

MELOR'S TALE:

A SHORT STORY

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For parents everywhere.

However you got them, cherish them.

Melor listened to the rain drumming on the window as he yanked his boots on. The coin spent on the inn boy as an overnight watchman had probably been a wasted expense - assuming the boy had even held up his end of the bargain. The rain hadn't let up all night as far as he could tell, so it would have been a determined rustler who tried to make off with any of his sheep. The cost of this room and the bed though - well worth it.

Despite the dismal weather, he had a good feeling about today's market. He rarely came to Dorster, despite it being the nearest big town to him; there were people he wanted to avoid meeting here, so he did most of his sheep trading in Waymes. However, that longer journey in this weather was just asking for the herd to pick up some kind of infection, so he'd taken a chance on Dorster. His sheepdog Trafferth was reliable and although the dog didn't know the route, it was a small herd he had brought up from the coast. Between them they were well able to manage.

After three years of shepherding he'd finally stopped eating into his savings from his sailing days and was starting to turn a profit. Thankfully. He'd struggled with his conscience every day of those three years. His ship money had less to do with his sailing skills than to the crew's ability to strike terror into the hearts of other sailors.

He'd be the first to admit he'd misspent his entire youth. As a boy he'd thought that running in the shadow of the bigger village boys like Dai Mawr and taking on their dirty work would impress them and make them friends. All it did was let them turn an innocent face to the village elders and profit twice over by gaining their undeserved respect, while younger, more foolish boys

like him felt the *Hendynion*'s disapproval. Once he'd realized his error, he decided to get away from the village and make a fresh start. *Coc oen*, but since that fresh start had led to him becoming a sea-robber, it hadn't been the best of decisions.

It did bring him to the attention of Gwilym Ap Gruffydd, son of the Gruffydd overlord of this part of the Southlands. Gwilym had been Melor's captain for eleven years. He was not a nice man, but if you followed his orders and didn't cross him you were left in peace. Under him, Melor had learned some common sense and good judgement at last – when to let sleeping dogs lie, and when to take a stand. It had earned him Gwilym's respect; that's how Melor had persuaded him to walk away from piracy before the darker secrets got out and the Revenue Men were forced to act. Gwilym was a man whose secrets Melor had kept so well (if so reluctantly), it earned him the chance to walk away from sea-robbing at the same time. Gwilym was only too happy for Melor to return to his old village. If the Revenue Men did ever turn on Gwilym (unlikely, given they answered to his father), they'd want witnesses to his misdeeds. Melor would be far enough from Dorster that they'd be unlikely to find him. The parcel of clifftop land he'd given Melor – deeds and all, no rent to pay – that was on top of the prize money. That was the sweetener for rarely showing his face in Dorster, where he might bump into Gwilym - or someone wanting to know more about Gwilym's business.

The parcel of land was a reward that intrigued his villager neighbours.

They still asked the cause of that gift, after three years: he still wasn't telling. Though he'd long since lost any faith in God, after what he'd seen and sometimes

done, he knew wrong from right. He could justify much of his own behaviour, but he knew he was toeing a nasty, messy line. The village had their own bad 'uns (Dai Mawr for one, still cock of the walk), but they were all Chapel, and they would sooner pass judgement on an outsider. *Diawl*, were Chapel good at that! But the Gruffydds had favoured Melor, and if he kept quiet about why, the villagers would assume it must be something good he'd done. Their lords, they reasoned, were rich and they ruled, so they must be right.

Sometimes he wished the world could be as black and white as they saw it.

They had been intrigued by what he had made from such an unpromising patch of land. He had a talent for taking sow's ears and making a silk purse out of them – figuratively that is. So they'd made him welcome enough (as long as he had money to spend with their tradesfolk), and they were happy to take a drink with him in the snug at the Road House Inn (as long as their wives and the preacher couldn't see them).

Now his stomach grumbled at him. He toyed with the idea of a hot breakfast. Was it wet and cold enough for that added extravagance?

He stepped over the still sleeping Trafferth, crossed to the window and opened the internal shutters to see just how hard the rain was driving. He was rewarded with a wet enough scene to back up his plan. What he hadn't anticipated was how busy the street would be, given the early hour and the rain; but business-wise, that was all the better.

Then he noticed the crowd everyone was heading for. It was gathered right beside his sheep pen. With a sinking heart he abandoned the idea of any breakfast,

called Trafferth to attention and grabbed his waterproof and his crook.

