

THREE SONGS

By

Martin Gill

December 2015

For anyone who's shared a song with me round a fire.

You know who you are.

There could scarcely be a bleaker place.

A cluster of hovels nestled in the lee of a rocky rise, blunt, sea-worn and battered by the ocean swell. Turf roofs wet through with perpetual drizzle. The stench of peat smoke hung in the air, a brownish fog smearing the hamlet in an oily haze. A handful of boats were beached on the stony shore, lashed to rotting posts that looked fit to crumble. The gentle rush of the waves and the rattle of the ever-moving shingles an endless song.

Cal shivered, as much from the bite of the winter air as from the melancholy of the view.

“Dreams must come here to die.”

Mol laughed, though not hard.

“We should push on.” She gazed around, seeing little more than Cal did to recommend stopping.

“Aye we should, but its close on dark. We won’t make the next headland before night and I don’t fancy being caught out on the shore if the snows come down.”

She nodded in silent agreement and hefted her bag further onto her shoulder. Strode purposefully down the hill, walking stick in hand, not waiting to see if Cal followed. He grinned at her back, watching the swish of her long black braid, a tail trailing from beneath the dirty shawl that cowled her head. She meant business, did that one. A determined lass when she was set to a task.

He stood and stared for a moment longer, watching as the sun sank slowly beneath the western waves, a last glimmering glint golden on the distant grey horizon. He reached up and patted Muckle on the shoulder. Solid beneath his hand.

“Come on, big lad. Let’s see if they’ve got any food in this wretched looking place.”

“Url.” Muckle’s slurring speech mangled the word.

“Aye. And ale if they have it.”

“Yer can kip by the hearth.”

“That’s a kindness.” Cal nodded to the old man. Mol had already dumped her bag, leaning her stout ash staff against a wall. “And kinder still if there’s some warm food and a jug of ale.”

The old fella nodded towards the hearth. “Make what you will’o that.”

He shuffled off, dipping his head beneath a fishing net that hung from the rafters, disappearing into the gloom to rattle pots, busying himself with some task or other. Mol prodded about the hearth. “Fish soup and oatcakes?”

“Is it warm?”

“warmer’n you by the looks of it.” A black pot hung on a greasy chain, simmering gently over smouldering clods of peat. She scooped out watery broth, ladling it into bowls she found. She sat and held her bowl up before her, head bowed. Fumbling beneath the layers she wore she fished out her Mother’s Mark, a small spiralling triskelion. It dangled from a worn thong round her neck. No silver-wrought lady’s pendant for her. Just plain iron. She kissed it. “Good Mother be praised for your bounty.”

“However slim,” muttered Cal.

She shot him a glare.

They ate in silence, thankful for what they had. Blessed warmth. A week on the road had worn them down. Cal watched while Mol and Muckle tucked in. The big lad was as strong as an ox and never seemed to tire, but Mol looked weary. Thinner. Her angular face more drawn and bird-like than before. Dark circles under her bright eyes. They needed rest, but they had to keep going.

Cal scraped the wooden bowl clean.

“I’d hoped to be past Cul Samail and half way to Mallaig by now.”

“Forest road would have been quicker than hugging the coast.” Mol shrugged at him.

“Aye, and with more chance of Thegn Calbha’s hearthtroop catching up with us. What then?”

“Well if you hadn’t...”

“Don’t blame me. We needed food, is all.” Cal thumped his bowl down on the table a touch too forcefully. The old man tutted away to himself in the far corner. Cal looked back to Mol and lowered his voice. “And we’ll need more if we are to make it to your cousin’s before the snows come down. What can we afford to buy from here before we’re on our way?”

“We ain’t got no coin left.”

“What, none? Are you sure?”

“Sure as sure.” Mol cringed. “Spent the last of it in that mead hall back in Drumcarah.”

“That’s just great.” Cal rubbed his eyes, the sting of the peat smoke sharp after days outside. “And how exactly were you planning on paying for this feast?”

Mol jabbed a finger at him. “Don’t start that with me. I didn’t ask you to burn my old man’s longhall down now, did I?”

Cal sighed. She was right. They were all tired. Nights under the stars, bitter cold and grumbling hunger had worn them down.

