

Salt, Sunlight and Sorrow

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Folk Tales From The Western Isles

By

Martin Gill

2015

Introduction

These are tales from a Scotland that isn't.

The Western Isles are a real place. A place rich in myth, history and inspiration. My version of the Western Isles brings the myth a little close to the surface, but it's myth rooted in the folklore of a ragged, wind-swept seaboard ravaged over the years by Vikings, Gaels, Picts and more. They all left their marks, on both the land, and the myths that linger.

The Seal Stone is a cautionary tale of the woes domestic violence.

Sunlight Trapped In Water was brewed in the Fitz in Brighton 03/09/15 listening to Delta blues, distilled in the awesomely named Grims Grenka in Oslo and aged over a large Jura (the drink, not the island). I dedicated it to my Dad, who introduced me to old whiskey and older stories.

Three Songs is a homage to all the awesome folks who've ever shared a song or a tale round a fire with me. You know who you are.

This is a compilation, an iteration based on musing, feedback and hopefully a little maturity now I've had a chance to think. I wrote these words in 2015 and published them online. This is an edit to what I first wrote. I don't believe that anything has to be set in stone, so hopefully what you see now is a more polished version of what you may have already read.

I hope you enjoy what you read.

The Seal Stone

By

Martin Gill

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It was set to be a wretched night.

Cal hauled at the oars. Callused hands bleeding. Back aching. Parched despite all this damn water. Any hope he'd blindly clutched to of making Dundonnel before nightfall ebbed faster than the salty tide of the sea-loch. Cal, it seemed, made the worst of sailors. He'd ripped the sail on the little boat and ended up tearing it down in frustration. Anyone with any sense would have turned back. But that weren't an option. Not after how he'd left things back in Norholm with Mari.

He couldn't tell how much further the tide had to wane. He had no eye for such things, and the rocky grey shore of the vast sea-loch was a fair enough distance away that it was impossible to gauge the sea level against the shore. Still, what difference would it make? He had to row on regardless.

Ripples in the water. The bobbing tan heads of a clutch of seals. Black eyes round in the low evening sun. Iron-grey clouds grew over Norholm, a squall building out at sea, threatening the jagged shoreline. Most likely it would make landfall well before night. The loch were no place to be caught at dark in a storm.

Cal pulled the oars from the water and dropped them in the bottom of the boat. He shuffled round, lifting his numb arse in blessed relief. He'd spent most of the day sitting facing backwards, hauling against the lapping tide. He gazed up the loch. Dundonnel were still a fair way off, that was certain. The snow-capped vastness of the Ord Ban rose to the east. He was about level with it, that towering mountain that thrust from the loch shore to rise in heather-dusted humps, as tall again than the nearest of mountains. Squatting like a great fell beast in a deep slumber. For that's what the old tales told. The Ord Ban, named for the great wyrm what curled her tail nine times round the mountain before she spewed out her hateful spawn to ravage the Western Isles.

That were long ago. Cal knew the tale well, as befitted one who'd spent time at the Bardic Lodge.

"Load of old bollocks." An old tale for an old land. No help here.

He squinted, peering up the loch, hoping to see some sign of civilization on the eastern shore. Some fishing village or hamlet where he could seek shelter. Nothing. Just the bleak, craggy wilderness. Birch woods rising from rocky shores. Huffing in disgust, he sat back down.

"Nowt for it." The oars dipped once more.

The seals bobbed by, glossy black eyes gazing with serene interest.



The light was fading fast. The swirling grey clouds rolled in from the Frozen Sea. Pale streaks of rain slashed downwards back along the loch, enveloping Lachlann and the coastal villages. An hour at the most before it blew inland, following the course of the wind between the mountains, up the steep-sided glen and right into Cal's miserable lap. He needed shelter.

A mournful voice drifted on the shallow wind. Cal lifted the oars, letting the boat rock as he craned his neck to listen. There it was. Distant, but definite. A woman singing. He squirmed around, looking for the mysterious singer. There, not on the shoreline where he had first looked, but right in the centre of the loch. A low hump of an island rising from the lapping waves. Straggles of wind-bent birch, silver stems bright in the gloom. Low, long and rocky. But an unmistakable twist of smoke rising from a fire.

“Hardly a laird's hall, but needs must.” He set his back to the oars.

The lilting voice carried on the gentle breeze. He couldn't make out the words. Naught but a sad melody that whispered loss and pain. An aching heart, that lass, to sing in such sorrowful tones. And Cal knew a thing or two about song. He may have squandered much of his training on cheap drink and expensive women, but he'd learned a thing or two from the Lodge before they threw him out on his ungrateful arse. Songs he knew, for no innkeeper in the Isles would turn away a lad who could weave a song or two to set folks a-drinking.

But this was a new melody.

Cal glanced over his shoulder. The shore was close now. Barnacles encased the rocks in pale shelly armour, exposed by the dropping tide. Straggles of black weed hung limp, glistening with beads of moisture. The rocks rose to the height of a man or more, a jutting headland thrusting out into the lapping water. No place to land, but he caught sight of the singer. She sat at the very edge of the rock, her pale bare feet dangling over the water. She was young, hardly yet a woman. Slight and winsome, staring out over the glinting water as she braided her long brown hair. And her voice. Close up Cal could hear her more clearly. He'd never heard the like. Fair set his heart aching. He couldn't fathom the words, some foreign tongue, or perhaps the speech of the Cruithne, the mountain folk that rarely

came down to the glens except to raid for sheep and women. But he didn't think so. Their speech was guttural and simple. Her song was hauntingly complex.

He drifted for a moment, lost in the yearning melody, almost unable to interrupt her. A fat drop of rain splashed down onto the bottom boards of the little boat. Cal looked up. A raindrop burst on his forehead. The clouds were darkening. Time to be off the water and looking for this lassie's bothy.

"Hello there." He called up at her, voice raised to carry over the splashing waves.

She didn't reply. Obviously lost in her song, or he hadn't been loud enough.

He called again. Still no answer.

"Woman." A third shout. This time she looked down. A vacant expression on her face, unfeeling and blank. Dark eyes that seemed to look right through him. Cal waved, but she barely seemed to notice. Was she blind?

He shook his head and dipped the oars again. Whatever sorrow was eating at her, clearly she was in no mood to help him with directions. He set off rowing once more, muttering to himself as he watched the woman disappear from view behind the headland.



The boat juddered as the prow beached against the pebbles. Cal shipped the oars and pulled off his boots. The cold hit him like a knife as his feet hit the water. Sea-smooth stones rolled beneath his toes. He cried out, a small, animal noise as he clutched his arms around him, as if hugging himself warm would ward away the chill bite of the loch. It was only just spring. There was still snow on the ground in places.

Jerky steps to the shore. He hauled the prow of the boat out of the water, salt stinging the cuts on his hands where the rope bit. Aching shoulders. A body unused to the rigors of hard labour. He lashed the rope to a thick wooden post driven into the beach just above the high tide mark, beards of stinking black seaweed and bleached driftwood marking the sea's limit. Another boat sat on the beach, secured to the single pole. Little more than a canoe, hardly big enough for two people.

Boat secured, he sat on a rock and pulled on his worn boots, surveying his surroundings. The island rose before him, the small pebbly crescent of the beach opening out to a rocky slope. Grass tufted

with heather. Gnarled gorse bushes, prickly and hostile. Cal shrugged. Time to find out where the woman was.

He set off up the slope, stiff-legged and sore. Over a crest and down the other side, feet skidding on wet rocks as the rain began to fall more steadily. He wrapped his cloak around him and pulled up his hood. Raindrops pattered on worn waxed leather. The headland stretched before him, rising in rocky ridges like great spines down a dragon's back. The clouds had closed in, grey banks of rain smothering the Ord Ban and the peaks to the east. Even the far shore of the loch was murky now, shrouded in drizzle.

Cal reached the top of the rock. He gazed down to the end of the headland, where the rocks plunged into the water and the woman had sat singing. There was no sight of her. Cal scratched his stubby chin as he looked around. There must be a path on the other side of the headland. The rain obviously drove her back to her bothy. He scrambled down the rocks, arms wide for balance as he teetered along a ridge to reach the tip of the rock spur. No obvious way down on the other side. If anything that route was more treacherous than the way he'd come. Still, it was her island. Clearly she knew the place better than he. He half turned to head back when something caught his eye.

A tiny stone lying on the rock.

Hardly unusual, except something about it brought a frown to his brow. He bet to retrieve it. Cold in his hands. As cold as the ocean. He shivered. It sat in his palm, a smooth oval worn glassy by the sea. Flatter at one end and pointed at the other. Two stubby fins protruded slightly from its girth. Not carved or shaped by hand, at least not that he could tell. Natural. Worked into this curious shape by the slow rolling of the ocean. Into the shape of a seal. He turned it over, smiling slightly. Something about it pleased him. It's simplicity. For a moment he contemplated hurling it back into the loch, returning it back to where a seal rightly belonged.

But he didn't. He kept it. He dropped it into his pouch and turned his back on the water to head inland.



The bothy nestled against a low cliff, the most sheltered spot on the desolate island, a rough, windowless shack with a stone foundation and a turf roof. A smoky peat-stench hung in the air, curling

down from the chimney in greasy brownish gout. A lean-too shack clung to the side of the hovel, blackened wooden boards slick with fish oil. A crude smoke house. Scraps of vegetables grew in sparse rows.

A dismal scene.

Cal watched for a while. He'd learned through bitter experience that some folks didn't take too kindly to strangers knocking on their doors. And those what lived on barren islands on wind-blasted lochs were as like to fall into that school of thinking as not. But the rain was pissing him off enough to blunt his caution. He trudged up the track to the house, eyes darting. Chances are there would only be the fisherman and his mournful songstress of a daughter. He knocked on the rough wooden door. Shuffling noises inside. A rattle of crockery. The scrape of something being moved. The door opened. Just a crack. A single beady eye peered out of the dark, framed between the doorpost and the worm-eaten boards of the door.

