



# Domnuill-dhu

Stephanie Ellis

# **DOMNUILL-DHU**

**STEPHANIE ELLIS**

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## Chapter One

The song of the pipes is a haunting music; a voice that echoes across glens in sorrowful lament, distinctive, and disconcerting. Many clans have their own songs, some taught in the old oral tradition of the *canntaireachd*, where the notes to be learned are sung to and by the pupil, a phonetic method almost a language in itself.

The *canntaireachd* of the MacNeil clan is one such. It is a sinister language with notes that come from no human mouth. The song, if you should be so unlucky as to hear it, stirs the darkest feelings, births the blackest thoughts. In the Highlands of the MacNeil clan, it is Domnuill-dhu, the Devil, who pays the piper and it is he who calls the tune. It is also the Devil who chooses the piper and he had chosen John MacNeil, a boy whose mother had other ideas and fled with her son across the border into England.

Of those early years in Scotland, John MacNeil had little memory, but their flight south had not been a total escape. The songs of the MacNeil *canntaireachd* so deeply engrained in his psyche, even at such a young age, had travelled with him. Those songs from the void carried with them images he could not dismiss, things he could not describe or discuss in his childish tongue with his mother. He endured endless hours of darkness, lying awake waiting for the monsters that had followed him from Scotland to come crawling out from under his bed. Long evenings when the creeping shadows stretched out their arms towards him and slow-moving days filled with ghosted mists. All his terrors had their roots in that country.

His mother and aunt could do nothing except bear witness to his suffering and wait until he'd buried the terrors so deep within himself, they never reappeared. Then all three fooled themselves the music had gone forever and the song had died. But some things bide their time, patiently waiting for the moment when they can come crawling back out into the daylight, on a perfect day, under perfect skies.

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The car window was wide open on one such perfect day allowing wavering voices to drift out and attack the landscape as its occupants crossed the border from England into Scotland. When he started to

sing *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* to celebrate England's recent win over Scotland in a 'friendly' rugby match, John MacNeil's efforts appeared to stir up nothing more than a gentle breeze. He continued to bellow out the verses to the bemusement of the sheep grazing the hillside.

He was completely aware of his failings in both pitch and delivery. He didn't care—and neither did Mair. She had promised to take him for better or for worse. Occasionally John wondered what would happen when the novelty of marriage wore off, how they would cope with each other's idiosyncrasies. It didn't matter, they would deal with that when the time came. After all, they had the rest of their lives together; time enough then for a different song.

However, in that moment of time they complemented each other perfectly and so the sun shone and the sky remained clear. It was as if their reluctant journey had been blessed. Not a single hold-up, breakdown, accident or unexplained delay in the whole of the ten-hour drive. Even when Mair had shared the driving, with her tendency to take the wrong turn, they had remained on track.

John couldn't believe his luck. He kept his fingers crossed both the stay and the return journey would be equally as smooth. Then he could forget about Scotland forever. Put the nightmares that had started to edge out of the darkness behind him once and for all. If he'd shared his forebodings with his wife, perhaps they could have avoided the journey. Yet talking about it would taint his marriage and so he kept quiet.

"How long is it since you've been here?" asked Mair, as she took the Lairg road which would lead them to the MacNeil estate.

"Not long enough," he said, staring out of the window, trying hard not to let past memories invade the tranquillity of his adult mind. Mountains swept down to meet them in the cradle of the glen through which they journeyed. Faded heather and coarse grasses carpeted the lower grounds and colour leached from the landscape even as the sun continued to glaze all with a false shine. He saw no beauty there. The diversion failed.

A song came on the radio and John started to hum along with it, hoping it would distract his thoughts. The song finished and he continued to hum. Strange sounds, strange words started to form

themselves in his mouth. They tasted vile on his tongue, a sourness he had to release before they choked him.

“Himdo himto himdo himdo himto ...”

He wanted to stop. Couldn't. He tried to quieten his voice, not wanting Mair to hear, not wanting to try to have to explain. Although the memory remained elusive, he was certain this tune belonged somewhere in his past life. A lullaby perhaps. *A lullaby to raise the dead*, he thought grimly. He stared hard at the mountains, tried to focus purely on their presence, found instead they were reinforcing the strength of the tune—land and song inextricably linked. He closed his eyes.

“What're you singing?”

“Huh?” John reluctantly opened his eyes and looked at Mair. “Oh, nothing, think I heard it on the radio earlier. It got stuck in my head.”

“There was nothing like that on the radio,” said Mair. “Come on, where'd you hear it? I quite like it, it sounds very ... Scottish, sort of bagpipey.”

“No,” said John feeling uncomfortable, as if he'd been caught out in some dirty little secret. He could feel the words itching at his throat, trying to push up and out. He swallowed, forcing their bitterness back down. “It's nothing. You know me, you're always accusing me of being tone deaf.”

“Well maybe I was wrong,” said Mair, with a smile. “Maybe you do have hidden musical talents after all. Must be crossing the border brought it out of you. You're finally getting in touch with your Scottish side!”

“No.” His tone was sharper than he'd intended it and he saw Mair bite her lip. He refused to apologise. He couldn't if he'd wanted to, the melody lurked too close to the surface for him to risk opening his mouth and its tune had stoked old fears further, fears he had been too afraid to discuss with his wife. Perhaps after they'd arrived he'd be able to tell her—tell her *what?*

*Domnuill-dhu*, the Devil, his aunt would call him when he lost his temper, “*just like your father*”. Those episodes, though rare, had terrified him, enveloping him in a rage so complete he could never recall either word or deed. Both his mother and aunt had told him of the old stories circulating about his family and a deal they had made in centuries past.

Domnuill-dhu had walked among them and promised them an estate that would prosper for centuries ... provided they played his music and danced to his tune. He had worried over this, feeling perhaps there was some remnant of truth in the old tales and so he made sure he kept this small dark corner of his soul hidden. John succeeded in burying it to the extent Mair had never known him to be anything but the placid man she married.

When he once jokingly asked Mair if she would dance with the devil, she had laughed. Aunt Esther, who had been present, remained silent. Her expression however, spoke volumes. Although he had no time for such superstitious nonsense, he did not like to upset either Esther or his mother by dismissing their fears out-of-hand. He made no more references to Domnuill-dhu.

They continued to travel in silence. The radio had faded out, interference from the surrounding mountains preventing any decent reception and neither Mair nor John were in any mood to put on a CD. The bubble of married bliss that had surrounded them for so long had suddenly burst, leaving a chill both were unused to and neither seemed to know how to handle. The silence was allowed to grow.

John wished they could turn the car round. Go home. Coming back had been a mistake. Something nudged at the edges of memory. He didn't want to let it in. He closed his eyes tight, trying to avoid the landscape which seemed to be staring at him as they drove along those last few roads. In so doing, he found his inner thoughts running in another direction.

He was travelling back, the years rolling away, until that night when his mother had taken him by the hand and they had fled to the car. His father had chased them, shouting and screaming in fury. He could remember little beyond the shape of his mother's body as she shielded him from his father. Behind him, his aunt's hands had pulled him and then his mother, sobbing loudly, into the safety of the car.

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The memory of that escape, twenty-five years ago, was all that remained. The five years before were lost to him and his mother never explained their flight—and after she died, neither had his aunt. He always thought of it as 'the escape' although unsure about what it was

they had been running from; his mind closed off that particular part. He had been sixteen when his mother died. Her end had been sudden and mysterious, following an unexplained journey north of the border. She had returned unsatisfied and ill-humoured.

He remembered her words as she walked back through their door for what turned out to be the last time.

“Promise me,” she’d said. “Promise me you’ll never go back to Scotland, no matter what.”

He had given his word and he was breaking it. It felt like a betrayal.

He had watched her drag herself up the stairs as if carrying some unbearable weight and close her bedroom door on both himself and Esther. There had been no sign of illness, no complaint of any suffering from her. When his aunt went to rouse her the next morning, she did not respond. She spent three weeks in hospital in a comatose state. It was as if she had given up on life.

“Too much,” Esther had whispered at her bedside. “It was too much for you to try and save Johnny from Domnuill-dhu ... from the piper.”

“The piper?” he’d asked.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with.” A brusque dismissal and her look had brooked no further discussion.

It was then, with his mother barely cold in her grave, his father made the single reappearance in John’s life since their hasty departure from Scotland. He had come to reclaim his son, appealing to the courts for custody on the grounds he was the sole surviving parent.

John knew his mother feared her husband and had been surprised when she’d gone back to Scotland shortly before her death. He’d seen the dread in her eyes as she turned away from him.

When Donald—he couldn’t think of the man as his dad—appeared at the hearing, a sense of long-buried terror stirred. At first John could not understand why. He looked perfectly ordinary, nondescript. He was no hulking giant, no bearded monster; just a slight, bespectacled man in a cheap suit.

Donald had approached, removing his glasses to study him closely and he had found himself looking into eyes as black as his own in uncomfortable recognition. He’d sensed something lurking inside his father that meant to harm him despite the man’s benign smiles and

questions about girlfriends and studies, asking if he'd been taught his *canntaireachd*. John had refused to speak and the judge had allowed him to leave.

“Hoenhoitra, hoenmistra, hoendre...”

His father had started quietly singing the strange song as John walked past him to the door. The sounds had caught John's ear, made him pause and stare at his father. His aunt had appeared behind him, pushed him out of the room. He'd found himself humming the same tune as they left the building.

“Stop,” said Esther. “I don't ever want to hear you hum or sing that song.”

“Why?”

“It's the Devil's own song and I'll not hear it pass your lips. Promise me.”

He'd promised. The distress in her eyes enough for him to agree to her request—another vow he found himself breaking.

Later, he'd asked Esther what the *canntaireachd* was. She had merely said it was nothing he need concern himself about and changed the subject.

“What if they make me go with him?” John had asked her.

“You're nearly sixteen. They won't force you to go anywhere. These days they'll ask you what you want to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Kathryn's ... your mother's ... last wish was for you to remain with me, you've known me far longer than that man, and you're in the middle of your GCSEs. What judge in her right mind wouldn't ask you what you wanted to do? Go in there, look her straight in the eye and tell her what you want to do.”

He could remember the sick feeling in his stomach, his clammy hands as he sat twisting them together, his voice shaking as he tried to tell the judge how he felt. He looked her in the eye, saw an expression reminding him so much of his mother and he wept. It turned out to be the best thing he could've done.

The judge decided that as a sensitive youth, currently undergoing a traumatic bereavement with the added stress of important exams, the most appropriate outcome for John would be to remain in the stable

and loving environment he had always known. Besides he could always go and visit his father if he wanted to.