“I’ll think of something.”

A cold draught washed over them. Flickering flames as the hearth fire spluttered. A weatherworn man stooped beneath the threshold, dipping his head beneath the beam as he entered the long, low hall. Two others followed him. Briny and wind-burned. Old before their time from a hard life battling the bitter grey sea. They nodded and grunted their welcomes to the old man, staring with open suspicion at the trio of interlopers clustered round the hearth.

Clay mugs. A jug of ale, fresh and foamy. A sweet heather tang.

They ducked beneath smoke-blackened rafters to sit close around a worn table. Little more than a rough driftwood plank smoothed with use. Ale poured, and none offered, they gazed at Mol. She shifted on her stool, pulling her tattered shawl closer about her shoulders.

“Hello?” Her voice wavered.

“Evening.” Only one of them spoke. A wiry lad with a tousel of straw-pale hair that half-hid one eye. The others gawped in silence.

“Name’s Cal.” Cal held out his hand. None moved to take it. “We’re heading south. To Mallaig and then on further into the Levan. Off to meet with Mol’s cousin.”

She smiled, a timid gesture. Cal glanced sidelong at her. Something about this crew had clearly put her on edge.

Other folks began to arrive. Three or four more, rough sea-lads and stoop-backed veterans. A couple of the women of the hearths as well, as sombre and weather-worn as their husbands and sons, hair caught back beneath drab headscarves. A low murmur of conversation.

“What’s the name of this place?”

“Scara.” Just one word. The blonde lad kept staring. Saying nothing more.

“And your name?”

The blonde lad paused, as if contemplating whether to share, as if knowledge of his name would grant some form of dominion over him. It took him a while to decide. “Loth.”

Cal held out his hand again. It wasn't shaken. He looked down at it, self-conscious now, and sat.

After a time the old man shuffled his way to the hearth.

"Fed?"

"Aye thank you." Mol smiled at him.

"A few coins would cover the fish and ale." He held out a thin hand.

"It would." Mol cringed. "But..."

"But nothing, lassie. Fair's fair. This here's a meagre place. Good Mother thank us but we can't afford to be giving away vittles to any who come knocking." He shuffled a step closer. The blonde lad and his companions stared all the harder.

"Perhaps we could chop wood. Muckle here's a workhorse." Cal patted Muckle on the shoulder, gripping his bulging arm as if he were a beast at auction. Muckle grinned at the attention, lopsided, chin stained with broth.

"Ain't no trees round here."

"No, I suppose there isn't."

"What other valuables do you have?" The old man's eyes beady as they hunted for hidden wealth.

"Hold on now."

"For trade, is all. Your knife? Or your blankets? Deal's a deal."

"I don't remember us agreeing on a price now."

Loth stood, rolling his sleeves as he did. He cracked his knuckles. Big hands. "And I don't remember hanging no sign above the door sayin' we're hedge-born nonces what give away free food to strangers. Now pay up."

Cal forced himself to stay seated.

He felt his heart race. If it came to it, Muckle could probably lay out a sound pounding to these lads, but Muckle seldom realised a fight was on him until he'd been hit once or twice first. And besides, Thegn Calbha already had enough cause to take the birch to them all. A fight here would see the three stout lashes he was already owed tripled at the least if the hearthtroop caught up with them. Likely worse. After all, no thegn liked to be shown up like he'd been in front of his own wife.

He glanced at Mol.

She shook her head, eyes darting for an escape.

“I know.” Cal stood.

Loth twitched backwards, jumpy, as if Cal were about to leap him.

“Hold your horses there, lad.” Arms wide, a forced smile. “I’ve got a suggestion. How about some entertainment? Good Mother knows, it looks like this place could do with livening up.”

Loth frowned, folding his wiry arms across his chest. The old man hawked and spat into the hearth.

Tough crowd.

“How about a tale or two? The tale of Iona the Seal-wife? No, that’s probably a bit too much like real life around here. What about the two-headed Ettin of Akraig? Everyone loves that story.”

Naught but grumbles and bitter stares.

“Or a song?”

“No singing.” The old man barked.

Cal clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t be silly. Everyone loves a song. Mother Mari’s Daughters?”