"Who are you?" A man's voice, laced with suspicion. And rightly so. For who would come calling to this miserable shack?

"Name's Cal." Doing his best to sound innocent and harmless.

"Carrying a weapon?"

Cal stepped back and spread his cloak. Other than the knife at his belt, he wore no weapon. Another bitter life lesson learned long ago. Fellas with blades always feel the need to prove things to other fellas with blades, as if strapping a sword to your waist sucked at your wits.

"Just a knife."

The door eased open. The occupant of the shack was lean and strong. A big man with the tangled beard and ragged hair of a hermit. Fish scales glinted like silver and jewels on his stained leather apron. The short, sharp hatchet in his hand said he didn't trust folks knocking on his door.

"What you want?"

Cal looked up at the darkening sky. Rain pattered on his hood, dripping from the oilskin of his cloak in growing rivulets.

“It’s fair dreich out here. I could use a fire and roof over my head.” He smiled his best winning smile. The one that worked so well on Thegn Machar’s pretty wife Mari. This fella proved to be made of tougher stuff.

“Ye can sleep in the shack.” He jerked the hatchet towards the smokehouse and made to shut the door.

“Come now. I have coin.” Only the slightest of lies. He had a coin.

“Ain’t no use for coin here.” The door was closing fast.

Cal fumbled at his belt, rummaging in his pouch as quickly as he could. He fished out the seal stone and held it out in his open hand.

“I found your daughter’s seal.”

The man glared at him, malignant and hateful. Perhaps the smokehouse wasn’t as bad a hostel for the night as he’d first thought.

“Give that here.” The fella stepped from the shelter of the bothy and snatched the seal stone, a rough grab. Coarse hands. He stared at it for a moment, a curious expression on his face. Bafflement, as if he’d never seen it, or even a seal before. He turned and stalked back inside.

Cal stood in the rain for a while longer until he realized the door was still open. A black yawning rectangle cut into the crude hovel. Only darkness inside. He followed. The reek of fish, peat-smoke and the stale stench of sweat. Cramped and low. A hazy smoke clung to the rough rafters. Wisps of weeds and creeping roots grew through the boards and rushes above them, curling tendrils grasping down from the turf roof above. Dark and close and smelling of loam. Fish lay gleaming on the table, a wickedly sharp looking gutting knife jammed in a board.

The fella laid the hatchet by the hearth and sat at the table. Went back to gutting the fish. Cal stripped off his wet cloak and sat by the fire, stretching his legs as far as he dared into the meager flames in a vain attempt to dry his sodden boots. The little seal stone was on the hearth.

They sat in silence for a while. Cal fidgeted, picking at the scabs forming on his hands. He was never very good at just sitting still, nor at being quiet.

“Do you have a name?” he asked.

“Toran.” Just the one word. More a grunt than an actual word. Still, it was progress. Toran continued scaling and gutting the fish. Little silver mackerel, dappled skin bright like moonlight. His hands were fast, accustomed to this work. Cal’s stomach rumbled.

“Ye’ll be wanting grub then?”

“Aye if that’s no bother?”

Grunt.

“I’ll be on my way in the morning. I promise. Heading to Dundonnel.”

No reply.

“How far is it, by boat, can I ask?”

“A day with good wind. Two or more if it’s calm.”

“My sail ripped. I don’t suppose you’d be able to...”

The opening door cut Cal short. A chill blast of wind and a flurry of rain. The singing girl entered the hovel. She was drenched. Hair plastered to her face. Linen shift clinging to her willowy body. Bare feet splattered with mud. She stared at Cal, dark round circles reflecting the firelight. Something between fear and fascination written on her face. Cal stared back, unable to look away, despite her almost nakedness beneath her sodden dress. Perhaps because of it. It was freezing outside, yet she didn’t seem cold.

Toran stood. Towered over her. “You’re late.”

She took a half-step back, glancing from Cal to Toran, eyes flicking rapidly.

“I heard your daughter singing.” Cal stood slowly, aware of the growing tension in the small room. Toran spun round and glared at Cal. Cal eased himself back down into the seat, unsure what to say or do to calm things.

“Not my daughter.” Toran spoke between clenched teeth. A barely subdued anger flickered there.

“Sorry.”

“She’s my wife.”

“Oh.” Cal looked back at the girl. Up close she looked even younger. A frail, trapped little thing. She stared at Cal, her expression no longer distant and vacant like she’d seemed on the rock. Pleading eyes.

“My mistake.”

Toran grunted a response. Hardly words.

“She has a beautiful voice. Haunting.” Cal couldn’t take his eyes off her. “What’s your name?”

She said nothing. Silence just hung there. The three of them just looking at one another. Both the men staring at her.

“Her name’s Iona.”

“Charmed to meet you, Iona.” Cal couldn’t help himself. What was it about other men’s wives? Why were they always so much trouble? Toran turned and glared at Cal again.

“She’s a mute.”

“But, I heard her singing.”

“You’re mistaken.”

“I…”

“You’re mistaken.” Toran’s hand drifted to the gutting knife jutting from the butcher’s block. Hardly necessary. The threat was obvious enough in his voice. He nodded to Iona. “Go and change. You’ll catch your death.”

She ducked behind a ragged curtain. A tattered old sailcloth, tanned from peat smoke, hanging from a rafter. Cal caught tantalizing glimpses through the gaps in the cloth. Pale white limbs. Small firm breasts. The curve of her arse. He looked away, his attention back on the fire.

Once, just once, don’t fuck things up.

Toran finished with the fish, setting them out on the board. He turned his attention to a net hanging at the other end of the small hut. Busied himself teasing at stray knots. Saying nothing. Iona emerged from behind the curtain, mercifully modest now in a pale wool dress, hair braided over one shoulder, but still barefoot. She glanced at Cal, dark eyes still wide, but her face blank now. She bustled around the hearth, rattling pots, chopping leeks and carrots, sizzling chunks of mackerel into a cast iron pot. The smells were more than Cal could bear. He watched her work. Precise, delicate fingers. The lily-white curve of her neck where her hair was drawn away from it. She poured water into the pot and stirred it, gently placing a lid on it. She took the remaining fish, those that didn't go into the pan, and opened a small barrel. Scooping salt. Rubbing it into the mackerel. Massaging it before placing the lid back on the salt barrel. A treasured possession.

She looked up and for the first time, gave the faintest of smiles. Ephemeral. Nothing but a curl at the corner of her lip. But she smiled at Cal. He stood and reached over her head, picking the seal stone from the mantle where Toran had placed it. He held it out to her in his open palm. It still felt strangely cold, as if he'd plucked it from the snow, not from the cookfire mantle. He frowned slightly.

"I found this. I think you dropped it."

Her eyes, if that were even possible, widened. She reached out her hand. Plucked it from Cal's palm. Her fingers brushed his skin for a fleeting moment. Featherlight and charged. And damn, but she was as cold as the stone.

Toran was on his feet in an instant. His rope-rough hand battered the stone from her grasp. It clattered into the corner of the hovel, lost from sight. Before Cal could even move, Toran hammered his open hand across the side of Iona's face. A vicious slap that spun her, hair whipping. She crashed into the table. Pots scattered. She bounced from the wood and slumped to the floor.

Toran rounded on Cal. Cal tensed, ready to duck. Or worst case, to fight back. Toran panted in anger, huffing like a bull at market. "That's not hers."

Cal shuffled backwards out of his reach. Toran was a big man. Long limbed and strong from a life hauling ropes and nets. Best to be cautious.

"I'm sorry."

“Getting to be a habit, ain’t it?” He glared down at Iona. She lay on the floor where he’d put her so roughly, as if waiting for his permission to stand. Toran’s palm-mark red on her cheek. Split lip. Blood flecked snowy skin. He looked at her when he spoke, but Cal wasn’t sure if the order was meant for her or him. Or both of them. “You have no right meddling with such things.”

“You shouldn’t beat her.” Cal knew it was a stupid idea, but he had to say something.

“My house. My wife. My rules. You can go if you like.” Toran pointed at the door.

“I’ll be gone in the morning.”

And I’ll be taking her with me, you malicious bastard.



Cal awoke to a thumping sound.

The fire had dwindled. Embers glowed orange in a bed of white ash. Curled by the fire, Cal rolled over, shrugging his cloak from him. His shoulder ached from the cold dirt floor. Toran had offered no blanket. Cal had decided not to ask.

The thumping continued.

Cal sat up. His bladder was full and the need to piss overcame the need to stay warm and dry. He fumbled for his boots, pulling them on in the gloom. They were warm, slowly toasted by the dying fire. A brief moment of comfort in this desolate hovel. He was about to stand when something glinted in the corner near the hearth. Caught his eye.

The seal stone.

Knocked from Iona’s hand to lie once again before Cal. He reached out and plucked it up, dropping it back in his pouch, determined to see it returned to Iona, even if he had to do so in secret. He stood and turned. The thumping continued. Rhythmic and pounding. Heavy, labored panting. He padded to the door. At least if there were one thing he was competent at, it was sneaking in and out of other men’s rooms, though usually not under such circumstance. He lifted the latch, glancing back over his shoulder. Iona’s face in the low light. Bent over the rough cot she shared with Toran. Glimpsed through the sailcloth drapes. Wide-eyed. Pale face blooming with the dark stain of a bruise already

forming. Hands held roughly behind her back. Silent as Toran pressed her face down onto the bed and pounded at her like a dog at rut. Head bowed, his shaggy hair covering his face as he grunted in animal lust. And her face. Vacant. Lost. Cal shut the door behind him. Anything to stop him interrupting, stopping Toran.

His house. His wife. His rules.

A knot ground in Cal's stomach. He stalked into the night, looking for a tree to piss against. The rain still fell, a seeping wet drizzle. Low clouds. Moonless. Starless. Black as the Fallen Father's broken soul. Cal staggered, foot catching in a rut in the ground. He took a juddering step and tipped forward into the dirt. Fell hard on his elbows on the hard ground. He eased himself to his hands and knees, wincing in pain. Then he saw it. A faint glow in the dark, pale like the moon, but too low down for that. And besides, there were clouds overhead. A reflection off the loch perhaps? He stood, brushing mud from his knees. Gazing into the night. There was definitely someone out there. Or something.