Since then, all contact had ceased, except for once when Mair insisted they invite him to their wedding. Thankfully he hadn't come, nor had he bothered to reply. John hadn't minded at all. He wanted none of the unknown darkness of his childhood to creep into the light he experienced as an adult.

Mair had been understanding and never pushed him on the subject. However, when the news had come through his grandfather had died, she persuaded him it was time for reconciliation. He was a grown man, what could happen to him? Besides ... she'd never met her father-in-law. Mair's family had welcomed John with open arms, their warmth and loving acceptance making him realise what true family was, what had been missing from his own. It was all Mair wanted for John. So here they were.

## Chapter Two

“*Hindo hinto hindbe ebebo ebebo.*” John was suddenly aware he was humming.

Mair glanced at him and he allowed her a sheepish smile. They were friends.

“Bagpipey,” she said.

He laughed.

Half-a-mile. Nearly there. And just like that, as Mair turned into the drive, the sun vanished.

Trees bowed over in front of them, not so much in homage, more to wrap themselves around the new arrivals; branches reaching out to pull them on towards the house, edging closer to the car as they drove on.

There were no leaves to provide any relief to this grabbing canopy blocking out the light. It was a strange tunnel to exist in such a landscape. And it seemed to go on longer than they expected.

“It’s like a portal to another world,” Mair half-joked.

John sensed an uncertainty creeping over her and wished he could do or say something to relieve the feeling. The trunks of this woody guard-of-honour were thickened and distorted, hiding the estate from view. He tried to remember what he had seen when they turned onto this track. His memory failed, everything seemed greyed-out, fuzzy. Hopefully they would stop soon but not here; he looked at the dead-branched barrier, definitely not here.

At last their path opened out, the trees sweeping around on both sides to join with a solid wall of stone forming a circle in which it included the house itself. There was one break in this barrier he could see, it appeared to lead to a small yard and a garage. It felt as if they had driven into some sort of trap.

A few low steps led up to the main door standing open behind a man apparently waiting for them. As John recognised him and reluctantly got out of the car to greet him, he could not shake off the feeling something else was waiting behind the door, in the dark ...

“Are you alright?” Mair’s hand was on his arm, her expression anxious as she looked up at him.

“I’m fine, it’s just—no, forget it. Best get this done and over with.”

He looked at his father, his unremarkable appearance, an apparent frailty strangely hinting at something monstrous inside. The tinted glasses hid his eyes and masked his expression. There was no welcome there. Yet he was waiting on the steps, not knowing their time of arrival. What did he see they didn't? What did he hear?

John did not move. The silence was overwhelming.

"He probably has spies on the estate," he muttered aloud, anything to break the stagnant peace swamping them.

"Spies?" laughed Mair. "Good grief, you *are* paranoid. It was probably someone in the village, saw us turn off and head this way, knew you were expected and rang up."

He didn't answer, gave her a look and took another step nearer to his father. He gazed up at the man, wondering at the nature of this reception. He felt an utter reluctance to move any closer to this long-absent parent. His expression lacked any paternal feeling. It was as though he was judging his son, assessing if he was worthy of an—as yet—undisclosed task.

Such an obvious examination, as if John might be lacking some undefined quality, irked him and spurred him up the steps, not breaking his father's gaze as he drew level. Then it was he who found himself looking down as his father shrank physically in front of him.

"Hello, Mr MacNeil, it's so nice to meet you at last, although it's a shame it has to be under such sad circumstances." Mair's soft voice broke the spell.

John hadn't heard her walk up behind him, had unforgivably forgotten her in the challenge of that first moment. He slipped his arm around her waist to bring her forward and introduce her at last to the man who had remained an enigma for so long. He didn't get a chance. His father looked briefly at his wife and then turned his back on them both without further acknowledgement.

"You'll find I've put you in your old room, John," he called back over his shoulder. "Matthew will see to anything you need."

He was gone, Mair stared after him, dumbfounded. John sighed. He had warned her. He followed his father through the long-remembered front door and stopped. The door was the gateway to something long forgotten. He'd been five-years-old when they fled on that dark night. And over the years, no matter how hard he tried, he

could remember nothing of the inside except its overwhelming darkness and a suffocating gloom.

Fact and distant memory began to merge. With something else his mind had suppressed. The coldness. A chill which seeped into your spirit even if your flesh remained untouched. He could feel Mair tighten her grip on his hand, seemingly sensing something of what he was feeling, a quick glance showing wide eyes nervously scanning the lobby. He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

The entrance hall was panelled in an overwhelmingly dark-stained wood. Glassy eyes stared down from severed animal heads, prizes mounted in traditional country manner interspersed with deadly antlers, blood-hued brushes and a variety of pelts and hides. The gloom enhanced death's welcome. What little light there was in the hall hit unseeing eyes and fang-like teeth, rendering the new arrivals uncertain and speechless. Already John could feel his skin crawling and he wished he had not given in to the demands of filial duty, had remained safely, happily back in the warmer depths of southern England.

For a moment he blamed Mair and her ceaseless cajoling. That was unfair, it hadn't been solely her fault or his sense of duty that had brought him here. Truth be told, if he dug down deep enough, it was simple curiosity. He felt that as a grown man he would be able to handle whatever it was that had caused his mother to run. Any further thoughts however, were cut short as a shadow detached itself from a shadowy corner. A giant, clad in a dark check livery appropriate to mourning, neared them. As John looked up, he shrank back to the child he had been. Another memory lurked, hovered in those rarely recalled realms.

The man's eyes were as black as John's father's and showed as little emotion. Coarse, close-cropped hair covered not just his head but most of his exposed flesh. His broad shoulders and sturdy build were in complete contrast to the apparent frailty of John's parent. Was he another monster? He seemed familiar.

"Master John, it's been a long time," said the man, introduced as Matthew.

He held out a hand John felt more inclined to stroke than shake. The firmness of the grip brought the past a little nearer, painfully so. He barely suppressed a shudder as he saw something crawl between

the hairs at the man's wrist. The lack of light prevented him from assessing anything else about Matthew's personal hygiene, thankful the man at least used a deodorant strong enough to mask any bodily smell.

"I'll show you to your room. I doubt you'd remember the way after all these years," said Matthew, ignoring John's reaction.

He turned back, the dismissal of Mair. John's anger rose. He did not follow.

"Matthew," he said. "I'd like you to meet my wife."

Matthew paused briefly but did not look back, did not acknowledge Mair, and then carried on walking.

"Come on," whispered Mair. "I don't fancy getting lost in this place."

"There's no excuse for rudeness ..."

"He's probably a bit deaf, that's all. There'll be time for proper introductions later."

She moved after Matthew and John followed, both almost running to catch the man up.

"I don't think we need worry about getting lost though," whispered Mair. "We can smell his deodorant a mile off."

John smiled at her attempt to lighten the mood but did not lessen his pace and neither did she.

They trotted along darkened corridors beneath the disapproving stares of ancestors whose names John did not know. Past portrait after portrait of the lairds. Past doors appearing to proclaim 'you shall not enter here'. As they neared the end of their journey, John realised he had seen no pictures of the women of the family, no wife, nor daughter; perhaps they had a gallery of their own.

Eventually Matthew came to a halt at a small door right at the end of the passageway. John glanced back the way they had come, it was like looking down the end of a long tunnel, and he suddenly wanted to hide from whatever was waiting for him in that hungry maw. He pushed past Matthew and into the room.

He remembered nothing, no blaze of recognition registered itself at the sight of the books and whimsical pictures which pointed to a young occupant. There was one small single bed.

"Cosy," laughed Mair.

John rounded on their guide, grabbing his arm and forcing him to look at them both. “There are *two* of us.”

Matthew stared at Mair for a moment—was that a flicker of disgust or disappointment across his face? John could not read his expression but knew it was not one of approval. Well, that was his problem. At least someone here had been finally forced to recognise Mair’s presence.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Matthew said to Mair, ignoring John, his tone surprisingly angry. “It would’ve been better if you hadn’t come.”

“What do you mean?” asked John, furious.

Matthew ignored him and turned and left the room.

“It’s probably because I’m English,” said Mair, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’d rather be English than Scottish,” said John. “At least I don’t have the accent anymore.”

They sat on the edge of the bed and contemplated their surroundings. John felt no surge of childhood nostalgia, no sudden urge to go looking for a long-lost toy. He picked up a Lego model, a dinosaur, it looked suspiciously like Nessie. He started to pull it apart. He honestly could not remember anything about this room or who the child had been who slept here. Was there anything of him left? Some voice that would suddenly start speaking to him, reminding him of how it used to be? The sound of Mair’s voice drew him out of his reverie.

“Huh?”

“I said this isn’t quite what I expected. Although I’m beginning to understand a little of what made your mother want to leave.”

John could see her eyes roving around the cell of a room. The sage-green walls closing in on you, the small window located so high up a young boy would never be able to see out, even standing on a piece of furniture. Had he ever done that? He got up and cleared the top of a chest of drawers, placing their suitcase in the space.

“No point in unpacking,” he said. “We’re not going to be staying long. It won’t harm living out of a suitcase for a day or two.” Not to mention it would make for a quick getaway if required. Then he pulled her into his arms, held her close for a second.

“Are you feeling alright?” he asked. She looked drained and he worried the trip had been too much for her. The doctor had given her the all-clear and they were past those dangerous first few months.

“I’m fine,” she whispered. “I—”

The door opened, interrupting any further conversation. Matthew dropped a camp bed at John’s feet and tossed a few blankets on top. He nodded at John and left the room.

“He didn’t knock,” said Mair, disconcerted.

John was barely able to suppress his anger as he looked at the put-me-up. The message was clear. Mair was not welcome, she was an inconvenience, something, like the bed, to be put up with temporarily and then packed away. He said nothing to his wife. Whatever words he had would be saved for his father. Happy families indeed.

“You take the bed,” he said. “I’ll take this.”

A clock struck the hour somewhere in the bowels of the house reminding them of the itinerary they—correction, *John*—had been sent. That first evening was to include a gathering of immediate family before the funeral the next day. This in turn was to be followed by a number of days of other traditional clan funerary rites. John however, had already decided they would leave as soon as his grandfather was safely in the ground.

A sudden tapping on wood roused them both. Mair opened the door to find a young girl in an old-fashioned servant’s dress. She seemed reluctant to talk to Mair and instead focused her look and words on John. He was becoming ever more certain an instruction had been sent out to ignore his wife for some reason.

“Your father asks you to join him in his study,” she said.

The two of them followed her out of the room. Then the girl put a surprisingly forceful hand on Mair’s arm, practically pushing her back inside. “Not you, just John,” she said. A little too familiarly for his liking.

“No,” said John. “I’ve had enough of this. We speak to my father together.”

