ye’ll be brave yet. I have great faith in ye. When ye’ve accomplished yer noble deed, I’ll come and give ye what ye most desire. But not until then. Do ye ken?“

„Aye.“ I nodded and braced myself. Nothing stirred on the road, so apparently I wouldn’t be traveling by car. „Where do I go?“

She closed her eyes and raised her arms high. „Ye’ll see, my friend. And God go with ye.“

The white fire, the green ring, and Soni were suddenly taken away. Or I was. I no longer felt the ground beneath my feet, no longer felt the presence of my brothers at my shoulder. But I did feel something.

In fact, I felt everything. My heavy head upon my neck, the strain of muscle pressed against the inside of my skin. My ears grew warm with blood. A pounding heart beat rapidly in my chest. Concentrating on my belly, I felt no wound, no pain. But I dared not wiggle my fingers for fear I would awake from this wondrous dream—like a dream of flying, I wanted not to wake and find myself tethered to the ground again.

Then suddenly, I was.