More carefully now, he moved towards the light. Cautious steps. His eyes were growing accustomed to the night. Dark rocks loomed black against shadowy grey earth. A birch tree brushed his face. Tiny claws scratching at his cheek. He yelped like a frightened child. But the light was clearer.

He wove through the strand of trees, easier to see now by the faint white light. No fire nor torchlight. It was too pale. Some alchemical mystery no doubt. He'd seen the like before, phosphorescent fungi mixed in bull's urine and worse to make glowing orbs. Ghost lights that stank like a shithouse rat. Whoever was out there in the night must have something of the sort. An expensive toy.

He paused. What if it were criminals? With Dondonnell at one end of the loch and Lachlann at the other that were two lots of taxes for merchants to pay. They made fair whiskey on the banks of the Garbha Burn in the shadow of Shira Falls up beyond the loch head. Whiskey some folks would be keen to avoid paying the Laird's tax on.

He moved more slowly, listening for voices. Nothing. Just the gently patter of rain. But the light was there, glowing from the other side of a rock. He crept closer. No not a rock. A cairn. A mound of stones as tall as he was and then some. Round at the base. Silhouetted in the ghost-light. Silver-stemmed birches leaned in close, bare branches latticed in relief against the light. Peeling bark like leprous scabs. One foot after another, he crept round the cairn. And almost howled in fear. Froze, jaw agape.

A woman. But no ordinary woman, for he could see right through her. Insubstantial and misty. Head and shoulders, arms and a waist. Flowing skirts that faded before they reached the earth. Washed away into a luminescent mist that clung to the tree roots and fallen branches like cold clutching fingers. She looked right at him. Black, sightless eyes. There was no colour to her. Just shades of grey written glowing against the black night, but it was clear she'd been wrenched from life in the most brutal of ways. Half her head stove in. Blood staining her face and arm, oozing down her dress. Her head lolled as if her neck was snapped. Cold washed off her in waves.

Cal gagged. Dropped to his knees and puked. Spat bile. Acid taste in his mouth. Staggered to his feet, knees shaking. He looked again. She was still there. She held out her one good hand to him, the other bloody and limp at her insubstantial side.

Help.

She spoke not in words, but thoughts formed in his mind. He fought back a scream. Bit his lip till he tasted the iron saltiness of his own blood.

“Who are you.” He could barely speak. Nothing but a trembling whisper.

Lara.

“What happened.” As if that weren't fucking obvious enough.

He murdered me to be with her.

So Toran was a bastard after all. “I don't think she wants to be with him.”

Serves her right, the salty slut.

“But? I don't understand.”

He brought her home one day. Said she would stay. That she was his. He owned her pelt, that's what he said. I couldn't bare it. I was sick with grief. I tried to free her but he found out. And did this.

She tilted the broken remains of her head so he could more clearly see the ruin rent upon her.

He hit me with his axe. Again and again.

Cal swallowed down bile. He felt his stomach growl, close to rebelling again.

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He buried me. Here. Beneath the cairn.

What was it about other men's wives? Why were they always so much trouble? To kill someone was one thing. But to bury their body beneath stones like the Dreugar of old used to. That was simply barbaric. Cal had little use for the meddlings of the Mother Church in his life, but the rites of death were clear enough not to be abused. Bodies needed burning. How else would a soul go back to the Good Mother to be reborn?

She took a ghost-step towards him. Hand still outstretched.

Help me.

He stepped back. Staggered. Feet sliding on slick round rocks.

She pressed on.

Fingertips like ice as they brushed his chest.

He slipped. Landed hard, arse on stone. Round rocks scattered, knocked from the cairn. Skidding into the muddy grass.

"But what can I do?" Pleading. Fear gripping him.

Her hand on his chest.

Your warmth. Give it to me.

"No."

Your life.

He screamed. Scrabbled backwards. Her chill fingers icy knives in his chest, clutching for his heart. Sinking into him. The strangest of feelings. Damp boots slid on rocks, kicking to drive himself back. Away from her. But all he was doing was dislodging rocks.

Let me be in you. Let me take you.

"No."

His foot caught on something. A snapping sound. She screamed. A bloodcurdling howl splitting his head. He looked down. A skeletal hand. Rotted skin wrapped tight. Bones of the forearm shorn through where he'd kicked them. His mind raced. The old tales. Bardic lore. Drilled into his ignorant head while he wiled the days away nursing a hangover and planning the next one. He thought of Iona, rubbing salt into the mackerel. Salt. Bones. Fire. There was a way.

“Fire and salt.” He yelled at her, desperate. “I can send you back. Back to the mother. Your bones. Fire and salt.”

She drifted back. Just a pace.

“Give me time. Give me until tomorrow. But I can do it. I know how.” Battered hands clawed at the stones, hurling them aside. Exposing more of her arm. She stank. A sweet, deathly reek that caught in his nostrils. But he forced himself on. On and on. Stone after stone. Her skull grinned a hollow rictus. A hole gaped in the side. One too in her shoulder, the jagged ruin of her collar bone and shoulder smashed to shards by Toran's axe blows.

She faded, and her light with it.

You promised.

He sighed in relief as he pulled away the final stones, dismantling the cairn around her poor broken body. And there on her chest was something he didn't expect. A roll of leather bound with rawhide. Cal frowned. The rain was easing and the first dull glimmer of pre-dawn broke the pitch darkness. Enough to see by at least now. He pulled his knife and slit the thongs. Rolled out the musty leather. Inside was another skin, but this one was perfectly preserved. Short glossy tan fur laid out in a perfect outline.

A seal's skin.

“Own her pelt do you, you whoreson?” That son-of-a-bitch hadn't bought Iona at a market. She wasn't an indentured ceorl. Anything but.

He grabbed the pelt and set off running.



Cal kicked the bothy door wide. Hammered it back on rusty hinges.

“Tona.”

He burst inside. She knelt by the fire, coaxing it into life with a handful of twigs. Eyes wide as they fell on the pelt in Cal’s hand. No longer vacant and blank. Desire. Longing. Lust even written on her beautiful face. She uttered a breathless gasp, high-pitched and ripe with desire. Cal gazed at her, drinking in the sight of her. She was beautiful. Enchanting. Other-worldly. But then she was from another world, wasn’t she? A world beneath the waves.

He looked down at the pelt, velvet-soft in his hands. Back at her, frail as a winter flower. Pretty as the first day of spring.

He could own her.

Keep the pelt. Take her away from Toran. She stood, barefoot still on the dirt floor. Thin linen shift. Backlit by the growing flames. Cal could see every curve of her young body. He had to have her. He clutched the pelt to his chest. Her face darkened. She knew. Of course she knew. Because this is what men did to her. Was Toran the first? Or had he killed some other poor bastard and stolen her pelt just as Cal now planned? Stealing her like a sheep in a raid.

A shadow fell across the door. Toran, axe in hand, hate in his eyes.

“You feckless cunt. I gave you the hospitality of my house and this is how you repay me. By trying to steal my wife. I’ll gut your worthless hide.” He brandished the axe, as if Cal couldn’t fathom its purpose in this engagement.

“You’re a murderer.” Was all he could manage.

“Aye, and one more won’t make no difference between me’n the Good Mother.” Toran grabbed with his left hand. Cal ducked. Dodged back, tangling himself in the sailcloth curtain. He slipped, dragging it down around him. Toran bawled with incoherent rage. He swung the hatchet, a brutal overhead swing as Cal scrambled to free himself from the sail.

“Fuck.” Toran yelled in rage as the axe slammed into a low rafter. The roof shuddered. Dust and dirt fell in a shower. Cal tore away the sail and threw himself over the cot beyond it, rolling to his feet, desperate to put anything he could between himself and the murderous axe. Toran wrenched it free

of the rafter and came at Cal. Spume flecked his lips. A frothing rage. Bloodshot eyes. But he was no warrior. As he pulled the axe back to strike, Cal threw himself at the bigger man. Shoulder into the ribs, blasting air from his lungs. Tipping him back. They crashed into the table. It shattered beneath their weight. They slammed to the ground, Cal on top.

Small mercies.

Cal pounded his fist into Toran's stomach and ribs. Once. Twice. Again and again. The fisherman soaked the punishment, grunting in pain. Cal's other hand scrabbled to grip Toran's wrist, straining to pin the axe down, but the fisherman was way too strong. He wrenched his arm back and pounded the haft of the axe into Cal's temple. Stars bloomed. Toran hit him again, but he barely felt it. He rolled off, pushed by the fisherman. Lolloped on the floor like the morning's catch. He rolled over, fighting the urge to puke. Forced himself onto hands and knees when Toran kicked him hard in the ribs. Something cracked. Air blasted from his lungs. Cal gazed up drunkenly at Toran. Clenched teeth. Axe in hand, raised for the killing blow. But he just stopped. Coughed. Lowered the axe. Frowned as he flexed his neck, rolled his shoulders as if he'd just cracked out a knot in his back. A thin trickle of blood dripped from his lip. The axe dropped to the floor. His knees buckled and he crashed to the ground. The short bone handle of the gutting knife protruded from his back.

Iona stood, one hand smeared in blood, crimson against her ashen skin. Her other hand clutched the pelt to her breast. Even smeared in her captor's blood she radiated beauty. She beckoned for Cal to stand. He wheezed, holding his side as he struggled to his feet. Breathing hurt. Shallow pants.

She smiled.

For the first time, her face broke into a wide smile. Dark eyes alive at last. She began to hum. A lilting tune. Not the dirge she'd sung last time he heard her, but an ethereal tune. A song of longing and hope. Cal could do nothing but stare.

She began to sing.