Cal cleared his throat. A quick sip of ale and he began to beat time with his foot. His voice pure as a mountain spring.

“Oh Mother Mari how’d you fare,

Three daughters blessed with beauty rare.

Lustful lassies of good Isle stock,

All three intent on one lad’s...”

And Loth hit him.

“He said no fucking singing.”

Cal tumbled backwards, head slamming into the table. Stunned. A blossom of lights bursting behind his eyes. Mol yelled. Her stool scattered as she leapt to her feet. Muckle bellowed with incoherent panic.

“What the Hell?” Mol howled at Loth, fists clenched, ready to pounce. “He was just singing.”

“Everyone’s a critic,” muttered Cal, hand probing the back of his head. It came away bloody. He reached up towards Muckle, as much for support as to give him a focus. Left unchecked he was as likely to tear the head of one of these luckless bastards as he was to just stand and stare. “Gimmie a hand, big lad.”

Muckle hauled him to his feet, one easy pull.

Silence lingered.

All eyes faced them. Loth glared, his bile up. Ready to take things further, but for why?

“No singing.” The old man’s voice was low, like this was a hushed secret. “You can stay ‘till the morning. Then you’re gone. No matter what the weather.”

Cal woke with a start.

The hearth was dark, and the room with it. The faintest of moonlight crept through cracks in shuttered windows. A bitter coldness clung. His breath plumed, pale mist in the darkness.

Someone was moving.

A shadow eclipsing the thin shaft of light that outlined the window. Heavy breath, like a bear. Snuffling . Shuffling. An animal stench. Musk and piss.

No. Not someone. Something was moving.

And it was coming closer.

He lay stone-still, hardly daring to breathe. Dread grew. A hollow feeling gripping his stomach. What was it? A person surely, wrapped in a fur cloak, meaning to rob them in the dark watches of the night. Or worse, take a blade to them while they slept.

He should wake Muckle.

Shout the alarm.

It sniffed the air, grunting like a boar at truffles. A wet sound. Closer still. Sniffing him. Cal held his breath, heart thumping, blood rushing in his ears. Not daring to move. Not daring to grab for the knife that hung from his belt, so close looped on the back of a chair. Not daring to shout for Mol. Warn her. If he stayed perfectly still then surely it would pass him by.

Then it pounced.

A rough hand clamped over his face. Its weight bearing down on him.

He tried to yell, but it muffled him.

He tried to kick out, but it crushed his legs beneath it.

He tried to struggle, but its iron grip held him firm.

Cal's head span. It pressed close, squeezing the air from his lungs. Shaggy fur hung in a black mane, matted with seeds and filth. Baleful eyes, luminescent in the night. Pools of pale forest green with no pupils.

"Mine."

It spoke with a rasping whisper. Sharpened teeth. Rancid breath hot on his cheek.

He had to warn Mol. He kicked out again, but it held him fast, pinioning him to the ground like a shepherd sheering a ewe. Muffling his breath. Pressing the air from him. He felt giddy. The room spun. Four eyes, not two, head spinning. Dim light lurching.

"Sing for me."

And that was the last he saw.

"Tell me," snarled Mol. "Or Mother help you, I'll let him loose."

The old man's face was pale with fear.

Mol stood with one hand on Muckle's arm. She could stop an ox as easily as she could stop him if he was really of a mind to visit harm on the old fella, but the threat seemed to be working. Muckle panted like a wolfhound, breathing through his mouth, ragged breaths. He'd half smashed the place to kindling. Bloodied fists hung at his side. She looked at him. Calmed down somewhat now, but barely shackled anger still simmered.

Mol knew him well enough now. She could calm him with a few words or a gentle touch. But she'd not seen anger like this before.

She looked back at the old man. He covered by the hearth, dawn's pale light washing his face.

"Where is he?"

Her voice was iron. The tone she used to use to use on her hapless brother before he got himself a knife in the ribs one dark night and left her all alone in the world but for Muckle and missing Cal. The tone her mother had taught her.

"Gone, and no return." There was no challenge in the old man's voice. Just sorrow. "And brought it on himself, so he did."

"What have you done to him?"

“Me? Naught. I told him, so I did. Told him not to sing.”

