

MELINDA SALISBURY

HOLD

BACK

THE

TIDE



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“Alva? The net. Today, if it’s convenient.”

The irritation in his voice yanks me from my thoughts.

“Sorry.” I shake my suspicions away. Now *I’m* being stupid. If he knew what I was planning, he wouldn’t bother to sabotage his own nets to keep me here. He’d probably just kill me.

I cover the transcription with a calfskin cloth to keep it clean and hastily roll up the old scroll I’ve been copying, disturbing a few tiny flakes of gold leaf that drift onto the desk. I have a jar of scraps I’ve harvested over the years, collecting the leftover fragments the monks forget, or can’t be bothered, to remove properly. The bottle they’re in is probably worth more than the contents, but I like the thought of my little pot of gold.

“I’ll go now, then,” I say, still hoping for a reprieve.

A normal father would hesitate to send his only child ten miles around the loch shore to fix up a new net with a potentially rabid lugh lurking nearby. He’d take pity on his daughter and allow her to go down into the village to collect the paper she told him she needs to finish her work. But not mine.

“Take a gun, and mind yourself,” he says, turning away. “And be back before nightfall.”

Aye, Da. I love you, too.

The sheds, where we keep the spare nets, our boats, and a whole mess of other things, are a mile west of the cottage, huddled together like gossips on the south shore of the loch. I'm warm by the time I reach them, hands damp inside my woolen gloves, my *earasaid* heavy on my shoulders.

When I was a wean, the sheds were my playground; I'd ride there on my father's back and spend the day with him. I'd sit in one of the boats and play at being a pirate, or get inside one of the cages and howl like a wolf until he threatened to toss me into the water. Sometimes, I'd thrash in the nets, pretending to be a mermaid, trapped, able to grant wishes in exchange for the cake I knew my mam had packed for us.

Then there were the times I'd sit quietly beside him, practicing knots on old scraps of net while he sorted through the newer ones, pausing occasionally to ruffle my hair.

I don't remember the sheds being creepy back then, but today, even in the bright spring sunlight, they're undeniably sinister: tall and thin, the wood black and warped so that they lean together, crowding me. Goose bumps rise the moment I move out of the sun and into the shade they cast, owing less to the cold than my own unease.

The ominous feeling worsens when a fat magpie lands on top of one of the boathouses, watching me as I pass, cruel beak parted like it's silently laughing at me. They're supposed to have a bit of the devil caught under their tongues.

Lore says that if you give them human blood to drink, it feeds the devil in them, and they'll speak like a person.

It had better bloody not.

I take my *earasaid* off and wave it at the bird, but all it does is eyeball me, dipping its head like it's taking my measure. I have the sudden, irrational feeling it's about to speak, drink of blood or not.

"Away with you," I say before it can. "I don't have time for devils today."

I'm both embarrassed and relieved when it simply cocks its head at me, then begins to preen, combing through feathers that glint inky blue and emerald green in the sun. Obviously dismissed, I leave it behind and head for the storage sheds at the back.

Inside, I light a lamp and watch the shadows play against the wood, pausing to give the rats time to get out of my sight. I listen to the sound of tiny feet scurrying deep in the recesses of the shed and the creak of the wood as it contracts in the rising heat of the day; winter has finally loosened her grip on the mountain. The place smells musty, dank from the droppings and the nets strung from the ceiling to dry before they're mended and rolled up for reuse.

It's the rolled nets I'll need, and the lamp isn't bright enough to check them properly. I spend a couple of sweaty, swearsy hours dragging them outside, unrolling them, examining them, then rolling them back up, disappointed. At last,