Strange words in no tongue he knew, and he spoke a few. He had no ken of the words, but the meaning was clear. As she walked from the hovel, he followed. Barefoot in the mud. Down towards the pebble beach. She lifted the shift over her head and cast it on the stones. Her body. Perfect and unblemished.

He followed.

She tugged at her hair, pulling away the ties. Teasing out her braids, slim fingers running through her curls like a comb. She shook her head, letting the light wind caress her hair. It fell in a tawny wave down the curve of her back. Bare feet on stones. Toes dipped into the icy loch. Knee deep. Then up to her waist. She turned and stopped singing.

Silence.

Cal felt it tug at his heart. He would have given anything in that moment for her to sing again. His very soul.

“Join me.” She spoke at last. Voice soft as the lapping salt waves.

“I can’t.”

The water looked cold.

“You can.” Words like music.

He took a hesitant step forwards. His boot in the loch. Freezing.

“I...”

The cold stopped him dead. She looked at him, her dark eyes filled with lust.

“Marry me,” she said.

And his heart stopped.

He thought of Mari. Of Thegn Machar and his curse-dripping death threats towards the man that stole away his wife. Of Una. Of Liliias. Of Aileen. Of all the women he’d conquered. For that’s all they’d been to him. Naught but a game to be played. Yet none compared to this one. Waist deep in the loch, lips ripe, parted, ready to be kissed. What was it about other men’s wives? Why were they always so much trouble?

He strode out into the loch.

Seals bobbed behind her. He was so close. The cold didn't seem to matter anymore. Almost close enough to embrace her when a yell from the shore stopped him in his tracks.

“Bastard.”

He turned.

“Get your filthy hands off her.” Toran, blood soaked and fearsome, hatchet in hand. He strode into the loch. Cal's eyes darted from Iona to Toran. Weaponless and about to die. Unless...

He tore at the toggle on his pouch. Pulled out the seal stone. Even here in the freezing water it felt cold in his hand. Toran yelled, forging his way through the water with great splashing steps. Cal held the stone out to Iona.

“I can't marry you. I've made a promise to someone else. I have to fulfil it. I'm sorry.”

She gazed at the stone. And smiled. Good Mother she was a beauty. She closed his hand around it. Her fingers brushed his skin for a fleeting moment. Featherlight and charged. Just as before.

“Keep it. They brought it to me so I wouldn't forget what I was.” She looked back over her shoulder at the bobbing seals. “Keep it so you remember me.”

“How could I forget?” And he meant it. “I love you.”

She smiled.

“Go.”

And she turned to Toran. He slowed. Stopped before her. All sense of murderous purpose washed away like the tide scours sand. He dropped the axe. It sunk beneath the iron grey surface of the water. She reached out to him, looped her hand round his neck.

She gazed up at him.

Cal staggered back through the water, imagining drowning in her black eyes, for that's what was happening to Toran. She leant up and kissed the fisherman, sucking away any last traces of his will. Dragging him down beneath the waves. Cal scabbled from the water before she changed her mind to slump down on the pebble beach, sodden and shivering, but alive, which was more than could be

said for Toran. He floated to the surface, face down, straggles of hair a black halo about him. Swirls of blood. The knife still jutted from his back.

A seal broke the surface. It stared at Cal with dark eyes that seemed to look right through him.



Embers curled into the evening sky.

A rafter burned through. The turf roof dropped, collapsing into the bothy. A shower of sparks. Cal warmed his hands on the blaze.

“Good Mother take you back, Lara.”

Fire and salt and what prayers he could remember. May that be enough to send her over the last bridge.

He sat down, cold arse on a hard rock as he watched the hut and Lara’s bones burn. Nothing but a ragged sail cloth for a shelter and salt mackerel for food. The first drops of rain pattered down. It was barely even spring. It could still snow. Cal couldn’t help thinking that the wholesome glow of having done the right thing wouldn’t keep him warm for long. He held the seal stone tight, clutching it to his heart. Its coldness lingered.

It was set to be a wretched night.

Like Sunlight Trapped In Water

By

Martin Gill

October 2015

V2

One: Mashing

It was a stupid idea.

The kind of idea what gets a man killed. Or at the very least thrown in a hole to rot out his days scrabbling in the black, devouring bugs and rats with no more ambition than to cling to life for one more wretched day. But the thing with stupid ideas is they never seem so dumb when you're drunk.

Cal sunk lower into the bowl of the tree roots, pine needles scratching at his arse. He glanced across the road to where Hapless lay, squirming his way deeper into the rain-damp bracken swathing the forest floor, the ragged hem of his hood shadowing his lean face. Dark iron mail glistened like fish scales half-hidden beneath muddy wool. Beady eyes glared back. Cal looked away, focusing back on the road rather than compound the growing feeling of dread festering in his stomach by thinking too much on the murderous intent of his companions.

His head thumped.

Parch-mouthed and fuddled, the lingering weight of last night's mead still sitting heavy on him. Easy money, they'd said. His fingers ran over the carved bone handle of his short knife, tracing the swirling lines for the tenth time today, hoping again that circumstance wouldn't call him to draw it. It had seemed like such an easy thing to talk of, to agree to in the dark of the mead hall. Now, not so much.

This could go well, if they were smart.

But these savage bastards weren't anything of the sort. An owl hooted. Cal jumped, for it weren't no owl. It meant Hapless had eyes on their quarry and things were about to get bloody.

"What am I doing here?" A low muttering to no one but himself.

"Had yer gob." Clunie crouched to his left, hunkered behind the rotting bulk of a fallen log. He stared at the road, casting his face in profile. A puckered white scar crept from beneath a rough leather patch where his eye had once been, gouged from his head in some long-forgotten scrap. Cal shuddered as he wondered what ruin Clunie had wrought to pay that wound back. The man's reputation preceded him, and neither kindness nor meekness were his bedfellows, if you believed idle talk.

The jingle of tack sounded like a gentle bell, carrying on the still evening air. The old man was coming.

Cal sighed. There was still time to be away. To jump up and run. Disappear into the woods. Put Clunie and his gang of reavers at his back and be done with this foolishness for good. There was naught wedding him to

a life in Dundonnel. Far from it. He'd travelled the Western Isles from Levan to the Shale Shore and would do again before his time was done. He could make for the far islands, for Stroma or Moya, far from the clutches of this murderous, one-eyed bastard. Spend a winter or two as the hearth-bard of an Isle Laird, weaving boastful ballads about his prowess in battle while he bedded the man's plump daughters. There were worse fates. Clunie would most likely have moved on or gone back to the Good Mother's belly by the time he meandered his back to Lachlann.

But he didn't run, for that would take courage. Instead he squirmed deeper into the autumn-brown ferns and watched as the wagon rumbled into view. There was nothing special about it, nor its driver, not that you could see at first glance. An old thing made of worn wood and rusted iron. One wheel creaked, wobbling slightly on its axle as it rolled lazily forwards. The driver hardly looked more sprightly. The silvery tuft of a billy-goat beard bristled on his chin. Liver spots stained his wiry hands. He flicked the reins, teasing the big brown horse onwards up the shallow hill.

Cal felt Clunie tense. Any moment now. Hapless notched an arrow to his bowstring.

Cal's part in this was simple enough, yet his heart still pounded and his mouth felt like he'd been licking stones. It was the hangover, he told himself, but he knew that was a lie. But at least there were no guards, just as Clunie had said. No guards, because no one would be moonstruck enough to rob Ubagaiche.

"Go." Clunie barked the word.

Cal pushed himself to his feet, legs trembling. He scabbled down the steep bank, as much on his arse as on his feet. Crashing through the ferns. Flurries of damp brown pine needles scattered. He leapt the ditch at the side of the road, landing heavily in the dirt directly before the shire horse. Slick mud. His feet went right out from under him. He crashed down in the dirt, splattering filth and peat-brown water.

"Get up you nonce." Clunie was close behind him, battle-notched sparth-axe in hand, the setting sun flashing from its top-heavy blade. The growl of a wordless warcry.

The horse panicked. It pulled back, lashing its head, wrenching the reins from old driver's hands. Cal kicked himself backwards, sliding through the oozing mud to gain precious distance from those massive pounding hooves. Iron shod feet hammered the wet earth. Far too close for comfort.

"Grab it."

A crash as Muckle burst from the pines. He was a big bastard, Muckle, big and stupid like he was dropped on his head as a bairn, but his job was simple. He dumped a great beam of pinewood across the road behind the wagon. Even if the old man could have turned the cart round, his way back was blocked.

Cal scrambled to his feet and lurched forwards, arms wide to stop the horse from bolting, gripped with the fear that if it did, he'd be run right down. The old man grabbed for the reins but Hapless put an arrow juddering in the cart, yelling at him to be still. Get off. Don't move. A stream of contradiction in the panic.

The horse's eyes rolled, bloodshot and wild. Cal grabbed for the bridle. The big horse's snout hammered his hand away. He yelped in pain, clutching at his arm. The horse thudded forwards, a lurching step. This was not going well. A flurry of birds burst from the undergrowth, every detail of their flight etched on Cal's frantic mind. Grouse. Tufted red heads flashing.

Clunie hefted the axe. A heavy, two-handed spar not much shorter than he was with a brutal hooked head. The mark of a Gallóglagh. A mercenary. But Clunie wasn't in anyone's pay today. Out for himself, so he was. Cal wondered if he could take the horse's head off clean with that filthy looking weapon. No call for killing a poor animal.

He grabbed again. His hand caught the rein. The horse fairly pulled him off his feet but he held on. Hauled it down, pulling its eyes to the ground as he looped his other arm round its nose, hugging its big, sweaty head to his chest. It bucked, almost lifting him into the air. Probably could if it tried. He had to calm the beast or things wouldn't end well.

Hapless still shouting at the old man.