Mol took her hand away from Muckle’s arm. Held a finger up to him, just to make sure he stood his ground for a moment more.

“I’ve fair lost my patience with you, you old bastard. Now talk plain. Where’s Cal?”

“Gone,” he wailed. “Gone for good now dawn’s light breaks.”

Mol growled in frustration.

“Right. That’s it.” She jabbed a thin finger at the old man. “Muckle. Pull his damn head off.”

Muckle grabbed the old man’s tunic in one massive fist and hauled him into the air to pound him into the wall. He shook like a ragdoll, yelping in fear.

“Stop. Stop.”

“Speak plain.”

“I’ll tell. I’ll tell. But there ain’t naught to be done for him now.”

Mol glared at him.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

The twine bit Cal’s wrists.

He struggled again, but he knew it was futile. He gazed around, looking for something, anything, that might help. Stone walls, arching up to a high, vaulted roof shaped like the inside of a bell. Heady smoke swirled, oozing from a low fire in the centre of the room. Low embers burned with a rich loamy smell. A musty dampness hung in the air, catching in his chest like the blacklung. Moss and mold. No windows. Only a single arched portal. A black void filled with fear.

The thing shuffled somewhere in the dark.

Cal hadn’t seen it since he’d woken. He’d lost all sense of time. Screaming for help had done naught but rasp his throat raw, and struggling against the bonds had just bloodied his wrists.

He wondered if the noise had roused Mol. Had she seen him dragged out of the hall by a vengeful fisherman, ragged-cloaked and muttering? If she had, then that was far from the truth. This thing was no fisherman, of that Cal was sure.

A scraping noise drew his attention.

The thing shuffled into the room, shaggy head bowed. Cal struggled to make it out in the gloom, hunch-backed and slope-shouldered. Matted fur covered its back, but as it shuffled forwards its belly looked pale and bare. Wrinkled and damp-soaked, like it had spent too long in the salt sea. It looked up, almost as if it were shy, embarrassed that Cal were lashed and bound in its dank dwelling. Pale green eyes dim orbs in the dark.

No man, that was certain.

It bared its pointed teeth and raised one hand. A short blade glinted. Notched, worn and bronze and pointed at Cal's throat. Cal struggled to swallow, bitter bile stinging. He could feel the bite of the dull blade already.

“Sing.”

It mangled the word, forced from a throat hardly shaped to speak more than grunts and grumbles. But it was unmistakable. Nonsensical, but unmistakable.

Cal stared in horrified disbelief.

The thing grew angry, growling the word again.

“Sing.”

It jabbed the blade at Cal, poking him in the shoulder.

“Ow.”

He yelped more from shock than pain. It scarcely drew blood. It brandished the blade again, tarnished metal dull in the firelight.

“Hold on now.” Cal stammered a response. “You want me to sing a song?”

A crooked smile cracked the beast's face. It lowered the knife.

“Then I can go?”

It jabbed him again.

Cal sang. The first tune he could summon, hardly worthy of the long years he'd suffered under the Brehon's tuition. Beaten with the birch for the slightest misdemeanour. Days in the dark of the sweat lodge, clutching for some higher inspiration. Intangible and unknowable. Learning the wood-wisdom by rote, hands pouring over the thin ogham staves. All that knowledge, all that learning, and what did he sing?

“Whose pigs are these?”

Oh whose pigs are these?”

He cringed as he sang. But the beast grinned like a moonstruck loon and danced some stuttering half-dance, hurling its arms around with a violence that made Cal duck. It laughed a drooling donkey-bray as Cal finished the song, a nervous stammer in his voice.

“More.”

Again the knife flashed.

“Wait. Wait. A drink first, perhaps?” Stalling. Then realising what he’d said. Realising where he was. The teachings of the Brehon ringing in his ears. “No. Wait. No drink. I don’t need anything from you. No gifts nor nothing.”

Cal shuffled on his seat while the beast stared at him. The faintest of ideas glimmered in his addled mind. He had to buy some time. Time to think. Time perhaps for Mol to find him.

“What’s your name? Do you have a name?”

It glared.

“They must call you something.”

It grunted. Unintelligible.

