

The Foretelling

Long before anyone could guess that dark times would one day sweep into the remote splendor that was the Glen of Many Legends, a tiny, black-garbed woman preened as she watched steam rise from the large, bronze cauldron hanging over the flat stone hearth of her cottage's central cook fire.

Known as Tigh-na-Craig – “House on the Rock” – the low, white-walled cottage was a haven, filled with the earthy-sweet scent of peat smoke and lit by fine wax candles to chase the gloom. Spotlessly clean and always warm, the cottage was also hard to find, nestled as it was between a jumble of tumbled boulders on the high moors above the Glen of Many Legends. Generally accepted as the coldest, most mysterious corner of the storied glen, this was a place where the wind raged and few men ever walked.

Those who did tread here came at the behest of the shrewd-minded crone presently eyeing her cook pot.

The way stood barred to others.

Grizel saw to that.

And although she prided herself on not looking older than eighty summers, she'd guarded these hills since before man's memory began. Together with her long-bearded, oft-times cantankerous partner, Gorm, she bore the style of Maker of Dreams.

This day, her duty proved somewhat different.

And she took her responsibility most seriously.

So she bent closer to her kettle and stirred the simmering brew, pleased by what she saw there.

She had every right to indulge in a bit of vaunting, for she alone knew of the great

tragedy that would bring much blood and sorrow to this fair glen, home to three clans who loved the land fiercely.

If her magic worked rightly – as it most-times did – she'd soon perform her own Brosnachaidh Catha. Not a true 'Incentive to Battle,' such as chiefs used to fire their warriors' fighting spirit before an affray. She'd much rather see the glen remain as it was now, quiet and at peace, save for the occasional squabble.

But that wasn't to be.

So she meant to do what she could.

The rest would remain in the hands of the three young lads she'd summoned. They were future chiefs who, she hoped, would darken her threshold any moment.

But first....

She peered again into her cauldron, looking deep. Already tiny figures moved there. Proud fierce men, great warriors all, each one beating his sword against his shield, the music of imminent war almost reaching Grizel's ears. She fancied she also caught the rousing strains of pipes. She did see the pipers strutting, their cheeks red with exertion as they played their hearts out, stirring the clans – all three glen clans – as men and women crowded against barricades, struggling for the best views of the battle that was about to commence. A contest of champions, the prize the sweet, precious glen each clan called their own.

On that distant day – the one Grizel now saw unfolding across the bottom of her kettle – a mock war would take place on the order of a King.

Men would die.

The glen grass would run red with the spilt blood of so many fine, good men.

Women would look on in horror, but stand proud as only Highland women can. But the children would wail, and even the glen dogs would tremble in fear. The skies would

darken, black clouds and cold winds tainting the shameful day as even the hills wept.

Yet....

The greatest joy only came after a seasoning of tears.

Grizel knew that well.

She also knew that a touch of Highland magic never hurt anyone.

So she straightened her back and took a long breath, preparing to speak a few well-chosen spelling words. Before she could, a familiar ill-humored huff sounded somewhere behind her, spoiling the moment.

“Phew! What be that smell?” Her partner Gorm’s grumpy voice stole the afternoon peace, ruining the blessed quiet. “What are you about, woman?”

Grizel stiffened, calmly smoothing her long black skirts. She silently mouthed other magical words: ones that changed the reek of battle into the tantalizing aroma of a thick and savory stew.

For good measure, she also wriggled her fingers, working a boundary charm around the circle of her hearth stones. A spell that wouldn’t affect the three someday-chiefs, but that would keep Gorm at a distance.

She didn’t need him poking his nose into her business.

And since his nose tended to be longest when he suspected her up to something, she took care to place a hand to the small of her back as she turned to face him.

“I’m about cooking your supper.” She eyed him crossly, annoyed because his splendid, near-to-his-knees beard ruffled in an unseen wind.

Gorm’s beard ruffles always indicated he was on to her.

So she kept her chin high, her gaze unblinking. “If you can’t smell your favorite stew, there do be something wrong with your nose.”

Insulted, he set his hands on his hips and sniffed the air. “There’s naught ailing me.

I can tell fine you've got my stew simmering."

"Indeed." Grizel bit back a smile.

Men could be fooled so easily.

Pressing her luck, she bent her back a bit, wincing. "I was about to take a creel o' fresh, buttery pine tips up to our deer herd. But I do think I've strained my muscles this day. Could you be" – she gave him her best beseeching look – "for taking the basket up on the moors to the poor beasties? I don't think I'm fit for the trek."

She could dance a jig on her cottage's thatched roof if she wished.

But Gorm took the bait, already letting his bandy legs carry him to the door.

"Be this the creel?" He hefted a cloth-covered basket off the stoop.

"Aye, just." Grizel followed him to the door, trying hard not to shoo him on his way.

But her magic was great that day. Rather than argue, Gorm did as she willed. Creel in hand, he disappeared around the outcrop of stone that shielded Tigh-na-Craig from the worst winter winds.

He vanished not a moment too soon.