Cal's heart hammered. He began to sing. An old mountain tune, one he learned in his younger days. Never failed. A lilting melody. No words, just the humming vibrations of his lungs in his chest as he breathed. Pressing the horse's great head close. It lashed its tail. On he went, letting the melody carry through his lungs. Letting the beast feel his calm. It snorted but stood still now. Cal lost himself in the song. He'd forgotten the words long ago. They were in the Cruinthe tongue, a simple language of guttural grunts. Primitive. Hardly words of beauty, but it weren't the words that mattered here, nor what beasts seemed to respond to. Not when he'd sung it before.

Clunie cuffed him round the ear. "Finished?"

Cal blinked. How long had he been singing for? It was so easy to get lost in these old songs. Timeless and ancient, they sang to the soul. But clearly not Clunie's, black and withered as it was. He bared his rotted teeth at the old man. "Get down."

Cal let go of the horse's nose. It stood still. Seemed they'd managed this without bloodshed after all. Well, so far at least. Clunie brandished the big axe, jabbing it towards the old man who was clambering down for the

wagon now, though not fast enough it seemed. Clunie grabbed him by the belt and wrenched him backwards. He slammed down into the road. A grunt of pain.

Cal winced. "There's really no need."

Clunie rounded on him as the old man squirmed in the mud.

"Shut yer whining gob and see to the barrel." He pointed at the wagon with his axe. "I'll take care of this cunt."

Cal didn't move. He glanced back at the wagon. Something lay beneath a faded oilcloth, lashed down tight by taught ropes. He looked at Muckle, standing slack-jawed at the back of the wagon, bereft of instruction. Drooling just a little.

"Muckle." Cal caught his eye. "Look under the tarp."

Cal's words galvanized the big lad into action. He peered under the oilcloth. His eyes lit up. A stupid shit-eating grin on his dumb face.

"What you see?"

Clunie shoved Cal, the childish gesture of an angry bully, but the bright-bladed axe in his callused hand raised the stakes. Cal staggered backwards, shoulders thumping into the wagon.

"You wanna be in fuckin' charge?"

"No."

"Then shut the fuck up." A hateful glare. Clunie stepped close, looking up at Cal. He wasn't a big man, Clunie, and that was most likely his problem right there, but there was a fire in him, a madness that set Cal's nerves on edge. The curve of the scar, ivory white against windburned skin. A rift carved down his forehead, through his cheek to his lip. It made him sneer, pinched his face inwards to cast him as bitter to look at as he plainly was inside. He stepped even closer, inches away. Rancid breath. Cal squeezed himself back against the wagon. This really was a stupid idea.

Clunie glanced at Muckle. "Well, dipshit?"

"Barrel." Slurred, simple speech.

A killer's smile cracked Clunie's broken face. He slapped Cal, open hand hard enough to snap his head round. Stinging pain.

"What did I tell ya? We're gonna be rich as fuckin' Lairds."

“What about him?” Cal pointed to the old man who now sat in the mud, then immediately regretted calling attention back to him. Clunie rounded on the old fella, but he just looked up, bright eyed and defiant. Not cowed by the axe-wielding reaver standing right before him. Not even angry. Seemingly just baffled.

“Do know who I am, lad?” The old man’s weatherworn face wrinkled in a disbelieving frown.

“Aye.” Clunie took half a step forwards. “Yer Ubagaiche and I’m stealin’ yer stash.”

“Don’t.” Not pleading. Almost like he was scolding a wayward bairn. Clunie hefted the sparth-axe, two hands on its worn wooden shaft. He drew it back, raising it to strike. Cal stared in horror. Stealing was one thing Murder was a whole different kettle o’ fish, that was certain. Not something he wanted on his conscience.

He grabbed the axe.

Clunie turned on him, a snarl like a rabid dog. Ground his teeth, too angry to speak. Cal’s heart pounded in his chest. What was he thinking?

“Don’t.” Hardly the most compelling argument. Clunie wrenched on the axe, pulling it from Cal’s hand. Staggering him. “Let him live.”

Clunie looked from Cal to the old man and back again.

“Why?”

Cal had nothing. Because I don’t want his blood on my hands? Because it’s wrong? His mind raced.

“Would you want to die like that?” It was all he could find.

Clunie shrugged, like his own squalid, mud-soaked death was a foretold inevitability.

“Suppose not.”

He pounded the old man in the face with the butt of the axe.



Two: Fermentation

The hall stood by a crook in the burn where it curled through a stunted strand of birch trees. Mossy beards draped the branches. Gnarly white trunks pockmarked with black. Leaves turning pale copper to match the crisp curling ferns carpeting the floor. A sun-bleached cow skull hung above the door, nailed in place beneath the arching eaves. Traces of old carving still showed, proud beast heads, but rot had set in long ago, erasing the detail. A once grand hall, but ill-kept now, and crumbling.

Hapless steered the wagon to a halt before the building. Chickens scattered. A mangy dog sauntered from behind a tumbledown old sty, staring with rheumy eyes but finding nothing worth barking at.

Cal jumped down from the wagon, boots splashing in the mud of the yard. Stiff-legged, numb-arsed and sore. He stretched his back, spreading his arms wide as he yawned. His stomach growled. It was close to nightfall now and he hadn't eaten more than a handful of berries all day, crouched in the stinking damp of the forest, and food didn't look too forthcoming in this forlorn place.

The hall door opened with an arthritic creak. A woman peered out. She was thin and reedy, long dark hair plaited in a thick braid trailing over one shoulder. Bright blue eyes steeped in suspicion. The glint of steel in her hand. A clever.

"Took your time."

"Sorry Mol." Hapless clambered down from the wagon, head bowed in apology.

"You never said you were married." Cal arched an eyebrow in surprise.

"I'm his sister, moron." She rolled her eyes and cocked her chin, scorn dripping. Things might be looking up. She was pretty in a severe kind of way. Cal smiled at her, but it did naught to thaw her icy glare. "You think I'd marry that useless turd?"

"And small wonder you ain't found a husband. The old man would be right proud'a you."

"Least I haven't resorted to reaving like some."

"Enough gabbing. Get the barrel inside." Clunie hefted his big axe over his shoulder and sauntered towards the hall, making it clear that any barrel carrying was up to the rest of them. "I'm parched lass. Bring ale."

She followed him inside, shaking her head in disgust.

Cal and Hapless set about unlashng the ropes holding the oilcloth down. Unshackled, the barrel was easy enough to roll off the back of the wagon.

“Oi, Muckle. Lend a hand big lad.”

The three of them lowered the precious cargo onto the muddy earth, Muckle taking most of the weight. Strong as an ox, and about half as bright. They rolled it through the mud and into the longhall. Smoke curled into the rafters, swirling from the shouldering hearthfire in the centre of the hall. Rich smells of food, savory and mouthwatering. The hoppy tang of ale. A black iron pot bubbled. The homely warmth of the hall stood in stark contrast to its ramshackle appearance from out. Clunie sat by the fire, legs stretched, damp boots steaming. He sipped ale from a clay cup, stuffing cheese into his gob between sips. Mol busied herself at the far end of the hall, half hidden in the gloom and the hides that hung in curtains from the rafters to make sleeping spaces. A big hall for just brother and sister. Cal craned his neck, eyes on the curve of her back and the long tail of her black braid as she busied herself at some task or other.

“That’s my sister.” Hapless glared at Cal.

Clunie spat a sharp laugh. “You know what he did to the last man what touched her?”

“Sorry.” Cal shook his head.

“Cut his cock off.” Clunie whispered it. Leaning close so only Cal heard, his fetid breath hot on Cal’s cheek.

“I’ll keep mine in my braes. No fear there.”

“Right you will.” Hapless glared at him.

“Calm down lad.” Clunie waved his ale cup, froth slopping. “Mol. Food and ale for me fellow reavers. Then we’ll see what our prize looks like.”

Mol bustled round the hall. Cal watched while she worked, half an eye on Hapless least he misread his intentions.

“So this is your hearth?” Cal looked up at the smoke-blackened rafters as Mol placed food on the low table before him. Trenchers of oatcakes and hard cheese. Honey and ale. Shallow wooden bowls of broth ladled from the cooking pot.

“Aye, I reckon. Mine and his.” She nodded towards Hapless. “Ever since our old man went back to the Good Mother.”

“A fair old hall.”

“Once was. Sworn to Thegn Gavan’s hearthtroop, he was. Rich from raids and warrior’s rings.”

“Till loyalty to a feckless Laird got him killed.” Hapless curled his lip, a bitter sneer.

“Don’t disrespect his memory.” Mol thumped a clay jug down hard on the table. “He brought you up better’n that.”

“And gave me naught but you as a burden.”

“Will you two shut yer gobs and eat.” Clunie’s barking voice cut between the bickering siblings. Hapless snatched a bowl from the table, grumbling but saying nothing. Mol flashed a glance at Cal before stalking away to the back of the hall.

The four men tore into the food. Silence. Hunger sated, Cal stared at the barrel. It looked old. Dark wood stained darker by time and use. Iron bands lustrous with a deep patina, old metal, well cared for. Ubagaiche’s black brand burned onto the side, a knotwork bird caught in flight, perhaps a swallow or a swift. The alchemist’s mark.

Clunie stood, pulling a heavy-bladed knife from his belt. “Anyhow, let’s see what we have in here.”

The knife thumped into the barrel. Clunie drove it point first into the hairline gap between the rim and the lid, hammering it home with the palm of his callused hand. He grunted as he leaned into the short lever, popping the barrel lid. They gathered round, breathless and eager in anticipation as Clunie lifted the lid.

Liquid amber glinted in the lamplight. The heady aroma of peat smoke and heather filled the room, honey-sweet and beckoning. Their faces cracked into wide smiles. Muckle laughed, a deep chesty chuckle, gap-toothed grin on his baby-round face.

“Whisky.” Muckle’s slurred speech broke the contemplation.

“Aye, whisky,” said Clunie. “And a fucking ton of it too. Now shut yer gob you drooling halfwit.”

Muckle’s shoulders slumped.