As they went downstairs and out and along the lane his brain threw possibilities at him. Scours? Scabies? – oh please, not footrot. He'd checked every beast he'd bought for all those and more, but the last of those would be a herd killer. It would ruin him.

He pushed his way through the crowd murmuring apologies, and someone piped up: 'Here he is!' Others turned to look and parted to let him through, until he reached the edge of his pen. Several women were bent over the fencing and, even more inexplicably, the town Rector and another man in smart but severe black were peering over their heads.

'Come on lad, let us see to her,' one of the women was saying. That had him confused; his herd were all ram yearlings. And one of his beasts was making the strangest sound, like a baby crying. Then he saw what was on the other side of the fence.

There was a child, a boy of about five, probably blond under all the dirt, and with a fierce face. He had a stick and was wielding it like a sword, keeping the watchers at bay and glancing wildly about in case anyone came at him from another direction. Behind him lay what he was so determined to protect; it took Melor a moment to resolve the heap his animals were milling around into a wan, sick looking woman with a crying toddler clinging to her.

Well, someone had to do something, and a blow from a stick wielded by a five-year-old was hardly going to do that much damage, so Melor climbed over the fence.

'Now lad, tell me what's happened.'

The boy waved the stick again and yelled a few words.

'He keeps saying that,' one of the women commented. 'I don't know what it means, but I get the tone.'

No, they wouldn't know, in Dorster. Too far from the coast. If this had been a harbor like Waymes, people would have known.

'It's Ilmaenese. He's saying, 'leave her the hell alone,' Melor explained. Actually the boy was using a far more colourful word he'd not normally expect to come out of a five-year-old's mouth, but something told him the boy had been through a lot.

'Is this your mother?' He asked the boy. 'Aytishi?' he tried, struggling to remember the word. The Ilmaenese in Gwilym's crew only mentioned anyone's mother when raising the shakiness of her marital status.

The boy gave a tight little nod, terrified - half *of* Melor and half *for* his mother.

'Haluan autaa.' He put two words he knew together, aware he was probably mangling the grammar, but the boy seemed to understand he wanted to help.

'Can I—?' Melor pointed to himself then to the woman and toddler. Slowly, the stick lowered.

The woman was in a bad way. She was a bag of bones; her skin was outright grey and there were little flecks of blood on her lips. A rag clutched in her hand suggested she'd managed to catch most of the coughed-up blood. Tuberculosis, he'd wager; he was a big reader of medical books, having been stand-in for the ship's surgeon for over a year. These around him would call it the white plague and run a mile if they realized, and with some reason: it was an infectious illness. He was more worried about the two children, especially the little girl -

he could see that's what she was now - who clung so closely to her mother. She'd stopped crying, hopefully out of tiredness.

Grey as the woman was, she smiled at him as if she had seen an angel.

'I knew you would come,' she said, and Melor could see this day was just going to get stranger still.

He'd done even better at the auction than he'd hoped, thanks to the two well-dressed men he'd seen by the pens. He didn't think very highly of men of God or Charity Records (that was the man in black, who'd bent his ear all the way back to the inn earlier), but they'd attracted an audience. The crowd that had accompanied them to the inn had not known how gravely ill the woman was, but they had spread the news that this was the farmer who had heroically rescued her from the pen and found her a bed at the inn. They hadn't even known his name, nor troubled to ask it; but when he got back to the market they'd pointed him out and talked and so word had got around. That's why his lots in the sheep auction had been so popular. On the strength of that, he'd sent a call out for the apothecary to attend later at the inn.

He'd had to leave the children for the innkeeper's wife to entertain. She was waiting for him when he returned.

She'd got a name and some use out of the boy Velohim; he was marching about serving drinks when Melor returned, while the toddler made her the object of her clinginess. As soon as he paid her the extra (for all-day use of the room, and a hot meal for them up there,

and the inconvenience), the trembling child was shoved into his arms.

'She's called Renia, and she's not toilet trained yet,' the woman told him sourly. Renia didn't protest at being handed over yet again but she was shaking like a leaf, poor darling.

'Not toilet trained, eh?' A strategic check confirmed that this time, the woman had sorted it out. 'Well now, that's two of us with reason to be shaking, cariad,' he murmured into Renia's ear.