The three lads were just coming over the brow of the nearest hill. Spelled as they were, they strode side by side. Bonny lads who hadn't yet seen their voices deepen or known the thrill of finding a hair sprouting on their chins, they were still capable of blacking eyes and bloodying noses if left to their own devices.

Clans Cameron, MacDonald, and Mackintosh were mortal enemies.

And their enmity was laid in the cradle.

Even Grizel's tolerance spell would only hold so long.

So she watched them approach, pleased they'd answered her summons. Above all, she hoped her luck would last until she'd had time to show them what she must. Then their tempers could break. Preferably once they'd returned to their own corners of the

glen.

For the moment, they looked at peace.

All tall boys, though somewhat gangly, their long legs and big hands hinted at the braw warriors they'd be someday. James Cameron walked with the most pride. Tigh-na-Craig stood on Cameron land, so he was especially dear to Grizel's heart. James knew that the land he trod was his own, even if Grizel's and Gorm's high moor was so sacred even Camerons rarely trespassed here.

Kendrew Mackintosh came with a swagger. He defied courtesy by wearing a short-hafted lad's ax tucked beneath his belt. It was a boast, no more. Mackintoshes claimed Berserker blood, so Grizel allowed the boy his show of pride in his forebears' mythic ferocity. The day would come when all in the glen would be glad of his daring.

Awe stood on the face of Alasdair MacDonald and he strode with respect. MacDonalds knew much of those such as Grizel and Gorm. Their clan held ties to the Highland's deepest past and that bond taught them to revere hallowed places and the will of the Auld Ones.

Grizel opened her door wide as the three lads drew nearer.

They made a promising trio.

So much so that Grizel's heart lifted as she gestured them over her threshold.

"Come away in, laddies."

But when they stepped through the door, they halted, exchanging glances.

Kendrew went farther, wrinkling his nose. "What's that smell?" He looked around, his gaze lighting on the steaming cauldron. "Are you making black sausage?"

"Nae, that isn't blood sausage." Grizel patted his shoulder. With Gorm away, there was no need for Tigh-na-Craig to smell of stew.

Truth was, the lads needed to recognize the seriousness of what stood before them.

“It’s the death stench.” Alasdair went straight to the kettle, peering over the rim.

James joined him, waving a hand through the rising steam. “There’s blood in there.” He agreed with Kendrew, who elbowed his way between them.

“Not true blood.” Grizel stepped up to the far side of the kettle. She waited until she had the boys’ attention. Then she wriggled her fingers over the cauldron, causing the steam to roll away and the bubbling brew to clear, giving them a fine look at the faraway battle taking place on the rounded bottom of the kettle.

“Behold the day that will change this glen forever.” She spoke solemnly, watching their faces as they leaned forward, staring at their future.

“That’s us!” James understood first, his eyes rounding as he bent closer to the mirror-like surface of the kettle’s glassy water.

Alasdair crossed himself, his face draining of color. “Aye, it is. Though” – he glanced between the other two boys – “we are men there. That means we can do something to prevent such carnage.”

“I willnae.” Kendrew swelled his chest, not looking at all daunted by the fierce battling inside the cauldron. “A fool can see that I am beating you both. At last, the glen will be wiped clean of Camerons and MacDonalds.”

Folding his arms, Kendrew grinned.

James and Alasdair bristled, frowning at him.

“Tchach, laddies.” Grizel wriggled her fingers again and the battle fury faded, leaving only dark, swirling mist. “No one can say who will triumph that day. All you need to know is that the day will come.

“And when it does” – she stood as straight as her years allowed – “you must each show courage, recalling the prowess of your forebears, and knowing that no matter who wins, it is a man’s reputation that lives on. That, no sword can take from you.”

“But our land, our own beloved hills....” James dared much by circling the cauldron to grip her arm. “Surely no man will steal that from us. Even if” – he showed great wisdom – “we must share the land for the weal of all?”

Kendrew smirked, patting his ax hilt. “Mackintoshes share with no man.”

Alasdair glared at him. “MacDonalds have more claim on this glen than any-”

“Behold three who would say you differently.” Grizel waved a hand over her cauldron, once more clearing the mist.

The boys exchanged wary glances, and then leaned over the cauldron.

Three beautiful young women peered up at them through the kettle’s glassy-watered darkness. One maid was graced with hair as black as a raven’s wing. Another shone with coloring brighter than any flame. The third was as fair as distant northern lands, her eyes blue as sapphires. Each held her spine straight, showing strength.

Their joined hands proved unity.

“They are our sisters.” The boys spoke as one.

“Nae, they are your salvation.” On the words, Grizel sped the lads back to their respective corners of the glen.

She also worked a spell so that they’d forget their visit to Tigh-na-Craig. It wasn’t important that they remember their peek into her cauldron.

What mattered was that they grew strong, brave, and true.

If they did, they’d be prepared when darkness descended.

The seeds were sown. Grizel could do no more.

Time would tell if the lads heeded her wisdom.

And if the love of three strong women was as powerful as she hoped.