Cal gazed into the barrel, remembering a time long past. Him just a young lad fresh to the Bardic Lodge given his first taste of strong spirits. He tasted that sweet burn like it was yesterday. But that was back before Altnabraec and before he met that lying sack of piss and wind Culkein. Back before the flying. Well, it didn’t do no good to dwell on that, did it?

“Sunlight trapped in water.” Mol was leaning close to fill his cup with ale. Her words jerked Cal back to the hall, back from thoughts of long ago, when the world had brimmed over with possibility. When he’d never met

such lowborn scum as these. He stared at Mol, one eyebrow raised in quizzical interest. Less severe now and almost smiling, her bright blue eyes alert.

“What’s that?”

“Someone once told me that when the alchemists craft whisky they capture sunlight in the rarest of mountain waters. Pure as crystal and cold as the Frozen Sea.”

“That’s beautiful.” Cal smiled. She had a poet’s heart buried beneath her frosty shell.

“That’s bollocks.” Clunie belched as he thumped his ale cup on the table. Mol rolled her eyes.

“The water of life, or so they say.” Cal nodded to the barrel. The words of the grey-bearded Brehon a lifetime ago still rang in his ears. A bard must know the pedigree of all things, their origin, their nature and their place in the world if he is to know their tales and tell them well.

“It’s nowt but beer they’ve brewed to be stronger.”

“There’s more to it than that. Or else why would they be so secretive?”

“To bottle the magic,” said Mol, staring at the barrel, a look of whimsy softening her thin face. Firelight blushed her sharp cheekbones. “So the old man used to say.”

“Captured in copper. Purified over fire. ” Cal nodded. Whatever Mol’s father had taught her, he’d clearly had a way with the word-hoard, and so did she.

“Magic potion my arse.” Clunie hawked and spat into the fire. Mol glared at him, then looked to Hapless, who just shrugged and looked at the floor, hardly daring to meet his sister’s gaze.

“You going to let him talk to me like that? In our own hearth.”

“Aye,” sneered Clunie, scarred face set in a bitter grimace. “Are you?”

Hapless shuffled his feet half a step backwards.

“What now?”

“We should try it, just to make sure it’s the good stuff.” Cal drained his ale in one frothy draught, smearing foam from his stubble with the back of his hand. He reached to dip his clay cup into the barrel.

Clunie slapped his hand away. “This is for profit, not for getting us pissed.”

“Where’s the harm in a dram?” Hapless looked at the others for confirmation, clearly glad the Clunie’s bile was directed at someone else for a change. Mol shrugged at her brother.

“He’s right,” said Cal. “We have to know it’s decent if we are to set a price.”

Clunie’s glare melted.

“Alright. But not with yer filthy ale cups. This here’s pure. Mol, fetch something to pour with.”

The four men hovered like ravens circling a dying war-thegn while Mol rattled round the hearth, returning with a copper bowl. She wiped it clean and dipped its shallow lip into the barrel. Golden liquid flowed. Dripped from the rim to splash back into the barrel. Ripples dappled the surface.

She held up the bowl above her head like a Sister offering a devotion to the Good Mother, slender hands cupping the hammered copper dish. And ever so slowly, while the men stared in lustful envy, she placed her lips to the bowl.

Her eyes fluttered. Her complexion flushed. She seemed to come alive.

“Well?” asked Cal.

“Oh aye.” Her face cracked in a wide grin. “It’s the good stuff alright.”

They drank.

The copper bowl brimmed with golden cheer. They passed it around, each savoring the burn on their lips, the rich loam scent, ripe with apple sharpness. The lingering glow as it lit their insides. Smiling and laughing. Muckle’s round face leering, his belly-laugh shaking the rafters. Hapless all hazy-eyed leaning against a post, stripped now of his rusted old mailshirt. Even Clunie ceased his barking for a while, the puckered scar twitching, curling his lip into a sneering smile.

Cal hummed a tune. Words came slowly. An old song he’d not sung in years. Mother Mari’s Daughters. A bawdy jig about three buxom lassies, all with lustful eyes set on snaring the same husband. He was on his feet, the others clapping, laughing. That’s when he saw her by the door, just standing there watching him. Her hair was autumn gold. Soft waves of honey and barley washing over her pale, freckled shoulder. Ripe-lipped and wanton, wide hazel eyes staring with intense intent, drinking in every last bit of him.

He rounded out the song.

They clapped and Mol passed an ale mug. A long, cold draught to wet his parched throat. She was smiling at him now. Frost melted.

“Who’s the lass?” Cal pointed towards the end of the hall where the woman no longer stood. He frowned.

“Who? Me?” Mol narrowed her eyes, her forehead creasing.

Cal took a step away from the fire. She wasn’t there. Must have dipped back out of the door and into the night.

“Don’t go. Sing another.” Mol reached out a hand, the lightest of touched on Cal’s arm.

“Gotta piss.” He stepped away from her and headed for the door, a tilt in his step, the whisky tweaking his balance. Eager to catch another sight of the girl. Warm and fuzzy, like sitting before a roaring hearthfire while the snows drifted outside. He stepped past the open barrel. His eyes lingered on the deep well of golden liquid. He tore himself away, heading for the door. Whoever was out there, Mol’s little sister perhaps, she was captivating. Too shy to show herself before Clunie and his hotheaded band.

The night air was bitter. An autumn bite. A spray of stars written in the black sky. The faintest green of the Aurora shimmered. A still night, and clear. Sobering. Cal staggered into the dark, glancing left to right around the yard. A pig grunted. He swayed, feet rooted in the mud.

She touched him on the shoulder. He spun. There she was. Right before him. So close in the night. The bite of wood-smoke wafted from her hair, like she’d sat too long by the fire, but it sat well on her, a rich scent to light desires Cal could only dream of. He reached for her, but she danced back, skipping out of his grasp. A whimsical smile lit her star-kissed face. Even here in the chill silvery night she seemed golden and warm.

“What’s your name?” Cal stared entranced.

“She likes you.” Her voice was honey and musk.

“Wha..?”

“She’s pretty.”

“Who? Mol?” And she was right. Mol was.

“You want her.”

She was right. He did.

“She wants you.”

Whispers in the dark telling him what he already knew. He glanced back to the hall. Light carved in a bright rectangle against the black. The sound of voices raised. Mol was in there. She wanted him. He glanced back to the woman, but she was gone once more.

He shook his head, baffled. Slippery minx. What was her game?

Back inside the lads were rolling bones. Clustered round a table, the rattle of dice and the chink of silver. And there she was. How had she slipped past him, so fleet? She looked like sunset, all golden and lingering, gracing everything in her amber glow. Beautiful yet dangerous, like you couldn't look too closely or she'd burn your eyes. Furtive, stolen glances were all he could manage. Quickly, out of the corner of his eye, like a caress. She leant against Hapless, one arm draped over his broad shoulders, her hair brushing the back of his neck. He paid her no heed, intent on the game. Liar's dice, a bluffing game. Judging by the glistening hoard of coin and hack-silver scattered across the table, they were serious.

"Liar." Clunie reached for the cup, beady eye on Hapless, looking for any sign of him wavering. He lifted the clay cup, revealing the score on the dice, and laughed. "Told you. Liar."

"Fuck." Hapless spat in disgust as greedy hands clawed at the mound of treasure.

"One more game." She whispered in his ear. Her voice was enchanting. Deep and breathy. "You can beat him."

Hapless didn't even turn to look at her.

"Again." He threw a coin down on the table. Clunie grinned like a wolf at the fold.

"Look like you've seen a ghost." Mol stood by him, the copper bowl in her hand, almost empty. She sipped from it, eyes closed in blissful contemplation as she did. She handed the bowl to Cal. He hesitated. Something wasn't right. Mol leaned into him, the curve of her breast rubbing on his arm. She held up the bowl again. He took it and she slipped her arm round his waist.

"Drink up." Her blue eyes glinted. Mischief ruled her.

"Who's the girl?" He lifted the bowl to his lips, savoring the smoky taste.

"I'm the only girl you need to worry about." She snatched the bowl from him, a playful gesture, and took him by the hands. The whisky did its work, like sinking into the hot spring the bubbled on Ben Morrdha, easing the aches of the day away. She pulled at his hand. He followed as she led him to the back of the hall, pushing open a door. It was dark in here, just a single flickering candle. Greasy tallow light. A ladder rose to a sleeping platform. She climbed. Somehow stripped off her dress as she did so. Teasing at the braid that held her hair so it fell in a raven-black wave over one bare shoulder. Long limbs pale in the dark. Bright eyes hungry.

"Oh Mother." This was a terrible idea.

She crawled towards him, looped one hand round his neck and kissed him. Any part of him that wanted to pull away melted in the heat he felt. He pushed her back onto her arse and grabbed her ankles. Pulled her so she flipped onto her back. She squealed, giggled as he climbed on top of her. Hands tugging his tunic over his head. Fumbling at the cord that held his braes. Feeling her pressed against him. Hot breath on his neck. Nails on his back.

“Take her.” A husky voice in his ear.

“Yes.” He felt the passion rising. Burning deep inside him as his hands traced the curve of her hip, pulling her leg over him. Then realization slapped him. “Wait, what?”

“Take me.” Mol moaned, dug her nails into his back. Eyes shut in blissful anticipation.

“Go on.” That husky voice in his head once more.

She leant against him, warm as a summer’s day. Her hair brushed his hand, the gentlest of caresses. The sweet smell of flowers and lust. Her hand on his arse, guiding him into Mol. Beside him. In amongst the furs as he lay atop of Mol. Cal yelped in surprise. He jumped up. Head slammed into the low rafters.

“Fuck.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Mol gazed up at him where he stood, crouched beneath the rafters rubbing at his head, breeches round his ankles, glancing round in bemusement.

“She was here. In the bed.”

“Who? How drunk are you?”

“The woman, the redhead. Your sister, or whoever she is.”

“I don’t have a sister. Just me’n Hapless. And even if I did I certainly wouldn’t bring her to bed with me. Pig.”