Mair, although upset, shook her head. “No. It’s been years since you’ve properly seen each other. He probably has things he’d like to say in private to you. You can tell me later at dinner.”

“Are you sure?” he said, eyeing her doubtfully.

“Positive,” she smiled. “I could do with a lie down after that journey.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek and went back into the room. The girl pulled the door shut behind her, so quickly John had no chance to say anything else.

“This way, sir,” said the girl with a triumphant smirk and led him down the maze of corridors and stairs. As he followed her, John promised himself this was the last insult his wife would have to take.

They crossed the hallway and his guide stopped. He could see no doorway until she drew aside a heavily brocaded wall-hanging revealing the entrance to what he assumed was his father’s study. She knocked and held the door open for him.

As he passed, she whispered. “My name’s Jenny, call me if you need anything.”

She placed special emphasis on anything and gave him a wink as she disappeared around the other side of the curtain. How on earth she thought she could compare in any favourable way whatsoever to his wife, he didn’t know. Jenny would find herself waiting forever before he called her.

John turned his attention to the interview to come. A nervous energy had begun to take over, pushing aside the weariness he felt. He would not let down his guard, he would not allow his father to get round him. He would be polite yet firm. This was no meeting of father and son. It was merely a meeting of a long-forgotten acquaintance, best to keep it business-like.

Yet he was not immune to the charm of the room in which he found himself. His new surroundings were softly lit against the night falling rapidly outside and a fire blazed merrily in the hearth. No coal-effect fake, the real thing. Deep leather armchairs faced each other on either side of the fireplace, a tartan throw cast over each in the pattern of the MacNeil clan. The floor was carpeted with a deep pile that buried any noise when you walked across it. Around the walls hung portraits and paintings of the countryside, all—he assumed—being some particular aspect of the estate or other. There were no portraits, and he was thankful.

Against all the odds, this room seemed cosy and welcoming and John felt he could almost begin to relax. Almost, but not quite, as he

thought of Mair alone in their cold, dismal room and the predatory way in which his father had looked at him with his serpent's eyes.

The man was standing near the window, tumbler in hand. He had been looking out into the darkness when John entered.

"A drink?" asked the senior MacNeil, walking over to him. His expression seemed friendlier than it had earlier, a lot more interested in the man who was his son.

*Probably because Mair's not with me*, thought John sourly, as he nodded at the decanter held up before the flames. The light danced off its cut-glass, the amber liquid within warm and inviting. He needed something after such a long day.

"You wouldn't have tasted this before," said his father. "It's from our own distillery, an old family recipe. One day I'll tell you the secret ingredient."

John took a sip, felt the warmth slide down his throat and trickle throughout his body.

"I didn't know we had a distillery," said John with unwilling approval.

"A small one. We supply the local shop, sell a few bottles to the tourists. It's not a big business but does well enough. Keep yourself small, exclusive and your reputation will grow. You can name your price then."

Donald MacNeil was proving to be a stereotypical Scot. Adept in the ways of making money—and keeping hold of it. John remembered how his mother complained she received no child maintenance for his upkeep but never went after the man. She'd said she'd rather be homeless than beg him for a single penny. She had refused both his and Esther's pleas to use the courts to help them.

Instead, she had taken on another job so he saw even less of her. He was convinced this had contributed in no small part to her ill health and early death. The thought rekindled the anger that had been dying down. He needed to keep both Mair and his mother in the forefront of his mind, to forget either whilst he talked to his father would amount to betrayal.

"I hear you've done well for yourself," Donald continued. "Something of a high-flier from what I can gather."

The world of frantic financial markets currently seemed a lifetime away and for that respite, John was thankful. Work had become increasingly pressured and on more than one occasion he had thought about packing it all in. He said nothing of this.

“I’ve done well enough,” was all he told his father. He felt disinclined to make small talk, felt it was up to this stranger to lead the conversation. Donald lapsed into a silence which John felt oppressive.

“How’s Esther, by the way?” John asked, finally acceding defeat. He wondered why they hadn’t seen her. She should have been one of the first to welcome them on their arrival. She had travelled ahead, determined to smooth over any troubled waters. Hopefully he would get to see her soon, she would be the ally Mair needed in this dreadful place.

There was no reaction from Donald at his words. Esther was Donald’s younger sister. Donald was the offspring of the first marriage, whilst Esther was a child of the second. John had never met any grandmother, step-grandmother or ex-grandmother or seen photographs of them. There had been no other children apart from Donald and Esther and as far as he was aware, John was the last branch of their particular family tree.

Well, not quite the last branch, that was another bit of news Mair had wanted to pass on to the family. John, annoyed at their—at her—reception, decided to hold the information back for the time being.

“She’s coming to stay with me and Mair for a while when we go home.”

“Mair?” Donald looked puzzled. “Oh, the girl you brought with you.”

Donald’s mind was clearly elsewhere, irking John further. He thought this first interview was supposed to be important, help straighten things out after so many years of alienation. Obviously, his father did not give it the same weight he did. What was he expecting, a quick drink, a brief chat and all’s well?

“She’s not some girl,” snapped John. “She’s my wife. We’ve been married two years. And when you greet her, you will treat her with more courtesy than you have done so far.”

Donald smiled. There was something of the crocodile's leer about his expression which sent a shudder down John's spine. His attention hadn't wandered quite as far as John had thought.

"Ah yes," said Donald fixing John with an unfriendly stare. "I'll certainly make sure she is treated more appropriately when I next meet her."

An unspoken threat lurked beneath Donald's words and John wanted to leave the room, return to Mair's side, make sure she was safe. He moved towards the door but his father stopped him with a slight pressure on his arm, directed him back to the fireside. He was unable to resist.

"Let's not talk about such *little* things," said Donald, his expression changing. "We have the future to discuss."

The smile on Donald's face deepened John's distrust. Did the man spend time in front of the mirror practising these looks? He must know how false it all came across; like a badly drawn emoticon.

"Future?" queried John. "My future is—"

"Where it always was, where it always will be. Here, in the family home," said Donald.

John looked at him in astonishment. Surely, he could not be serious? This was not his home, Donald was not his family, not in any real sense of the word. There was nothing, absolutely nothing here for him. Mair would probably agree with his father's sentiments, view it as part of some peacemaking plan, but she would not want to stay here either. And as for raising any children in this house—no, he could forget that.

"The *family* home," repeated Donald. "It's been a long time since the family has gathered together properly. We can introduce you to all the old traditions. The ones you will pass on to your own children one day."

His children. Did he know? How could he know? The man must be speaking hypothetically. John didn't want him to know anything about his unborn child, his daughter. He wanted to protect her from this man who stood in front of them. He recalled how Esther's worries had increased as soon as she found out Mair was expecting a girl, had done everything she could to stop the trip, which in turn made Mair more stubborn. What did Esther know?

His thoughts became hazier. He could not hold on to them. He sank into the chair, the sweat trickling down his back, whether from the heat of the fire or the nervous tension, he couldn't tell.

### Chapter Three

John could feel everything slowing down around him, the clock's steady ticking started to drag, the hand crawling until it seemed as though the seconds refused to pass. A sound rose somewhere from deep within him and he found himself humming the strange melody that had earlier made him snap at his wife.

"Hioemtra haentra hioembari chehentra."

That wasn't him. Donald was sitting opposite, leaning back in his own chair, eyes closed, humming. No, not humming, he was singing. His mouth moved hypnotically, keeping John more transfixed than his father's eyes had done.

The song had disturbed him earlier, now however he found it comforting and gave voice to his own song. It soothed the worries away, sent a warmth through him his father's whisky could not match. *If I keep humming*, he thought, *I won't bear him*. The melody was giving him strength, he realised. He continued to hum, eyes closed until he felt ready to speak to his father. He didn't consider why his father said nothing.

"No," said John eventually. "I'm here merely out of respect for my grandfather and then I'll go back."

"A sad illusion," said Donald with a strange smile on his face. "You will stay here, it was decided when you were born. This is your home, your birthright."

"I don't want it," said John. "I don't want any of it."

"And what if I said you had no choice," said Donald. "The song you were humming, that lament. It proves you belong here."

"There's always choice," said John. As he spoke, he felt the melody rise up within him no matter how hard he tried to push it away by thinking of something else, anything else. Like a parasite, it had its hooks in him and he could not shake it off.

"Like I said," said Donald. "You belong here."

John stared into the fire, his vision blurring in the heat. Shapes moved within the flames, fiery antlers, blazing eyes, evil knives. He shook himself. What he was seeing was the whisky talking, tiredness, his imagination. He turned away from the fire and stared instead at his hands clasping an empty tumbler. If he fixed his gaze on himself, he

would be real. The song restarted. He was singing a chorus which claimed him completely, his body following suit. His hands moved of their own accord as if they belonged to someone else, someone who put down the glass, moving his fingers along an invisible chanter.

He looked up to find Donald standing over him, the thick carpet having silenced his tread.

“All those years,” Donald said softly. “I thought you would never remember. It is coming back. I can see it’s coming back.”

“No ...” John didn’t want to remember, it felt as if he was betraying his mother, Esther—his wife. If he remembered, his father would claim the victory, claim him.

A strange wailing sound keened through the night air. A steady drone that built up into a recognisable lament; it was the tune he had been humming.

A spark of light at the window caught his eye and he made his way over to take a closer look. The music was coming from outside, near a beacon shining out in the dark—summoning them.

“Come,” said Donald suddenly. “It’s the last night those pipes will be played and the last time this particular piper will play. It is both a farewell and a welcome. We must listen.”

Again, John thought about Mair and yet again he allowed himself to be led in the opposite direction. His father opened the French windows, which gave out onto a wide stone terrace. A low wall ran round its edge surmounted by strange carved creatures, their faces grinning in the dark, tongues lolling. As he neared them, John could see they were hounds, crouched as if stalking prey, a triumphant gleam in their hungry eyes. *Hungry*, a strange word to use for a stone animal, yet that was the word that first came to mind. They were hungry. And it was a terrifying hunger.

John backed away from the pointed teeth, the open mouths.

“Don’t worry,” said his father, appearing at his shoulder. “They won’t harm you.”

John looked closely at his father to see if he was joking. There was no humour there. What he had said seemed to have been spoken in all seriousness. To test his theory, he stretched his hand out to pat the head of the dog nearest to him. Donald stayed his arm.

“Best not to tempt fate though,” he said. “They need to get used to your scent.”

*Mad*, thought John. That’s why his mother had fled all those years ago. The man was mad.

“No,” whispered Donald in his ear and guided John towards the others who had gathered in the darkness with them. The beacon’s light, wherever it had come from, had vanished although golden pools of light spilled out from the house giving him some small comfort.