Cal shook his head. Shrugged as best he could with his hands lashed firmly to the stool. It grunted again, but this time Cal fancied he could make out some rudiments of speech.

“Trow?” He frowned as the thing nodded its shaggy head. “Is that what you said? Your name is Trow?”

It grinned its jagged fey grin. Razor teeth bared in a rictus. Needle sharp.

“Well Trow, I’ve got a suggestion for you. How about if I can sing you a song you’ve never heard, you let me go?”

It growled, looming over him. It was big, like that bear he’d once seen baited by hounds in Dundonnel market. Cal recoiled as best he could, squirming his way deeper into the rickety wooden seat. Thongs chafed his wrists raw.

“Alright. Three songs. How about that?” A desperate tone to his voice. A wavering note of fear. “Three songs you’ve never heard before dawn’s light breaks and if I can’t sing you three you ain’t never heard before, then I’ll stay.”

The thing smiled.

Mol raced along the beach.

Boots pounding through foamy surf. Fleeting moonlight glinting silver-white as the clouds broke. Plunging her into darkness as the wind churned the sky. Shale shifting beneath her feet, white-flecked with broken shells. Skirts bunched in one fist. Stout staff in the other. Muckle panting behind. She reached the headland. Rocks rising sharply out of the sea. Barnacle-rough and smeared with the stench of seaweed.

She climbed.

Scrabbling upwards. Scuffed knees. Grazed hands. Hauling herself to the top. Rough and grassy, spiny barbs of gorse bushes needling her as she staggered to her feet. A view out over the coal-black sea. The clouds eased from before the waning moon, and in its pale light she saw it. A dark hump against the distant sea-flat horizon.

Just as the old man had said.

A broch.

Muckle clambered to his feet beside her. She pointed at the distant mound of stones.

“There. That’s where he’ll be.”

She looked round, gazing up at the bleak spine of the Biennen Beag. The faintest glimmer of light outlined the sheer peaks. In the east, the sun was rising. She turned back towards the sea. Back towards the jutting headland and the squat, round broch.

“Come on. No time to lose.”

Cal’s voice faltered.

The beast growled a sullen threat. A rumble deep in its throat.

“Let me try another.” Cal’s stammers did little to calm it. The first tune he’d found delighted it. A sea ballad from far-flung Moya. A winsome tune about the perils of strong drink and stormy seas and how the two are ill paired. It lolled its shaggy head and grinned a toothy-mawed grin. For a moment Cal even thought it might drift to sleep, its pale green eyes dimming as its head nodded. But as he hummed the last

refrain it snapped awake, petting him like a favourite hound, ruffling his hair fierce enough to jar Cal's neck.

The second tune proved more troublesome.

False starts. The Ballad of Fyrie angered it. O'er the Muir earned Cal a stinging slap. He spat blood and tried again. The Rowan Tree, Fair Edina and Bonny Thistle were all cut short. Cal's head spun. The thing knew every song he did, and grew more truculent with each failed verse. Cal stared round the room, clutching for inspiration. A song from the south, perhaps? A sonnet from the Summer Court that the thing could never have heard.

Then it came to him.

He'd met a man once, a thin, dark man in a meadhall in the rolling hills of the Middle Marches. The furthest south Cal had ever been, and he cared little for it. Rude folk, weak ale and naught but rain in the air and red clay mud beneath his feet. But the man had been as far from home as Cal. Further. A Francoii by birth, but exiled, or so he said. They drunk the weak ale and traded tales and songs. One stuck in Cal's mind.

One penned by the troubadours of Francoii. A song of courtly love.

His wavering voice mangled the tune. Half the words in the Francoii tongue where he could remember them. The other half barely humming the melody.

But it worked.

Finally a song the ragged beast hadn't heard. It was a sad song about loss. That was plain even without knowing the words. It listened in whimsical silence, mouth agape.

But now he was silent. Bereft of inspiration.

The thing shuffled. Edged closer.

"A moment." Dry mouthed. Croaking. Not daring to beg hospitality from the thing. "Give me a moment."