A yell from back in the hall cut short any reply. A crash of something breaking. Mol folded her arms over her bare breasts and frowned at Cal. She nodded to the hall.

“What?”

“Go and see what my half-wit brother is breaking.”

That was clearly the end of things here. Cal pulled up his braes and climbed down the ladder. Shrugging his tunic over his head, he crept to the door. Another muffled bang. The sound of breaking pottery. He hesitated. Sounded like Clunie and Hapless had come to blows over the dice. A quick peek through the half-closed door

confirmed his suspicions. Muckle sat by the fire, hugging his knees to his chest, tears glistening on his cheeks. Rocking backwards and forwards like a caged animal.

The other two were less calm. They lent into each other, arms locked round heads, fists and knees flying. Grunting and lurching. Staggering together as they crashed into the iron tripod, sending it crashing down into the fire in an eruption of bright embers. They rolled right over the hearth, slamming down onto the dirt floor.

“Fire.” Cal yelped in alarm.

No response. The two men hammered away at each other. Embers caught in dry straw. Flames began to lick. Cal glanced around frantically. Bucket. Water. He grabbed it and sloshed water across the floor and up the post where the flames threatened. Splashing across the hearth. A hissing burst of steam as the fire almost died, darkening the room. Gouts of steam.

Then a yell. Not the angry curse of a drunken brawl, but a high-pitched howl of pain. Hapless lurched out of the smoke, eyes wide in fear, the bone handle of a knife jutting from his chest. Punctured lung wheezing. Blood on his lips. He reached for Cal, collapsing forwards. Cal caught him, staggering backwards under the man’s dead weight, rolling him over as he sunk to the ground so as the knife wasn’t driven further into him.

“Clunie?” Cal’s voice wavered.

Darkness wreathed the hall. Steam and billowing smoke. Catching in his lungs. Drapes and furs made darker shadows. Too many places to hide.

“Had it coming.” Clunie’s voice rasped out of the darkness. Cal glanced round but couldn’t catch sight of him.

“Cal?” Mol’s wavering voice.

“Stay back.”

“Cal. What’s going on? I heard fighting.” Then she screamed. Cal stumbled through the smoke and grabbed her by the wrist. Panic on her face.

“What’s he done?” She stared in horror at her brother’s body. Blood oozed in thick red rivulets, soaking into the dry earth floor. He spluttered and kicked his last.

Clunie leered out of the dark, wild eyed.

“Killed the wee cunt, that’s what.” He lunged for Mol. Fist closed round her hair. Dragging her backwards, straight off her feet. Her wrist wrenched from Cal’s grasp. She screamed, slamming down hard with a grunt.

Knocked half senseless. Clunie left her where she lay, stepping over her stunned body, glaring at Cal. Steel in his hand. A heavy bladed knife honed to murderous sharpness. “And now it’s your turn.”

Cal backed away, hands held before him. “Come on Clunie. No need for that.”

“Gonna cut you up. Then I’m gonna fuck your woman.”

“What is wrong with you?” Cal glanced at Mol. She struggled to stand. Stunned from the fall. He had to buy her some time. He stepped back again, keeping his distance from the blade. Just out of reach. His arse hit the barrel. It rocked, a sloshing sound echoing within. Clunie grinned. Scarred lip curling. Gap-toothed malice. He lunged. He was quick, but drunk. A clumsy slash. Cal jumped backwards, rolling right over the barrel, tripping. It toppled sideways, teetering for a moment, whiskey sloshing. Cal hit the ground, square on his shoulders, pounding the air from his lungs. Whiskey splashed to the floor. The pungent scent scorched his nostrils.

“No.” Clunie’s yell, defiant rage. He leapt forwards, grabbing the teetering barrel before it fell.

Cal scrambled to his feet. The girl was there behind him. Not Mol. She still sprawled on the floor, crawling on elbows and knees, scrabbling away from the brawl. No, the other woman. Golden-haired and wide-eyed.

“Run.” Her voice was urgent, tinged with fear.

Cal glanced to the gaping door, chill night and the birchwood beyond. Safety in the black from the slavering murderer who closed in on him.

“Go, run.”

“But...”

“I’ll be fine. Go.”

Clunie glared up from the oozing pool of whisky slowly dampening the baked earth floor, one hand on the barrel and what was left.

“I’m gonna kill you,” he growled, lunging forward. The knife slashed an arc in the air.

Cal turned and ran.

He blundered out into the night, heedless of whether Clunie was on his tail or not. Blinded in the dark, he ran for where he thought the track was, bare feet pounding in the mud of the yard. Fear drove him. Fear of the knife in his back at any moment. Slamming straight into a low log which took his feet right out from under

him. He pitched forwards, arms flailing as he pounded face first into the damp dirt. Grunting in pain, he rolled over to look back towards the hall.

No sign of pursuit.

Light flooded from the open doors, glistening from the muddy pools in the yard, but by some small grace, Clunie wasn't following him. Whatever the murderous bastard was up to, he seemed happy to let Cal stumble off into the night.

Lying on his back, Cal stared up at the stars dusting the night sky. Now he was outside in the cold night air, he didn't feel so drunk any more. Not that he thought he'd drunk that much in the first place. Enough to feel the warm whisky glow, for sure, but enough to be as staggeringly drunk as he'd felt when Mol took his hand, of that he was less certain. And where had the redhead woman come from? Why was everyone ignoring her, whoever, or whatever she was? There was something fae about her.

A muffled scream sounded. A woman's voice. With Muckle naught but a drooling wreck, that left Clunie alone with Mol and the other lass. He had to go back.

"Good Mother what did I do to deserve this?" He muttered under his breath to himself as he stood, then jumped in shock when someone replied.

"You let her out, didn't you?"

Cal's eyes darted in the dark. A hooded figure, there by the crumbling trunk of a rotting old birch tree. Face shadowed by a deep cowl, just a stubble-flecked chin jutting out.

"And who the Hell are you?" Cal's heart thumped in his chest. He couldn't see any obvious weapons. Certainly no sword or axe, but there were a dozen places a man like him could conceal a blade and still have it drawn and ready before Cal could even shout his name. The man stepped forwards, lifting the hood from his face. He was a dour, frowning bastard who clearly saw no joy in the world. Pale grey eyes as bitter as the wind-bitten sea.

"I'm the Guager." A resigned tone, as if he were used to explaining himself to idiots.

"The what now?"

"I'm here to recover what you robbed before things go too badly wrong for everyone."

Cal shuffled backwards, minding his footing on the wet grass. Eyes on the man in case he sprung.

"I haven't robbed nothing."

“Don’t play the fool. I know what you did, and you’re bloody idiots. Just tell me one thing, you haven’t drunk any of it, have you?”

“Well...”

“Have you opened the barrel?” His tone was urgent now. No longer just faintly patronizing, but concerned, most likely in case they’d drunk too much of his precious stock.

“Yes.” Cal shrugged, as if it were nothing. Certainly not the time to tell him that actually, he’d almost knocked the entire barrel over.

“You really are an idiot, aren’t you?”

“Hold on now.”

“No lad, you hold on. Do you know what’s in that barrel?”

“Aye, of course. Whisky.”

“Oh no.” The Guager shook his head, a fierce glare in his pale eyes. “That’s the raw spirit. It ain’t whisky until I’ve worked my craft on it.”

“Really? Do I look like I’m a bairn born yesterday?”

“Any old fool can brew up spirits from barley, but it takes a rare talent like Ubagaiche to make the water of life. Only a true alchemist can capture the Uisce Beatha.”

“The very essence of the spirit?” The stories came back to him now. Now that he wasn’t fuddle headed and intent solely on bedding Mol.

“So you aren’t as dumb as you look then?”

“Five years in the Bardic Lodge. Some of it stuck. The Uisce Beatha. It lives in the whisky. It’s what makes it so potent.”

“Aye. Ubagaiche captures it, ages it in his barrels then I bottle it. It’s the Cruithne way. Handed down from father to son, and there’s only a few of us left who know the real secret. It’s at its most dangerous right before its bottled, once it’s had years to mature, and it’s concentrated. That’s the trick to gauging, you see. Tapping off just enough of the true spirit to keep it potent, but not too potent.” Caught up in his craft, he seemed only too happy to talk now.

“I’ve seen her.” This made some sense of the mess. “The Uisce Beatha. She’s escaped. She’s causing havoc.”

The Guager sighed.

“I thought this might happen.”

“What do we do?” Cal gazed back at the hall. This had hardly been his idea, but the burden of responsibility tugged at his conscience.

“Flames will take her. We’ll burn the hall. A damn waste of ten years work, but it’s the safest way.”

“Woah now wait there. There’s people still in there.”

“Any you care a damn for?” The Guager’s eyes were bleak slits.

“One I’ll happily pour pitch on and light up myself. But the other two are innocent.”

The Guager sighed, a weary wheeze as he shook his head.

“Well that only leaves one thing. We need to get her back in the barrel. Or rather you have to lure her back into the barrel, for if she spies me she’ll flit, and who knows where she’ll end up.”

“Will she go back to the mountains?”

“No lad.” The Guager sighed again, deeper and more despondent this time. His glare withered Cal. “She likes folk too much. Like as not she’ll head down the burn to Dundonnel, and once she’d there, well you’ve seen what feats of madness she drives men to.”

“So how do I get her back in the barrel?”

“Well lad, she has a weakness, like all her kind do.”



Three: Distillation

A quick peek round the door post.

Cal darted back, ducking behind the wall. Even the dim lights of the hall were blinding after standing in the black of the night. He'd half expected Clunie to plant an axe in his skull the moment he poked his head out, but mercifully the bastard was busy elsewhere.

Heart pounding, Cal stepped into the hall. Lit up by the fire, bright and obvious in the doorway. He heard a gentle sobbing. Couldn't tell if it were Mol or Muckle. A quiet, snuffling sound. Tentative steps. Muckle still sat by the fire, broad shoulders hunched, rocking backwards and forwards like a roped bear at the Midsummer fair just waiting for the snarl and bite of the baiting hounds.