Only men were present, John noticed, no women and they were all looking in the direction of a small crag looming up from the bottom of the grounds. The moon had cast its spotlight on the solitary occupant and John could make out the shadowy figure of a piper. It was from there the dirge had come.

“Why do you say he will never play again?” asked John, curious despite himself.

“Because the laird has died and his piper is not permitted to play for another generation; nor are his pipes, these are burned at the end of the last lament when the vigil is over. It is the song of Domnuill-dhu.”

“Domnuill-dhu?” The old feeling of foreboding resurfaced.

“It is what I have summoned you for. It is why we are all out here together.”

The mournful song was getting quieter, like a dying heart, a last pause for breath, it allowed its requiem to carry on for a little longer before fading out. In the silence that followed, no one spoke. The lights around the house dimmed and all John could see was the moon-bathed piper. Then he noticed a spark, a small flicker growing to a height he was sure must surely catch the man at its side.

No one around him seemed too concerned. They waited expectantly, until the distant figure gave a sudden cry and the flames leapt higher. There was a sound, a wail, a scream so unearthly it reached into the core of his soul, announcing a death which had already occurred once and was about to be repeated.

“This is the twice sacrifice,” said Donald. “Death fashioned the pipes in his own image and tonight they die again.”

The scream continued to reverberate around the grounds. High-pitched, a dagger to the night, a woman’s cry if he thought about it,

speaking of suffering beyond comprehension. What sort of instrument could make such a noise as it was destroyed?

No one else seemed concerned, the death throes of the pipes mere background noise. They continued to talk and drink until finally the scream died and there was a sudden and complete silence. John looked towards the crag. He could see the shape of the piper and something else behind him; something dark, moving, taking shape. A monstrous creature looked down on the gathering below. It opened its colossal maw as if to eat them all up, instead it sang—if you could call it singing. And John recognised the words.

“Hioemtra haentra hioembari chehentra.”

This gained everybody’s attention. As one they turned in the direction of that horrific figure, raised their glasses and then turned, glasses raised, to face John. He stood there, dumbfounded, as they began to chant in that unknown language the words mimicking the sacrificed instrument. He knew then who Domnuill-dhu really was.

“Hiomentra, haentra,” they droned, moving closer, and the creature on the crag repeated the words back to them. A terrible duet he already knew as those forgotten early years were revealed in all their miserable clarity. Memories most humans would normally be unable to recall from such a young age were somehow being redrawn for him by the spell woven that night. John tried to move away. Those behind him halted his retreat and his father held him in place.

“There is no need for fear,” said Donald. “There is no harm in it. This is who you were, who you will become.”

“Hiometra, haentra, hioembar, chehentra,” the men continued to chant. Their words skirling around him as they circled, *like vultures sighting their prey*, thought John, standing his ground as his father had directed. Personal pride meant if nothing else he would brazen it out. Round and round they walked, closer and closer until he felt he could no longer breathe. And then they stopped both singing and circling. Another silence more unnerving than anything that had gone before, more than the terrible moment when he heard Domnuill-dhu sing.

Then the song started, a refrain of reply; this time coming from *his* lips and there was nothing he could do to control it. At first, he had felt the terror surge up inside him but as he repeated the words, allowed them to linger on the night air, fear died and a sense of peacefulness

claimed him. This was *his* song, he knew it, and there was nothing that could stop him singing. Nor did he want to stop. The notes were telling him everything would be alright. He was safe. He was home.

Glasses were raised and John returned the salutations automatically. The lights came back on and everyone started chatting and circulating as if everything were normal.

Donald led his son back into the study. For some reason a lot of John's animosity had dissipated. He knew there were things he should be annoyed about, angry at. He realised he no longer cared as much. He felt as though most of his life had been wrapped in a blanket preventing him from seeing himself clearly, seeing his true self. It had been his mother and his aunt—the women—who had prevented this.

All the fury he had previously directed towards his father started to dissipate, turned towards his wife, his aunt, his mother. The women did not understand Domnuill-dhu; neither did he—properly, at least not yet. He was willing to learn, regardless of where it led. He pulled himself up short at the thought—*regardless*—did he really think that? The chant started to play itself out in his head, began to remove the doubts.

“Hobandre, chehendre, hobandre, chehendre.”

It was irresistible, this call to his core, that deepest part of him he had hidden for so long. *Why had they made him leave? Those women, why?*

Donald smiled at him, as if he knew what John was thinking. “It’s called coming home, it’s called being accepted, anointed,” he said.

And for the first time, John detected an element of truth. It was also the sort of phrase, the sort of welcome Mair approved of. A name he recalled very faintly, a skein of remembrance dancing in the wind ready to vanish at the merest gust.

“Mair—” he started, her face however was a faint memory. He struggled to recall her appearance, his feelings towards the woman he had married.

“Your *wife* is sleeping,” said Donald. “I’ve instructed Matthew to look in on her from time to time. In fact, I was wondering if perhaps you think she might prefer a tray in your room this evening rather than coming down and having to deal with so many strangers after such a long journey. She told Matthew she was quite exhausted.”

It seemed a logical suggestion. Mair *had* been tired. Better to leave the women out of such gatherings.

“And don’t worry about changing. I’ve had a tartan specially made for you and you can change in here without disturbing her.”

The voice of reasonableness, of solicitation. John felt slightly guilty he was abandoning his wife but she *was* tired. Best to let Mair sleep. It would be a nice surprise for her when she woke up to find he had done as she asked, thawed towards his relations, made steps towards reconciliation. It was what she wanted.

He had to admit, despite himself, despite memories of his mother’s fears, he wanted to know more about this man, his father. He wanted to discover what lay at the root of his unease, his inability to break through the blank of his childhood. As an adult he would be able to deal with his worries in a more detached and clinical manner, dismiss them as the childish nonsense he hoped they were. Nor did he want to think about Mair. The feeling of being threatened by the house, by his father, had almost disappeared. His memories of Mair coming and going in waves, each time a tide that finished a bit further out.

He allowed himself to accept another drink and found himself sat opposite his father, both their faces warming in the glow of the fire’s caress. He could almost describe their silence as companionable, did not want to break the magic spell weaving its power around them. He pushed the questions he had once been so desperate to answer to the back of his mind. Now was not the time. Coming back to Scotland hadn’t been so bad after all.

As he allowed himself to drift, he became aware of a low humming sound, a drone emanating from his father’s mouth, although this was firmly shut.

The words, words he did not recognise or understand vibrated through him, burrowing their way beneath his skin into neural pathways, jumping from synapse to synapse, until they reached the cerebral cortex and took possession.

The clock struck the hour, the sorrowful lament swirling around them both, through him, a permanent, inescapable background noise. John glanced at the mantelpiece, he had lost all track of time and the hands showed midnight. He dismissed his confusion as a combination of tiredness and alcohol.

Against the background of these skirling syllables, his father also spoke and John found himself transfixed despite himself. It was the sound that controlled him, guiding his thoughts, his actions, the internal transmissions directing his limbs and organs. His heart seemed to beat to this rhythm, accepting it like a long-lost friend, keeping pace with the melody in an easy manner.

“You can feel it, can’t you,” said Donald. “Your subconscious recognises it even if the conscious you, does not. It’s in your genes, your blood. That’s why you’re here, although you may deny it.”

John stared at his father, determined not to portray blind acceptance. Another distant wave of remembrance, of his mother’s terror and her subsequent silence on matters to do with his family. He could not betray whatever suffering she had experienced at the hands of his father. Again, such thoughts faded, they had no place here. The waves rolled out as he listened, taking the memories of his mother’s pain with them.

“Feel what?” he asked, despite beginning to realise the answer, beginning to welcome it.

“We are the pipers of the blood, of the clan,” said Donald. “We are born with it and we die with it and at each passing our song is reborn in the next generation. It is in our genes ... and it cannot be denied. It is why you probably found yourself humming it as you travelled home.”

How did he know? How could he know?

The swirl of the song began to echo around the room, a deep pulsating presence throbbing, melding into every fibre of his being.

“To be a piper is an honour,” said Donald. “It has ensured our clan flourishes, our land thrives, our people thrive.”

“And if there is no piper?”

The melody faded at these words, seeped away into the walls and out into the darkness. It left behind it a chill, a searing coldness despite the lively fire dancing upon the hearth. He felt numb, frozen—dead. This was his answer. Donald had no need to reply.

“Who becomes the piper is a question I am sure you will ask. And that is something that can only be answered on the death of the old one, the song chooses. Domnuill-dhu chooses.”

John knew he had been chosen. Still he asked questions that did not need answering.

“And if he fights it, denies it...”

Donald shook his head. “That cannot happen, has never happened. To do such an unspeakable thing would mean the end of our clan. We must attend the vigil. You must don your tartan.”

He stood like a statue whilst his father wrapped the checked cloth around him, its deep greens and reds, jewelled purple warming him as much as the whisky had; strengthening his newfound feeling of belonging.

“Where are we going?” he asked, unable to throw off the echoes of the song swirling in the depths of his mind.

“To show you your rightful place,” said Donald, draping his own tartan over his shoulder and leading him through a series of passageways every bit as labyrinthine as those above.

His childhood memories finally lived. John wanted to know, to reach back into the darkness and see. His father stopped and opened a door, standing back to allow John to go first. He froze. Beyond the threshold was a scene he had observed once before. With startling clarity, he realised this was what he had seen on that last night when his mother had dragged him from the house and they had fled into the night. This was what they had run from.

He shouldn’t have run.

The room was circular, heavy-panelled and windowless. Above the lower panels, rich tapestries hung depicting scenes from the Highlands. A distorted panorama, where men with antlered heads ran before two-legged lupine packs. On a mountain in the distance stood a piper, his eyes looking out at the observer, fixing them with his stare, playing a tune that resounded across the valley, seeped into the room. *Blood*, thought John. His five-year-old self had seen blood. There had been blood on the walls.

John cast round, saw a loch beneath a crag on which the twin of the earlier piper stood. The water was dark, crimson, a stain spreading and lapping at the banks on which the hunt had come to a stop. A horrible sight yes, not enough to have frightened him. So, what else had there been?

He unconsciously stepped over the threshold, Donald following him and closing the door. As if on cue, another door opened and he could see a small globe of light bobbing in the distance. The glow grew brighter, increased in size as it neared, bringing into view the masked faces, the antlered heads that carried the torches.

There were eight of them. Eight men of powerful build, eight men whose eyes seemed to glow red, eight men who stood in a circle round them, humming, chanting the same sound he had heard earlier. On and on it droned, a ceaseless buzzing making the air vibrate and shimmer.