His mind darted to past lessons. Nights in the great old roundhouse framed by the banners of a dozen war-thegns who'd bought the lodge's praises with silver. The Brehon's lessons like wisps of smoke in his mind now. Half forgotten, but well-formed enough to haunt. Lessons of the Dreugar, gone from the world now to live below. Driven beneath the brochs and howes by the fire and fury of the Ord Ban as she ravaged the isles. Never to return.

Though not never. Nothing is forever.

For that was the Brehon's other lesson. On the turn of night to day, on the turn of winter to spring, on the in-between times the Dreugar still came back, sneaking through the cracks in the world. Some to watch, some to kill and some to steal. Steal people. Whisk them away back beneath the land, into the earth's dark belly, never to return.

He had to find another song.

But his mind was blank. He must have sung a thousand songs in his life, each one different, and now when his life might just depend on it, he had nothing but the simplest of crib-rhymes spinning in his empty head.

He needed inspiration.

The creature prodding him once more with the blunt tip of the tarnished knife was scarcely the inspiration he grasped for. He yelped in pain as its proddings turned to harsh jabs.

“Wait. Give me time.”

It snarled, leaning close to him, baleful eyes and stinking breath. Pushed him hard, a thumping fist in his chest. Cal gasped for air as he toppled backwards. The legs of the rough chair slid as he crashed to the floor. His head hit rock. A grunt as pain washed over him. Hands crushed beneath him, still lashed to the chair.

The beast towered over him, still snarling. Drool dripping.

“Not like this.” Cal flinched as the chill blade brushed his neck. Rancid breath and pale eyes.

The point drew blood. A warm trickle seeping beneath Cal's tunic. He squirmed, straining to lean away as the point pressed home.

“Sing.”

Cal's mind was a blank.

“Again.”

Muckle strained at the boulder.

“Hurry.” Panic edged Mol's voice. She glanced up, eyes to the distant mountains. Jagged silhouettes against the pale pink dawn sky. Muckle grunted, a desperate animal sound as he strained. A creaking sound. The grinding of rock. The great slab that looked like a door teetered.

“Push.”

He hurled himself at the rock, shoulder dipped. And it gave. Collapsed backwards with an earthy thump, and more with it. Mol leapt backwards, feet slipping on slick grass. She crashed down on her arse as Muckle toppled forwards headlong into the black hole he'd just made in the broch. Stones falling with him. A terrible crack as the lintel sheared. Boulders tumbled.

“No.” Mol was on her feet, scrabbling at the rocks. Dragging at Muckle's boot where it jutted from the jumble of stones. Nails torn, hands bloody. Hurling rocks behind her to uncover him. She squeezed beneath the half-fallen lintel, propped diagonally now across the void of the door. Enough space for her to wriggle through. Muckle lay face down inside, smeared in mud, a deep gash on his head. Mol's hands worked quickly, tearing cloth, binding the wound. She tried to pull him free but something pinned him.

She paused, catching her breath.

A stony tunnel, dank and cramped, hardly wider than her narrow shoulders. A faint flicker of firelight cast from moss-slick stones. An echoing growl. Whatever beast took Cal was at the end of the tunnel. Clutching her staff, for the slim good it might do her, she set off. She'd come back for Muckle once she found Cal.

The tunnel was longer than she'd imagined.

The air was warm and wet, thick with the smell of rotting leaves. Mol thought of fat wriggling worms and burrowing insects with altogether too many legs scurrying down here in the black. The broch hadn't seemed so large from the outside, just a round pile of stones heaped on top of one another like a rocky beehive.

That growl again. And a man's voice. A yell of pain.

Cal's voice.

She quickened her pace, bursting out of the tunnel into a round chamber that felt like the very heart of the mound.

Cal was yelling. Flat on the floor, scrabbling backwards, kicking with his legs. Hands tied behind his back, seemingly lashed to a stool that he dragged with him, or more like it dragged him back. A ragged black thing loomed over him.

“Hey.” Mol's voice rang out. The thing turned. Fair put the fear into her, so it did. Round eyed and snaggletoothed. It snarled. Mol stepped back, shoulders bumping damp stone. It came at her fast, a blade in its paw. She must have screamed, half out of fear and half in anger as she lashed out with her staff. Cracked the thing right on the skull with a noise like snapping wood.

