

As though it had been a signal, the camp sprang into a flurry of activity, even before the Governor's aide had disappeared through the trees. Weapons already primed and loaded were checked and re-checked, buckles unfastened and refastened, badges polished, hats beaten free of dust and cockades affixed, stockings pulled up and tightly gartered, filled canteens shaken for reassurance that their contents had not evaporated in the last quarter-hour.

It was catching. I found myself running my fingers over the rows of glass bottles in the chest yet again, the names murmuring and blurring in my mind like the words of someone telling rosary beads, sense lost in the fervor of petition. Rosemary, atropine, lavender, oil of cloves....

Bree was notable for her stillness among all this bustle. She sat on her rock, with no movement save the stir of a random breeze in her skirts, her eyes fixed on the distant trees. I heard her say something, under her breath, and turned.

"What did you say?"

"It's not in the books." She didn't take her eyes off the trees, and her hands were knotted in her lap, squeezing together as though she could will Roger to appear through the willows. She lifted her chin, gesturing toward the field, the trees, the men around us.

"This," she said. "It's not in the history books. I read about the Boston Massacre. I saw it there, in the history books, and I saw it here, in the newspaper. But I never saw this there. I never read a word about Governor Tryon, or North Carolina, or a place called Alamance. So nothing's going to happen." She spoke fiercely, willing it. "If there was a big battle here, someone would have written something about it. Nobody did -- so nothing's going to happen. Nothing!"

"I hope you're right," I said, and felt a small warming of the chill in the small of my back. Perhaps she was. Surely it couldn't be a major battle, at least. We were no more than four years from the outbreak of the Revolution; even the minor skirmishes preceding that conflict were well-known.

The Boston Massacre had happened earlier in the year: a street-fight, a clash between a mob and a platoon of nervous soldiers. Shouted insults, a few stones thrown. An unauthorized shot, a panicked volley, and five men dead. It had been reported, with a good deal of fierce editorializing, in one of the Boston newspapers; I had seen it, in Jocasta's parlor; one of her friends had sent her a copy.

And two hundred years later, that brief incident was immortalized in children's textbooks, evidence of the rising disaffection of the Colonists. I glanced at the men who stood around us, preparing to fight. Surely, if there was to be a major battle here, a Royal Governor putting down what was essentially a tax-payer's rebellion, that would have been worth noting!

Still, that was theory. And I was uneasily aware that neither warfare nor history took much account of what should happen.

Jamie was standing by Gideon, whom he had tethered to a tree. He would go into battle with his men, on foot. He was taking his pistols from the saddlebag, putting away the extra ammunition in the pouch at his belt. His head was bent, absorbed in the details of what he was doing.

I felt a sudden, dreadful urgency. I must touch him, must say something. I tried to tell myself that Bree was right; this was nothing; likely not even a shot would be fired, and yet there were three thousand armed men here on the banks of the Alamance, and the knowledge of bloodshed hummed and buzzed among them.

I left Brianna sitting on her rock, burning eyes fixed on the wood, and hurried to him.

"Jamie," I said, and put a hand on his arm.

It was like touching a high-voltage wire; power hummed inside the insulation of his flesh, ready to erupt in a burst of crackling light. They say one can't let go of such a line; a victim of electrocution simply freezes to the wire, helpless to move or save himself, as the current burns through brain and heart.

He put his hand on mine, looking down.

"A nighean donn," he said, and smiled a little. "Have ye come to wish me luck, then?"

I smiled back as best I could, though the current sizzled through me, stiffening the muscles of my face as it burned.

"I couldn't let you go without saying...something. I suppose 'Good luck' will do." I hesitated, words jamming in my throat with the sudden urge to say much more than there was time for. In the end, I said only the important things. "Jamie -- I love you. Be careful!"

He didn't remember Culloden, he said. I wondered suddenly whether that loss of memory extended to the hours just before the battle, when he and I had said farewell. Then I looked into his eyes and knew it did not.

"'Good luck' will do," he said, and his hand tightened on mine, likewise frozen to the current that surged between us. "I love ye' does much better."

He touched my hand, lifted his own and touched my hair, my face, looking into my eyes as though to capture my image in this moment -- just in case it should be his last glimpse of me.

"There may come a day when you and I shall part again," he said softly, at last, and his fingers brushed my lips, light as the touch of a falling leaf. He smiled faintly. "But it willna be today."

The notes of a bugle came through the trees, far away, but piercing as a woodpecker's call. I turned, looking. Brianna sat still as a statue on her rock, looking toward the wood.