Donald put his hand on John's shoulder. "Tonight you take your rightful place, become who you should be." And then he stood back, taking his place in the circle as the figure to his left, handed him his own mask and antlers.

A strange sight, becoming more unsettling as they started to circle him, anti-clockwise, always with the same words on their lips.

"Hoenhoitra, hoenmistra ..."

As the sound seeped through him, the room started to fade from view and for a moment—tantalisingly brief—he thought he heard his mother's voice calling for him, screaming his name, grabbing hold of his hand and pulling him back to the solidity of reality. That had been then. His memory told him he was not the one who had been in danger, it was something to do with his mother, some threat to her, not him. There was another woman around somewhere and she had a part to play. He would have to make sure she did not escape. *Her name—what was her name?*

He turned his attention back to his surroundings. They were no longer indoors though he could not remember leaving the house. The ground felt uneven beneath his feet, rocky soil and clumpy heather replaced tile. Moors lay beyond, enveloped in a mist clinging like a desperate lover to its surface so he found it hard to see very far. Occasionally this blanket would shift slightly to reveal shadowy figures moving behind him.

"Where are we?" he whispered.

"Where we have always been," said his father. "This is our inheritance. It is where the pipers meet for the only time. It is where we keep vigil, where we welcome Domnuill-dhu back into our clan."

They continued to walk until they stood at the foot of a lonely crag. A narrow winding path led to the summit. Here stood the piper who had played them in. Solitary and proud, his pipes continued their mournful notes across the glen. John recognised the man as the one who had played beyond the terrace.

The tune's tempo eased, becoming a mournful air, the sadness overwhelming.

John started up the path. The others remained behind.

"Only the piper can walk this path," said Donald.

John continued on alone. Any remnant of fear decreasing with every step as he finally understood he was safe. He knew something terrible was to happen at the summit but he was not its victim.

Step-by-ever-slowing-step he made his way to the top. Everywhere was that wild song from the piper above and the gathering below. It controlled every movement he made, pulled him, shackled him with its rhythm, up and up, a burning fire not easing until he had reached the musician.

It was a man. A normal man. No mask or antler. A man, perhaps some few years older than John. Over the piper's shoulder John could see nothing; a blackness, devoid of discernible life. There was something there waiting, a presence creeping closer, reaching out for one of them; the one whose time had come.

"What do I do?" asked John.

"Nothing," said the piper who had finally stopped playing whilst the notes continued to resound from the depths behind him. "If you could do anything, you wouldn't be here."

"What will happen?"

"What has always happened and will continue to happen, what will happen to you in turn. My time is up and I play no more. The pipes drain me of my voice. Can you not hear I am fading already? The pipes gave up their own voice at the gathering. Now they can only speak through mine."

The piper's fingers continued to move over the holes on the chanter. When he blew into the mouthpiece, the bag seemed to hold on to his breath, refused to allow him to replace what he had just given, kept his lips clamped to the pipe.

The void behind the piper continued to grow, moved around the musician to envelop him in its eternal embrace; a growing, gaping hole refusing to release its hold. Soon both man and instrument were swallowed up, leaving John isolated, looking down at the gathering below. He made to leave, to return and take his place amongst them. His feet would not move.

“A moment,” whispered a voice. “A small moment and then you can return.”

“How long must I stay here?” he called down to his father, his voice sounding lost in the wilderness.

“Until your own set of pipes have been created and you have played the new laird in.”

“Sounds a long time,” he said. “More than a moment.”

“It will seem like both,” murmured the voice. “It will seem longer than your heart can bear and shorter than all hope allows; it is both eternity and the blink of an eye.”

Time stood still. Domnuill-dhu returned through the void, a terrible creature with blazing eyes that fixed themselves on John. He stood fast. A small part of him had always belonged to Domnuill-dhu, shared the genes, bound him to the land and the clan he sought to deny. They were one and the same, he was one and the same. A name ... Mair. *Mair?*

## Chapter Four

In her room, Mair's sleep had become tormented by a nightmare. Her mind acknowledged she was dreaming but it would not permit her to wake. She found herself out on the moor where figures prowled through the mist, human figures or at least they appeared that way, for they walked on two-legs, solid, upright. They kept their distance.

She knew they were watching her, studying her every move, guessing her next one, shifting their own position accordingly, as if she suddenly realised, they were herding her.

Yet their movements were leisurely, as if they sensed she could not get away. The sudden feeling of being trapped made Mair look around for an escape point. Behind her, merging in and out of the miasma, the hunters stalked in a steady semi-circle. Ahead, she could see little. The ground, of heather and shrub, rose in a gradual incline and she had no choice except to follow the track on its upward path. She could see a solitary figure up there waiting for her, she recognised his face and started to run towards him.

John! Here was safety. He was holding his arms out to her. Strangely, there was no smile on his face, instead she could see tears coursing down his cheeks, his lips mouthing a silent apology. For what? She didn't understand. The hunters behind her had stopped. They gathered at the bottom of the track with a satisfied expression on their faces as if pleased with a job well done.

From behind John came two men—no, not men, giants. They were masked and clad in leather aprons. Each carried an evil-looking knife, the sort you might use to skin an animal. They walked towards her, carrying those knives and chains, and John did nothing. He stood there and continued to cry. Sound erupted from his lips. Not words, a lament, and it was a lament for her ...

Mair woke to the darkness with a start, relieved at finally being able to release herself from the clutches of that terrible dream. Her heart hammered in her chest and her nightgown stuck to her body, slick with sweat. She looked around as if to convince herself she was really back in the physical world and found the terrifying blackness horribly reassuring.

The thinnest finger of a moonbeam filtered through the too-high window. There was no light in her room and no comforting strip of illumination beneath the door. She fumbled for the lamp switch at her bedside. When she eventually achieved success, its resultant light failed to offer any comfort, and, if anything, made her current situation seem a great deal more disturbing.

The solid slab of blackness disintegrated into myriad shadows dancing along the wall, splitting and re-coalescing into phantom shapes of nightmare. Her hand hovered over the switch as she debated whether to turn it off. The feeling of emptiness, of nothingness, of floating in a void, prevented her from plunging herself back into darkness. At least slivers of light allowed her to see more solidity in her situation, provided she could drive the transient devils from her imagination. She crouched at the head of her bed, pulled the blankets tighter around her.

Mair glanced at her watch, it was nearly midnight. She had slept soundly for at least ten hours, without disturbance or interruption. She had been left alone—abandoned. Suddenly all the fears that had consumed her in her dreams seeped out into reality. She needed to find John. When she found him, they would laugh together about how silly she had been, and then they would pick up their unpacked bags and leave; it didn't matter it was the middle of the night and it had been she who insisted they come.

She quickly dressed, deciding the corridors were too cold and draughty to go wandering around in a dressing-gown, nor did she want to appear vulnerable to anyone she would come across. She remembered Jenny's sneering expression, Matthew's disregard, Donald's ignoring of her, and shuddered. They had all made it perfectly clear she was not wanted here.

Mair opened the door, taking out a small torch hanging on her keyring. Luckily it worked and gave her some guidance as she stepped out into the midnight world of MacNeil Hall.

The thought occurred to her perhaps she should try and find Esther first. The woman must be occupying one of these rooms and surely, she wouldn't mind Mair disturbing her at such a late hour. She went from room to room, opening each door a tiny bit so she could cast her feeble torchlight about inside. Nothing. There was no sign of

any other occupant. Until she came to the last room. She saw no sleeping body, instead spotted a familiar suitcase, recognised a jacket tossed on the bed. Esther's. This must be her room. If she wasn't here, she was probably downstairs with John and his father. The thought reassured her and she continued to make her way towards the stairs, more confident that she had a known ally in this strange household.

She found herself jumping at every shadow, every bizarre shape that loomed up out of the walls, at every set of glassy eyes following her progress beneath them. With a great effort, she decided the best way was to look straight ahead, pretend everything else wasn't there, no point in frightening herself with imaginary visions. She walked quickly and, after a few twists and turns, soon found herself at the head of the stairs. She took each step carefully, lightly; afraid of giving away her presence by provoking some sudden creak although each riser looked solid and was heavily carpeted.

She paused briefly to hold a mocking conversation with herself. Why was she sneaking about like a thief in the night when she was a guest, the daughter-in-law of the owner of the house no less?

She descended the stairs with her head slightly higher, expression more determined. Yet as the last flight rounded a corner and gave her a full view of the hallway below, her courage failed. Her little torch shining its weak beam into that well of pitch, illuminated only her own weakness. She faltered and stopped.

She could see nothing although she sensed a presence. There was a pulse of something there, waiting for her. The feeling of being hunted, *stalked*, returned to her. Mair patted her pocket, felt the reassuring bulge of the car keys. She could make a run for it, drive down into the village and book herself into a B&B for the night. John would understand, he had seen how she had been treated. He would join her there.

A fluttering movement in her womb reminded her of the other reason she wanted to escape. A very faint glow from somewhere illuminated the frame of the front door, guiding her as if it had read her thoughts, wanted her to leave, to run out into the cold, desolate night, wanted her to run, not to the village—to the moor.

No, she would not go that way. Mair remembered the terraces. If she found one of the rooms with French windows she could slip out,

unnoticed. She had to cross the hall, the deepening shadows. With great effort she reached the bottom step and cast her torch about, finding a door, not too far off to her right. *If she ran quickly?* She dashed across the tiled floor, trying to suppress the thud of her soles, attained the door without coming to grief.

She paused for a moment, breathing heavily, her clammy hand slithering to gain purchase on the door handle. She could hear no sound from either within the room or behind her. Mair turned the handle and stepped inside. She had been lucky.

The veiled moon shone its melancholy light through the windows, enough to guide her pathway through ancient furniture and even more death heads mounted on the walls. She knew with a certainty this was not a place for the living, not a place for her unborn child. Another pause at the terrace doors. She could see nothing outside. She opened the door and stepped out under the unforgiving Scottish night. No one.

Where was John? *Probably getting drunk with some long-forgotten family members*, she thought resentfully. No. He was not a drinker. He had been reluctant to come here. Where was he? Could he be somewhere feeling as scared as she was? Doubt about leaving entered her mind. Then she saw the antlered heads on the wall, those eyes looking straight at her and her nightmare came rushing back. She had to get away.

Outside she found it was lighter than she expected and her eyes soon adapted to the night, enough for her to creep around the side of the building to the drive without accident. The car wasn't there.

*Calm*, she thought, *stay calm*. There must be a garage, or a yard. She continued to prowl round the building, found no sign of what she sought. Perhaps the outbuildings were a bit further afield? Yet she recalled them being next to the house itself when she arrived. They had vanished. Deep breath. Stay calm. It had been a long day, that was all. Far from home, alone, anyone's nerves would be shot to pieces in a place like this. She would make another circuit. She'd probably overlooked a gateway or some such in her nervous rush. Pregnancy brain had a lot to answer for.