It staggered.

Dropped its knife.

She raised the staff again, holding it in both hands like a thegn with a broad-ax set to break a shieldwall. But it grabbed her. Filthy paws, one on her arm, the other in her hair. She thumped at it with the butt-end of the staff, but there was no force in her blow as it wrenched her head and hauled her off her feet. She definitely screamed that time as it launched her across the room. She hit the dirt hard, air blasted from her lungs, elbow slamming into stone with numbing force.

Mol shook her head. The room span.

Cal howling at her, asking if she was alright. Still scrabbling to be free of the stool, half on his feet now but still hobbled. Her left arm limp, numb from the fall. A warm, wet smear down the side of her face where the thing had torn hair from her scalp.

She stood, legs like a new-born fawn.

The beast stepped forwards once more. Mol's eyes darted for a weapon, her good hand closing round the Mother's Mark that hung round her neck.

Help me, Mother, for I am lost to the Fallen Father here beneath the earth.

Cold iron in her hand a small comfort.

The beast growled, almost a word.

“Sing.”

“What?” Mol reeled. It could talk?

“It wants a song.” Cal's voice pitched high with fear. But she had no time to make sense of what he or the creature were saying. It lurched towards her, arms wide, grabbing again, and this time she had no intent to be caught. She ducked as it snatched for her.

Mother save me.

Cold iron in her hand.

“Cold iron.” She spoke it out loud with realisation, glaring at the beast as she tore the triskelion from round her neck and thrust it palm-first into the creature's face.

It howled like the dying.

The stench of charred flesh, like a pig left too long on the hearthfire. An acrid sting that burned her eyes. It collapsed, writhing. Down for now.

Mol pulled her knife, slit the rawhide binding Cal's hands. Bloody wrists. He hugged her, a fierce crush that lifted her off her feet.

"Oh Mother, you came."

"Of course I came, idiot." She pushed him away, cheeks flushed and still twitchy about the creature behind them. It seemed less of a threat now, hunched by the fire sobbing in great heaving gasps. One hand held to its ruined face. She looked back at Cal. "What's going on? You look terrible."

"We made a deal," he said. "Three songs for my freedom."

"So why are you still here. You're so full of songs it's a wonder you ever shut up."

"Three songs it hadn't heard before. I sang two then I was lost. My inspiration left me." He stared at her and she swore there was a tear in his eye, though it could just as well have been the peatsmoke or the stench of the creature's blistered skin.

"We should go." She grabbed his hand, pulled him towards the tunnel. "Before dawn for certain."

"Not yet." Cal crouched before the creature. It seemed smaller now, and not so fierce. "I made a deal and I mean to keep it. It's what's right"

Mol shook her head in despair.

"When have you cared for what's right."

"Since I met a woman that made me want to be something more than a failure."

She gazed at him for a moment, lost for words. Cal looked up at her. That grin on his face that he wore when he meant mischief.

"I thought you said you were all out of inspiration." She looked from Cal to the creature. The iron had burned a spiral on its face. Fur seared away, branded with the Mother's Mark.

"It came back to me," said Cal. "You came back to me."

And he sang a song. One she'd never heard before and likely never would again. A thing of beauty it was, about a bonny maid with a long black braid and a stout staff of ash who bested a beast to rescue her lover. His voice was raw and there was no fiddle to pluck a melody, no drum to beat time but in all her years she'd never heard music like it.

He sang it to the creature, not even looking at Mol once. It snuffled and reached out, touching Cal on the knee where he knelt.

When he finished there was nothing but silence.

He stood and took Mol's hand and she saw tears in his eyes. There was nothing left in him. All spent. She led him back up the narrow tunnel, leaving the creature huddled, burned and alone. Scrabbling beneath the shattered lintel and out into the pale dawn. Muckle sat there, slick with mud, blood smearing his face. He was grinning, gazing up at the rising sun where it crested the Biennen Beag, burnishing the high clouds orange and bronze in the violet winter sky.

The rain had stopped.

Mol fancied she could hear a song over the lapping waves, echoing from far beneath down in the belly of the broch. A rough old voice singing in a language she couldn't fathom.

A thing of beauty in this bleakest of places.

THE END.