Cal tiptoed towards the open barrel. He hunted around for a cup that hadn't been broken in the earlier scuffles. Scooped up a generous dram from the barrel. Whisky in hand he looked up. There she was by the fire. How hadn't he seen her the first time? She looked cold, shivering and wretched. Her once auburn hair streaked with silver. Pale face lined and worn. The fine linen dress she'd worn now grubby and stained.

But still as beautiful as summer.

She looked up, deep brown eyes flecked with gold. Cal's breath caught in his throat. He looked down at the cup, overcome with thirst.

"Just one sip. That's all." Her voice a musky whisper.

He tried to tear his gaze away, but all he could do was gawp like a moonstruck loon. He'd been wrong. Her hair wasn't grey after all, mealy streaked with barley-blonde, bleached out by the summer sun. Her skin wasn't sallow, simply a trick of the light.

"Sit with me."

He sat, shuffling towards her on the bench, the dying warmth of the fire welcome after so long out in the cold.

"Drink."

He raised the cup. So close to his lips. Honey and heather, smoke and seaweed brushing his nose. What harm could one drink do? Just one little taste.

Then Clunie hit him.

"Bastard." A savage yell from a throat worn ragged with screaming.

They tipped forwards, Clunie driving his shoulder into Cal, spilling him off the bench. Crashing down to the dirt. The clay cup flew. Breath hammered from his lungs. Cal kicked out, trying to stand. Trying to drive himself backwards. Anything to be away from this madman's clutches.

"It's mine. All mine." Spume-flecked lips. Bloodshot eyes wild in the dim hall light. Hands clutching for Cal's throat. Closing round his neck. He wrenched at Clunie's wrists, but the grip was iron. Squeezing hard and tight. One thumb hard in Cal's windpipe making him want to heave. Hands flailing. He couldn't get a grip. Lightheaded. Room spinning. Clunie screaming blue murder and cursing the Fallen Father as he squeezed the air and life out of Cal. Slowly but surely. She leant over him, whispering in Clunie's ear. Whispering exactly what he wanted to hear. Urging him on.

"Kill him."

But it wasn't Clunie that did the killing.

"Shut your gob." Muckle's slurred words as he grabbed Clunie, one hand in his hair, hauling him upright, straight off his feet. Clunie's bloodshot eyes bulged. Freed from Clunie's murderous grip, Cal gasped for air, watching in stunned amazement as Muckle pounded Clunie head first into a carved wooden post. Hot blood splattered Cal as Clunie's nose broke.

"Shut your gob." Muckle slammed the ragdoll form into the post again. A sickening crunch as something vital broke. He didn't stop.

"That's enough." Cal laid a tentative hand on Muckle's shoulder.

The big man dropped Clunie's broken corpse. He turned and stared, big cow eyes wide in the dark.

"He wouldn't shush. Always telling me to."

"No. He wouldn't, would he?" Cal gently steered Muckle to the fireside, pushing him unresisting down onto a bench. "But he won't open his gob again, so you just sit there. Cal needs to take care of something."

Cal hunted round for the cup. Mercifully it hadn't broken. He limped back to the barrel, still wheezing for air. Dipping it in once more. A gentle hand stroked Cal's hair. Just a featherlight touch making him jump. She crouched beside him, pale face so close in the darkened room. Intimate. Gazing at him with those deep brown eyes. Her hand caressed his cheek. He shivered, a wave of longing clutching him.

"The night's but young." Smokey voiced and lustful. "I'm all yours now."

“Rude to drink alone.” He tore his eyes away from her, hunting round the hall. There she was, Mol, a cut on her cheek dripping blood. One eye bloomed with a new-formed bruise. She cradled an arm to her chest. Yet still a pale, winsome beauty luminescent in the dark of her father’s crumbling old hall. She held out the hammered copper dish. He reached out and took it from her, eyes intent on hers. Don’t look at the Uisce Beatha, least she seduce him with one glance. Holding it gingerly in one hand, he poured half the whisky into the shallow bowl. It trickled from the clay cup, an amber pool glimmering against the beaten copper.

A deep breath. He tore his eyes from Mol.

He held out the bowl. Caught the spirit’s eyes. His heart skipped.

“Share a dram with me.”

The bowl shimmered, rich liquid rippling like it was alive.

“I can’t.” But she reached for it anyway. Her turn to be seduced.

“You can.”

“My beautiful boy. Let’s run havoc.” Her eyes smoldered. Her fingers reached for the bowl, trembling. Brushed his as he held it. “Let’s slip from this poor place and take on the world. You and me. None will dare stop us. Come run with me.”

“I’d like nothing more. But first a drink.” Cal lowered his voice, intimate as a lover in the long dark watches of the night. “It’s everything sweet in the world. Its honey and love and warmth. You look tired. It will make you feel better.”

“I am tired. Drink with me.” She took the copper bowl in her tremulous hands. Raised it to her lips, her eyes alive with longing.

“I will. I’m yours. Forever.” And some part of him meant it. He mirrored her, lifting the clay cup to his lips. She tipped the bowl, sighing in ecstasy as she drank. Cal lowered his cup. Her eyes fluttered. The softest of frowns creased her brow. She did look tired. Worn and ghost-pale. Hair no longer golden, but pale like the peeling bark on the rotting birch trees outside. Sunset eyes wide and now black with fear.

“What have you done?”

“You can’t resist the copper, can you? Sunlight trapped in water. It’s how Ubagaiche catches you, isn’t it?”

“How did you know?” Nothing but a whisper left.

“The Guager.”

“Bastard.” She reached for him, one last caress. “He diminishes me.”

“I know.” He threw the last of his cup on the embers. Flames bloomed the colour of rich ripe fruit. A burst of summer. “It’s sad, but it’s for the best.”

And then she was gone.

Cal stared into the flames, feeling the warmth dying. The night cold brushed the back of his neck, feather light, just like the tips of her fingers. He looked up at Mol.

“What happened to you?”

She nodded at Clunie, broken on the ground.

“Sorry I ran.”

“It wasn’t you. It was her. She got into you. She got into all of us. I’m glad you came back. I don’t know what she would have done to us.”

“You saw her?” Cal stood and walked tentatively towards her.

“Aye. Out of the corner of my eye. Just a glimpse. But when I looked she was never there.” She reached out her good hand, looping it round his neck. Pulling him close. “So how did you know?”

“The Guager told me. But I remembered it myself. The Brehon taught me well. He may curse my wretched hide now, but I remember enough of his lessons. What about you? How did you know?”

She raised one eyebrow, the slightest of smirks on her face.

“Perhaps one day I’ll tell you.”



Four: The Aging

They stood in the cold, four of them shivering in the false light of the pre-dawn.

“Are you sure?” Cal looked at Mol. She pulled the shawl closer round her bony shoulders and shrugged.

“Aye. Naught left for me here but bad memories. Besides, I ain’t building a pyre for my hapless brother and his murdering fuck of a friend. But nor do I want to see his soul damned.”

“Good point. Back to the Mother’s belly for him. Where will you go?”

“South. Over the Beinnen Beag to Levan. Put Lachlann behind me for good. My cousin lives down that way. Married to a thegn, so she is.”

“Good for her.”

“Reckon I’ll take this big lump with me.” She prodded Muckle on the shoulder. He grinned at her, gore still smeared black on his face. “For protection, if not conversation.”

“Reckon that’s smart.”

“And what about you?”

Cal looked from her to the hooded Guager standing a few paces distant, burning brand in his hand. Firelight flickered. His grey eyes glinted.

“Depends what that dour old bastard decides.”

The Guager said nothing. He just walked slowly towards the hall and hurled the brand high, a looping arc bright in the dark. It landed in the thatch. Flames licked. Caught quickly.

Mol wiped a tear from her eye.

“Come with me?”

“You know I can’t.” The words tugged at Cal’s heart. “I have to go with him. Face what I did. Can’t keep running.”

Mol sniffed, rubbing at her nose with the fringe of her shawl.

“Saw nowt.” The Guager’s voice was gravel. Cal stared at him, looking for the trap. “Ten years up in smoke. Just tell me one thing. How was she?”

Salt, Sunlight and Sorrow

Cal stared for a moment, all the honeyed words spinning in his mind, but none better than already spoken by the woman at his side. He reached out and took Mol's hand.

“Like sunlight trapped in water.”

THREE SONS

By

Martin Gill

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V2

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 cowl on 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 draped 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. Mol 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 arched an eyebrow, daring Cal to challenge her. “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 taken their toll.

“I’ll think of something.”

A cold draft 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. They ducked beneath smoke-blackened rafters to sit close around a worn table. Little more than a rough driftwood plank smoothed with use. The old man bustled. Clay mugs. A jug of ale, fresh and foamy. A sweet heather tang in the air. 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. The sullen silence oozed back into the room. Soon 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?” Cal held out his hand again. It wasn’t shaken. He looked down at it, self-conscious now, and sat. 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.”

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 already writ on Cal’s ledger 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. Cal 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. Cal opened his arms wide and forced a smile. “Hold your horses there, lad. 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.

“Ob 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 eclipsed 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. Cal 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, whatever it was, grunting like a boar at truffles. A wet sound. Closer still. Sniffing. 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 spun. The thing 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 cowered 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.” His voice the reedy wail of a drowning curlew. “Gone for good now dawn’s light breaks.”

“Right. That’s it.” Mol growled her frustration. She jabbed a thin finger at the old man. “Muckle. Pull his worthless 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 almost feel the bite of the dull blade already.

“Sing.”

It mangled the word, forced from a throat hardly shaped to utter 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. The knife scarcely drew blood. The thing 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.”

Trow smiled.



Mol raced along the beach.

Boots pounded 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.

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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 blank.



“Again.”

Muckle heaved 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 of 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 Mol’s years, she’d never heard music like it. Cal 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. They scabbled beneath the shattered lintel and out into the pale dawn. Muckle sat there, slick with mud, blood smearing his face. He was

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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.