Eyes. The glassy eyes came back to her. She shook her head thinking she was dreaming. Not this time. The shock froze her to the spot. Clashing with the darkness was a swirling white mist

simultaneously lighting her surroundings at the same time as obscuring them. Through this miasma came the eyes, belonging to antlered heads, prowling figures. Her nightmare had become real. They were walking towards her, forming a semi-circle, shepherding her, forcing her to run in a direction she didn't want to go. She could see little, realised she had run out into wide open space.

She was on the moor. With no idea, no sense of direction, Mair ran. Her feet landed heavily on the ground, casting up the fading scent of heather. Occasionally she looked back and the wispy tendrils parted briefly, like fingers splaying to allow a peek through the hands, and she would see the semi-circle of hunters following, a relentless pursuit whose pace never seemed to change.

The ground began to steepen and her breathing became heavier, her rasping lungs working overtime to help her keep up a pace which she knew she could not maintain. Already the traitorous sign of failing energy was seeping its way up into her mouth, that coppery taste of blood, the stabbing pain with each breath.

The ground rose up ahead of her. She had no choice and unwillingly followed the track on its upward path. She could see a solitary figure waiting for her. She recognised his face and started to run towards him. That dream. She had dreamt of safety when she'd seen John's face, at least until the giants appeared. Yet she continued to walk in his direction, what little hope there was, she felt, lay with him. *He loved her, didn't he?*

She ran to him. The vows they had made to each other being repeated over and over in her head, a mantra of protection, a shield against any possible harm. And then she was with him.

At first it looked as though he did not recognise her, his eyes, unfocused looked beyond her shoulder, at the waiting hunters behind her.

"John?"

Her voice triggered a response, made him look at her fully. Then they were standing as they had done at their wedding. He reached out both hands to her and she took them, stepping close, gazing into his eyes as deeply as he bore into hers. The message was unfathomable, unreadable whereas before she had only been able to read his love for her. She felt discomfited and stepped back. Her hands were gripped

tight, not with the strong-protective clasp of a loving husband, more the vice-like hold of a triumphant captor. From behind him, two giants appeared, silver blades gleaming, deadly razors. Desperately she tried to wake up as reality and nightmare merged.

She pulled back. He would not let go.

“I will never let you go,” he whispered into her ear. “You will always be with me.”

The words reassured her slightly. They were together, still a couple who could not be parted.

“Look at me,” he urged. “Don’t focus on them. Look at me. It’ll be over, soon.”

Their hands and eyes remained locked. She refused to look behind at the waiting audience, refused to look at the giants who were coming closer, striking their knives against a sharpening steel, producing a hissing, whispering cry for her blood that echoed through the night.

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John found himself looking at Mair. How on earth had she found him? Then another thought, *who was she?* It didn’t matter, they were together and his father would not be able to separate them. Then he remembered the words spoken earlier. They swarmed into his mind, reclaiming buried thoughts wrapped in his DNA, bringing forward the heritage he could not deny.

He was a victim of his own family and with a sense of utter hopelessness he realised there was nothing he could do, except hold her until it was all over, hold her and his unborn child in that never-ending eternity of horror, that blink of an eye of pain. His wife, Mair. *Who was this woman?* Mair. His wife. *Who was this woman?* He could feel the distance growing between them as he tried to recall her. Every time he clutched at her name, he would hear the hunters singing below and it would vanish in an instant.

So he held her hands as the giants closed in on him; held her hands as the knives were raised and her eyes looked at him with uncomprehending terror and accusations of betrayal; held her hands as the knives swept down and he felt her dead weight in his arms. Her eyes were open, glassy. Another trophy for his father’s wall.

Slaughterer's hands tried to take her from him, however there remained a part that remembered and he refused to let go. No matter. They merely swung their knives down, left him holding her hands, and carried the corpse away into the fog behind.

He closed his ears to the sound. There were no screams, but every cut of the skin rent the air, every splinter of bone pierced his heart and there was nothing he could do to stop it. They would bring her back to him soon enough, in a form his father would at last find acceptable. Then they would resume a partnership that would become unassailable.

The whistle of steel continued to cleave the air behind him, a low steady sound of some liquid draining away, her lifeblood he was sure. He did not want to see how they would fashion her, how they would stitch and bind her skin, how they would carve the pipes and chanter from her bone. His arms itched to hold her.

"Soon you will be playing the music you were always meant to play," said his father.

His old self resurfaced briefly. He balked at the thought of holding that vile instrument, that product of murder. Tears coursed down his face as he thought of his unborn daughter.

"You have brought us an extra blessing," said Donald. "The blood of an unborn child brings greater potency to the song of the clan. It is a good omen."

"She was an innocent," said John, his words struggling through the fog of his mind. "Both my child and Mair, innocent. People will come looking."

"And what will they find exactly? Why nothing, nothing at all. As soon as they hear our music, drink our whisky, they will forget the purpose of their visit and leave quite happily. No one will ever ask questions."

"I will," said John. "I will ask questions."

"No," said Donald. "No, you won't. Your first question will always be why didn't you stop it and you will *never* be able to accept the answer."

"And what is the answer?"

"You know I do not need to tell you," said Donald. "Now play."

Soft folds of skin had been placed in his hands, skin he had caressed and loved when it had been part of a living, breathing person. It was a dead thing and yet he found himself stroking it. His fingers moved of their own accord to the chanter. He raised the mouthpiece to his lips and started to play.

An invisible force guided his hands, taught him the notes of the tune he played. He was still at the top of the crag bound to the instrument. He could not release the chanter until the tune released him. When the last notes had swirled off into the mist and the glens beyond, he descended to the men below.

“Now the pipes have been baptised,” said Donald, “they will be clothed in the tartan of our clan. Nobody else will ever be able to touch them.”

In a strange way this satisfied him. The thought of another man’s hands holding the chanter, stroking her flesh revolted him. The pipes were *his*.

The hunters walked sedately behind Donald and John as they walked across the moor until they were back at the house and the mists vanished beneath the sunrise of a new dawn.

“Go and rest,” said Donald.

Obediently John returned to his room, clutching the new pipes under his arm. Matthew met him at the foot of the stairs. He stared at the bagpipes, then at John. The look of sadness on his face shocked John. He had thought Matthew would approve. This was for the clan.

“She shouldn’t have come. I told you,” said Matthew.

John merely nodded. There was a vague sense of unease at recent events. Anything relating to Mair had numbed, vanished into a fog of its own, become an unreality he did not wish to consider. That had been a separate life.

“And what about Esther?” Matthew continued.

“Esther?”

“She’s here, John. Waiting for you.” Matthew grabbed his arm. “She has a chance.”

“Why do you want to help?” asked John. “You seem to know what madness reigns in this house, in this family, in me. Why do you stay?”

“I promised your mother many years ago should you come back I would protect you. I should have acted sooner. I’ve failed you all—”

“I don’t need protecting,” said John.

“Not anymore,” said Matthew sadly. “The piper has you and you have his protection, you have no need of me.”

“No indeed he doesn’t,” said a voice from behind them both.

They turned to find Donald surveying them grimly.

“Matthew, I am disappointed in you. I thought you were truly loyal to this family, to our clan.”

“I have always served the tartan faithfully—”

“You sought to betray it. I’ve often wondered what the two of you were discussing on that last visit; all the time you spent closeted up together, *plotting*.”

John tried to reach into what little of his past remained accessible to him; he remembered his mother’s return after her last trip to Scotland, her death. Then it faded.

“She was my sister,” said Matthew angrily. “What do you expect? I would allow you to gift her to the piper? My family has given him more than most already, more than *you!*”

“Such self-conceit from one not of our blood. I wonder why I have tolerated you for so long,” sneered Donald.

“You *know* why,” said Matthew.

Donald glared at him a moment before turning and walking away.

John stared at the man who remained by his side. “You’re my *uncle?*”

“Aye, your mother’s brother.”

Something itched inside his head, he could feel something crawling, a fog descending. He gazed dreamily at Matthew.

“I had a wife once,” he smiled. “Her name was—her name was—”

Matthew looked at him sadly. “Soon you won’t remember you had a wife.”

The clouds were heavier. He struggled to push his way through them.

“A wife? No, Matthew. I’d know if I was married.” John laughed and pushed past his newly-discovered uncle. “I’ve got to run. The pipes need me.”

“And an aunt!” called Matthew behind him. “Esther. Remember her?”

Esther. John recalled a woman's gentle gaze, soft words, comforting arms.

"No," whispered a voice. "*Hoemetra, bodra*, the pipes, the pipes are all you need, *hindra, chehindra*."

All around him the melody danced; it came out of the walls, erupted from beneath his feet, assaulted every part of him, filling him to the extent there was nothing left for anyone else, no room for any other thoughts. The *canntaireachd* had claimed him.

He played the pipes and the house listened, channelling their energy into every corner, allowing itself to be reborn. The darkest corners of the building were nourished in this way.

## Chapter Five

From that very first note, Esther realised everything she, Kathryn and Matthew, had tried so hard to avoid had come to nothing. The piper had claimed him. And if he was playing for the piper, it meant Mair was gone.

She cried then, for her nephew and his wife, for their unborn daughter who was to have become her namesake. Perhaps she should have warned them, explained everything when John had asked, brushed aside his disbelief. Esther's mistake was coming alone, thinking she could change things, hoping some humanity remained in the remnants of her brother-in-law's soul. She had failed.

There was nothing left. She looked back over the years. At least she had had some sort of life. Kathryn had insisted on her going with them to England. If she'd stayed, where would she have been now?

Looking around her, Esther already knew the answer. They had locked her in the Women's Gallery. Here were the portraits of the women of the family, this was where their eyes gazed down on successive generations. Their haunted faces followed her as she walked past each of them. It was her duty to look upon their faces, to ensure someone remembered them, was willing to fight for them. She would be the one to ensure they were the last to suffer this fate.

Esther reached up and touched the last face there. It was her mother. Her skin was dry and coarse, did not flake or crumble. They treated the flesh with formaldehyde to preserve it. Funny how what was treated with contempt in life was so revered in death. The piper may have been the one to play the tune but it was the women who allowed him to continue, they bred the next generation, birthing the lives which would one day turn against them.

Each face was hung in an intricately-carved frame with a low light illuminating it from above. The floor was covered in a deep carpet and velvet curtains draped each 'portrait'. Beneath each image was a small glass-fronted cabinet. Within, lay the woman's jewellery, including her marriage ring. There was also a photograph of her son, the one who became the piper. And under that, sitting solitary on the lowest shelf, was her skull. There was one empty frame—waiting for Mair.

No other woman had set living eyes upon this gallery. She was the first. If she had stayed, she too would have been on the wall, not in this gallery but the one on the neighbouring estate. They followed the same laws, danced to the same tune. In running away to England, she had escaped the arranged marriage that would have led her to such an end.

“How?” she asked the dead women. Nobody answered, they stared at her and spoke with their silence.

Donald would be back soon. If John and Mair had not turned up when they had, she would already be dead. They had given her a gift of extra time. Now the pipes were playing and they would come for her. She had until the burial of their father was complete.

Donald had said little on her arrival, staring at her long and hard before making any acknowledgement, a smile as brief as it was unexpected. He had removed his glasses and for once Esther had caught a glimpse of what lurked beneath. Nothing. There was nothing there, nothing of the young boy who had played with her as a child, nothing of the youth who had once defended her against the unwelcome attentions of a local reprobate, nothing of the brother she had once loved.

Years had passed since her mother had explained their family’s history, the reason for the piper, the power that existed within him, its purpose.

“The clan made a bargain with the land,” her mother had told her before she too, disappeared. “Music was needed for the lost souls who wandered the glens; it was an unquiet country, heart-sore and in need of soothing. The piper was to play the songs that would sing these rootless souls home. And in return the land would give them the life they desired.

“Then something went wrong. A darkness crept into the tunes, Domnuill-dhu seeped into the world, to gradually become the blackened stain existing among our people. And every time the laird died, this evil would creep forward to lay claim to the folk of the glen, until a sacrifice was made. When one piper could not bear to be parted from his young wife, he fashioned her into the instrument that would play for the land. And so those sacrifices too became part of the ritual.”

“Didn’t the pipers love their wives?” a young Esther had asked.

“Yes, they did at first. However, the music of the pipes is a jealous mistress, it wraps itself around the piper, claims his thoughts, his heart for its own. Once a woman has provided the next generation—piper or laird—she is regarded as disposable.”

Esther remembered the despairing expression on her mother’s face as she spoke. It had frightened her. She had said nothing though, instead burrowed into her mother’s arms which tightened themselves fiercely around her.

“One day,” her mother whispered. “One day you must run, you must leave all this and get as far away from here as possible.”

“What of you? Of Donald?”

Her mother had simply sighed in answer. She did not need to say anything else. She had never seen her mother again.

It had been strange how quickly she’d accepted her mother’s disappearance. Donald had never made a comment, never seemed to notice, continued to run happily through the heather with his invisible friends. He had, after all, gone through it once before.

“Welcome home, Esther.” Donald had smiled when he’d greeted her on her return. That cold smile which did not reach his eyes. Why she never suspected he might drug her food, she’d never know. Perhaps she was desperate to recapture some semblance of the brother she’d once known.

“Oh, you women,” said Donald when he visited her in the gallery. “You’re much too soft to live in this world, too trusting, too easily-led; however, you are nature’s nurturers so we allow you your place here ... for a time.”

“And who is to say when our time is up?” she’d asked.

“The land, Domnuill-dhu” said Donald. “He replies to our music, tells us when he needs feeding, when he needs our daughters, our wives, our sisters.”

“Are the men too tough for his tastes then? Too much bone, too much gristle? Why do you not sacrifice yourselves?”

He’d laughed, idly picking up his step-mother’s skull and turning it round in his hands. “Oh, didn’t you know dear sister, we have, we already have.”

He put the skull back in the cabinet. “And soon,” he continued, “we will also have a new piper. He is on his way here with some young

woman who presumes to call herself his wife... we would soon disabuse her of that notion. Although John *will* need his own set of pipes.”

Donald had left her alone with the haunted faces of the long-dead women. She had not seen him since. She had been given food however and a small bed had been made up, niceties which she had not expected until her eye had been drawn to a large landscape dominating the far wall, one landscape amongst a sea of faces.

She moved closer, studied the moors represented in oil which were so familiar to her. There was the piper’s crag, the mound on which he traditionally played his lament, below him were the hunters standing poised as if waiting for something, their dogs sniffing the ground around them. In the distance she could see a small figure running, long hair, white dress, a girl. She was running away from the gathering. The prey. Another part of the story her mother had told her. One which she had buried, so horrific had it seemed to her young mind. Now however she was forced to confront it, to consider the Devil’s game would indeed be played out for real, and she would be the one running.

“The sacrifice the girl makes,” had said her mother, “is of her heart, her life, her hope. Loss of hope is what feeds the darkness in the heart of the devil that has claimed our land. It cannot be allowed to flourish and the hunt is symbolic of this.”

“Do the dogs get her?” Esther remembered how small her voice had sounded.

“They merely track. The beast, the Devil, Domnuill-dhu, from the void is summoned by the piper. It is he who runs with the pack, who captures the girl and takes her back into the darkness. The only thing left behind is the heart he rips out. *That* is fed to the dogs.”

There had not been such a hunt for a long time. Esther knew that was about to change. She could tell it from the lament the pipes had been playing. The notes had told her their story, *her* story. They were both warning and invitation. The music condemned her. The notes wailed a sorrowful cry, a keening for the deaths that had already been and for the deaths to come.

The melody reached its end. She touched her cheek, found she had been crying. The dead women cried too.

“Esther?”

A man's voice. Matthew.

She hadn't heard him come in.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There was nothing I could do. They took him outside to the crag before I could speak to him."

"I want to stop this, Matthew. Once and for all."

"As do I," said Matthew. "I've wanted to for so long. I should never have waited. The hunt—"

"First things first," said Esther, avoiding his last remark, she did not want to have to think of that yet. "We need to get out of here."

"And we'll need to hide. He will send both hunters and hounds after us."

"If we go out onto the moors. I propose we hide in the house. I know of a place. My mother told me of it once, she joked very few wives had such a well-appointed place to spy upon their husbands."

Esther took one last look at the rows of dead faces. Soon they would no longer need to cry. They would finally be at peace. The two ran as quickly as their increasing years allowed; down darkened corridors, all hung in the heavy black of mourning, through low-lintelled doors, down hidden stairs and yet more corridors. They did not need light, years of familiarity kept them sure-footed on their way. The hardest part would be to cross the lobby to Donald's study. For once, after so many unlucky days, their luck held and they were in the landscaped room without trouble.

Matthew was stunned. "Here?"

Esther moved over to an engraving on an area of corner panelling almost hidden from view. She traced the lines and then pressed. The wall swung open to reveal a small room. They quickly went inside.

"How on earth does he not sense there is someone here?" he asked.

Esther shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea, it seems charmed. Kathryn and I would hide here sometimes when we were trying to find out what Donald and his father's plans were for John. She kept saying knowledge was power. I'm not sure that was enough in the end."

She stood up and showed him a small peep-hole. Anyone looking through could see the whole room. Their own abode was slightly less comfortable than the other side of the wall with small benches and rags for blanket. And if they were discovered they were trapped, there was

no other way out. Still Esther felt safer in here than anywhere else—  
until she saw the hunters enter the room.

## Chapter Six

Donald smiled as soon as he saw the hunters. It had been a long time since there had been such a chase and for this to happen on the day of his father's burial was an honour. It would be a celebration of his father's life, his son's return and his own position as the new laird. The estate would grow and prosper as it had never done before.

The men stood silently before him. They never spoke, never betrayed any emotion. After all these years, and all those other, lesser, hunts, he did not know the identities of those who lay behind the mask. His father had told him they were merely sons of his tenants, bred for the purpose as their family was to lead the estate and to play for the piper.

He had grown up with the children from the surrounding farms and villages, attended school with them, yet there was nothing amongst them that gave any clue. Tall and muscular, grim-jawed; men who could, and had, inflicted considerable pain. They occasionally caused him some small concern but had never turned against him, silently obeying every command, fluent in the rituals they were called upon to perform.

Soon they would wake the hounds, even his voice could not rouse those creatures of stone. First, they would drink together, as friends and comrades. He would share with them the same whisky he had shared with his son the previous night; more potent this time, replenished by the blood of his daughter-in-law.

"Tonight," he said, "is a blood moon. This is the sign for the hunt that must take place, the bargain we as men from the glens and the mountains made when the lands were given to us. Tonight, we will run and hunt together."

He toasted each of them with his glass and they responded in kind. Yet they remained silent, stern-faced behind the masks.

"Raise the hounds," said Donald when all had finished their drinks.

They did not move. It was as though they were listening for something else, listening to another voice. Donald shook himself; no, he was in charge, he was their laird and it was *he* they would obey.

Domnuill-dhu had promised when he had gifted the Devil his son.

He watched with satisfaction as the men finally moved out onto the terrace, noticed with approval John's distant figure, his son already in place on the crag. He knew the tune to play. Behind him, the sky was grey and heavy, deepening as the storm clouds gathered.

Each man placed a hand on the muzzle of a dog, the stone crumbling away to reveal the hound submerged beneath. Huge black creatures, those beasts. Teeth, white daggers, eyes blazed red. These were animals that would hunt to the end of time and were beyond his control. Donald had been promised though, all would be well, he would come to no harm. Did any of them realise how much of a coward he really was? Did Matthew? Did Esther?

She had been closer to the mark than she knew when querying why John had been summoned, why he himself had not volunteered to play for the piper. He could feel Esther nearby, knew she would be hiding in the old priest hole she and his late step-mother had thought no one knew about. Believe in enough superstitions and soon you will believe that ancient charms will protect a room, make it invisible.

Fools. There was a purpose to the room. Did they not know it was to foster false hope, to build up that emotion so the fall, when it finally came—the realisation there was nothing else and never would be—was harder and harsher than expected and more exquisite for Domnuill-dhu?

He left the hunters with the pack to briefly return to his father's graveside. Their family had their own cemetery near the house. The bones were forbidden to leave the estate. It was where he too would lie one day. The grave had already been filled in and would have to wait some time to settle. The service had gone well and the estate had turned out in force to pay their respects. He said a silent prayer, the one traditionally offered to the deceased laird from his successor, the words dictated by history and known only by the family.

At last he had pulled the clan together, made it whole. His son would play for Domnuill-dhu and he would bring the profit and expansion which had been promised.

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Esther watched as the men moved out onto the terrace. The glow of their torches disappearing into the murk. Hope surged in her heart;

John's mother had been right, this small room, deep within enemy territory had offered the only protection. But to finish it all? She would have to stop the piper.

The ancient deal between Domnuill-dhu and the family demanded they play for him. If the music was halted for whatever reason, then surely that would be breach of contract? And the devil was very big on contracts, that much she knew already.

They stepped out into the study, gently lit by low-burning candles, and moved stealthily over to the windows. All was darkness outside although they could hear the piper playing.

"Which way?" she asked Matthew.

No reply.

Desperately she searched the darkness, could not see him. She knew though where he had gone. He hoped to stop John, save her at least. The swirling lament continued to dance around her. She headed in the direction of the pipes. Walking up the path Mair would have taken earlier, up and up leaving the land behind. The hunters gathered behind her, watched her progress up the hill. An air of expectation gathered. They had been promised a hunt.

Matthew was already there. He turned towards her with a horrified expression. "Run," he said. "You must run."

Esther looked behind her, noticing the pack for the first time.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I'm not going back there."

"Then what?" asked Matthew.

Esther took a few steps towards John. He continued to play the tune as their eyes locked onto each other.

"You must stop," she said.

He continued to play and the blackness opened up behind him. In its depths she saw souls mixed in a cauldron of hate, spinning and turning, grabbing and clawing. All berating whatever god they believed in for abandoning them. She could see old friends, family; all those who had denied her. She had failed, had used her life to live comfortably away from the horrors experienced by those on the estate and this was to be her punishment. She had nothing else, no one else. This ending would be one of her own choosing, not some whim of Domnuill-dhu.

She stepped nearer to John, holding out her arms for a final embrace. He ignored her. Another step. Behind him she could see the void opening up, the abyss that claimed the piper. She had already decided they would fall into this eternity together. Esther had promised his mother she would look after him, and she would, until the end.

She was right by him, her arms reaching out to his. Matthew's arms were in the way, forming a barrier between herself and John. He was pushing her away, saying something. She could see his mouth move, could not determine the words. He was trying to get her away, forcing her back. To what though? She had nothing left, no one to go back to. To finish it all would be no great hardship. But Matthew didn't know, couldn't accept that.

As he played, Esther could see John's lips curving up into a smile, the notes coming out stronger, more powerful. Something else was creeping towards them, something malevolent, searching for her. At that moment, whatever hope she had faded and despair overwhelmed her. The blackness she saw surrounding her, rose up from within, turning the world dark with her misery. This was the moment when she realised there was no hope, there never had been. She and Mair and Kathryn had all been puppets in Domnuill-dhu's play. He had pulled the strings and they had danced to his tune. The devil had been wedded to the land for too long to allow some mere female to force his divorce. She was nothing.

Laughter came. Echoing out of the abyss, roaring over her in a tidal wave, each moment of despair increasing the laughter one-hundred-fold. She was feeding the monster and she could not stop it.

She took one last look behind her. Saw Matthew. Donald. His grin was triumphant. She was going to feed the land with her blood, woman the nurturer, the carrier of the world's sorrows, she was going to slake Domnuill-dhu's thirst and then Donald would choose another woman, and so would John. The whole cycle would be repeated. She had failed and other women would suffer and the world would spin on regardless, its victims lost in amnesia's realms.

Donald had closed in, his breath on her neck. "Something extra for our little celebration," he whispered. "I'm so glad you could come."

She turned and smiled sweetly at him, clasping his hand firmly in hers.

“A farewell hug, Donald,” she murmured, using what little strength she had left to pull him to her. She stepped back as she did this, felt his slight resistance. A quick look at Matthew and he could tell what she was doing. There was a momentary look of sorrow on his face and then he did what she had hoped; he dived forward and pushed both of them into Hell’s portal.

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Matthew stared into the pit behind John. He could see no sign of Esther or Donald. They were gone. John and the hunters remained, they and Domnuill-dhu, the spirit which infiltrated everything. He had to stop the music, break the promise to the creature from the pit so that he would leave their land. Esther had sacrificed herself. It was his turn to be as brave. He wasn’t sure he could do it. Then he looked at the instrument in John’s arms, remembered what it had been fashioned from, recalled the young woman who had come so trustingly to the family home expecting a warm welcome, not such a horrific death.

If only. He hated those two words. The guilt of them bore down on him. He should have spoken up, sent them away as soon as they’d arrived. He’d promised John’s mother he would remain near to Donald, do his best to keep John from him, and, if by some unfortunate chance her son should return home, then he was to try and keep him safe. And he had failed. There was nothing left of his family. No one would mourn him when he was gone and he was glad. He could do whatever needed to be done without any regret.

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John continued to play. His movements, his thoughts, his very soul he felt, were not his own and yet they were. There was something out there, hidden in the darkness that completed him. He would never need to hide any part of himself again.

He saw Matthew coming towards him. The man was moving his mouth. John could not hear what he was saying, the pipes were smothering his voice, preventing him from listening to anything other than the song.

As he became aware of his uncle, his hand started to slow in their playing, an unwilling sluggishness that fought against the awareness of the reality in which he found himself. He wanted to lose himself in the music, forget everything, forget his role in whatever had gone before.

The soft folds of the instrument nuzzled into him, he stroked them idly. Such a beautiful instrument, his, all his.

Matthew watched him and John felt suddenly angry. How dare the man stand there and judge him. Perhaps he was jealous. He wanted to be the piper, he wanted to own and hold Domnuill-dhu's bagpipes. John thought back to his arrival. Matthew had looked strangely at Mair. *Well, he'd never get her now*, he thought, hugging the tartan-clothed flesh to himself.

"I cannot stop," said John. "I'm the piper. This land will never let me go. I need to be here. This is where I," he paused to consider the pipes, "we, belong."

Matthew put a hand on his arm, tried to stop him from moving towards the hunters. His was the signal they were waiting for. They no longer had Esther to chase. Who would be their prey?

John shrugged Matthew's restraint off and continued on his way. He didn't need anyone to show him what he had to do. It was as if he knew everything and all. Once upon a time he had buried all memories of his Scottish life, now those were in the ascendent, he suppressed everything else. His hands twitched, moving over the smooth bone of the chanter. They wanted to play, they had to play, he was subject to another force.

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Domnuill-dhu appeared on the crag, his presence casting a darkness over everything. John started to play and this time it was the hounds who raised their voices in answer. Their howls could be heard clear across the glen. Who would they hunt? No other woman had been brought from the house. Instead, the men looked in his direction. And Matthew knew they would come for him. There would be no escape.

He didn't run, not yet.

"John," he said, trying one more time. "John, it doesn't have to be like this."

John looked at Matthew. "I'm sorry."

Matthew did the only thing he could do. He grabbed the bagpipes from his arms and ran. His nephew, stunned at this sudden attack, did not respond until the man had stumbled his way down the other side of the crag. When he realised what he had lost he let out a roar of anger. It was not his voice. It was Domnuill-dhu speaking through him. He ran after Matthew and the hounds followed.

Across the dead-wintered lands Matthew ran, the instrument weighing heavy in his arms. He refused to let it go. They would catch him, rip him limb from limb and they would tear the pipes apart. Their animal instinct sought flesh and they would sense its presence beneath the tartan. Nothing could prevent it; unless John caught him first.

Matthew kept on running, tripping over rooted bracken and heather, woody branches scratching at his legs. The skies above were darker, if possible, for a night sky. There were no clouds and one by one, the stars gradually disappeared from view. A shroud was being cast over them, away from the view of outsiders. Nobody would see them, nobody would hear them as the darkness muffled all sound as well.

A low mist started to swirl around his feet, rose higher, took the shape of those who had passed before. The dead had risen to run with him. They did not frighten him. Something in those tortured looks told him they were urging him on in his efforts, pushing him to keep running, merging themselves around John so he could no longer see Matthew and a distance began to grow between the two men, although the hounds were nipping at Matthew's ankles.

His heart was hammering in his chest, pounding, his bursting lungs preventing him from taking a breath with any ease. A stabbing pain ripped across his ribs, a cruel stitch causing him to double up. He kept running. He had to give the dogs time to complete their task, himself time to prepare for the end.

He would have to stop soon, he was almost spent. The mists continued to keep John away. The dogs were closer, circling.

This was it.

Matthew stopped. Clutched the bagpipes to the front of his chest. When the dog's teeth ripped into him they would meet the bag first and the instrument would be destroyed. A faint smile appeared on his

lips, remained there as he suffered the first attack. The pain was beyond belief, a shrill scream escaping from his lips, the sound sending the pack into a greater frenzy. There was another scream, not his, something coming from the instrument as the dogs tore at it. He pictured Mair suffering; no, he told himself, she was gone, *that* was just air retained in the bag.

A burning sensation seared across his abdomen and he looked down in slight bemusement to see the grey murk of his stomach start to ease its way out of its bodily prison. Bizarrely, the pain began to disappear, replaced instead by a coldness, a sense of displacement. He was watching from somewhere else, looking on as the dogs finished off what was left of him, devouring his flesh, crunching at bone. And nowhere could he see the bagpipes, apart from a tattered bit of bloodied cloth stuck to the tooth of one of the hounds.

He looked around, sensing another presence. The mist that had kept John from view, moved towards him. The dead souls surrounded him, welcomed him into their midst, thanked him. Soon they would be able to rest. There was one more thing to take care of before the hold of Domnuill-dhu was broken forever.

The dead watched as John walked towards the pack. The animals were in the throes of a frenzied blood-lust and it was not safe for anyone to approach them. The hunters held back. Only Domnuill-dhu could move amongst them and he was angry. The piper was not playing his tune, the pipes had been destroyed and there was no other instrument suitable for him to play. Without bagpipes, the piper was nothing. The clan had broken their promise to him. They were not singing his song.

With the bargain null and void, he had no reason to give them his protection. He took his voice back from John, took back the song with which the piper could control the dogs, the hunters, even without pipes, made them all ordinary men once more; ordinary men amongst a pack of wild dogs. The animals caught their scent, recognised prey, turned on the humans so unwisely on the moors that night. Nobody heard their screams. The song of the piper had come to an end.

## About the Author

**Stephanie Ellis** writes dark speculative prose and poetry and has been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies. Her latest work includes the folk horror novel *The Five Turns of the Wheel* and the Gothic novella, *Bottled*, both published by Silver Shamrock Publishing. She has recently been published in Flame Tree Press' *A Dying Planet* anthology, the charity anthology *Diabolica Britannica* and is included in Silver Shamrock's upcoming *Midnight in the Pentagram* anthology. Her poetry can be sampled in the Horror Writer Association's *Poetry Showcase Volume 6* and *7*. She is co-editor of *Trembling With Fear*, [HorrorTree.com's](http://HorrorTree.com) online magazine, co-hosts The Infernal Clock imprint with David Shakes and is part of the new [Black Angel Press](http://BlackAngelPress.com) with Alyson Faye. She is an affiliate member of the HWA and can be found at <https://stephanieellis.org/> and on twitter at [@el\\_stevie](https://twitter.com/el_stevie).