'—Vel?' Melor tried the short version of the name, since his mother had used something like it. The boy looked up, set down his tray and hurried over.

For Anesiaren, the bed was a welcome change from hedgerows and woodstores, and with the children being looked after, she was able to rest properly. Not sleep; she dared not sleep though it would be easy to now her body had given up the fight between dry fever and the sweats. She knew how close she was to death, how real the risk that she would go to sleep and never wake up again. Not before she had done one last thing to keep her children safe. This truly was her last chance. The Charity Recorder had followed her rescuer Melor back to the inn, insisting the children be taken onto The Charity books.

'They aren't in need of you yet, sir,' Melor had said firmly as he heeled the inn door shut in his face, but the man had stared at her till the wood came between them. In his line of work, he knew a dying woman when he saw one. He would be back.

They couldn't go on The Charity. Not here. Dorster was too close to the one man in Mhrydain who knew who she really was. She had already gone to him in

desperation, only to be physically thrown out. She had been beyond despair when her uncle dismissed her without even acknowledging her. She should have expected it; he must have been confident she would not dare shame him publicly in front of his people by asking how he could abandon her. But his cruelty had shocked her. He'd ordered his own son to manhandle her out, and her cousin had not been gentle, especially when he had seen her cough blood. Chances were it would have made no difference if Gwilym Ap Gruffydd had known who he was dragging out; Velohim had run at him, small fists flailing for treating his mother so harshly, and he'd cuffed the boy, hard.

Velohim and Renia, Velohim and Renia... their new names came reliably to her tongue now, a small relief among her many worries. No-one this side of the water could know their proper names, the ones with which Lemno would be hunting them. She was confident he had lost her trail long ago in Ilmaen, and she had created dozens of false trails since both there and here, but she had been growing steadily more ill and exhausted. She had made a terrible blunder with the Recorder in Wymond, letting him know of the only place she had left to turn, her Gruffydd relatives in the south. And Lemno was relentless; he would never stop looking. He only had to make that one link, and he would have them.

She was almost more afraid that he *wouldn't* kill them if he did so. He had said of one of his targets: 'I know what lies ahead of him, and death is a kindness I'm in no mood to offer him.' Like her, he had visions – or rather just one, that grew ever more detailed as he put another part of his dark plan together. From what he had shared with her, he was gaining justice for the wrongs he had been done, the kind of wrongs she had known

herself. She had seen a kindred spirit and admired his strength and the way he had taught her not to be ashamed of this curious power that everyone else called witchcraft. Because of him she had learnt to embrace what she could do, and that was why she had helped him. But something unexpected had happened. An evening had come, a glance across a room at the next man Lemno had sworn to ruin. That single moment was enough. Her own vision had instantly shown her the ultimate, terrible cost of Lemno's revenge – on herself first and foremost, if she was honest, but on so many innocents too, her children among them. Back then she had been naïve enough to think she could influence him; now she feared there was nothing left but to pray. She had made more than one mistake in her life, and they were coming home to roost.

Then when her cousin threw her out of the Gruffydd house, his last piece of cruelty had given her a way to clutch at hope. She had been too ill as he dragged her down the corridor, beyond the effort of reading his mind remotely as she normally would, even right beside him. But when he reached out to give a small boy a vicious smack, his grip on her sleeve had slid down to her bare wrist. Skin to skin, a flood of information poured into her while he, distracted by Velohim, failed to notice. She took the chance to soak it all up and search for an answer to her most desperate need.

Find me a way to keep them safe! Find me one good man...

For, reluctant as she was to admit it, it would need a man. This world would not bend on that; even with her talents, she on her own could not keep them safe. She did not have the strength left to rail at the unfairness anymore; everything she had was bent on this last

search. And then on a turn of a corner in Gwilym's mind, she found him. Not an old man, but not a youth either; a man capable of taking the hard way if he had to, yet gentle-spirited enough to seek a better way if one could be found. From far enough away that her relatives would not connect him to her; yet close enough that she would encounter this good man in the little time she had left. The detail of that last bit was, as so often, a mystery; but her vision was the one reliable feature in her life. It had promised her that the children would find safety, and that was enough. She had turned from the door that slammed in her face, sick and bruised and exhausted but once again hopeful, letting her feet and vision guide her to Dorster. There, her last coin secured them what passed for lodgings and meals in the poorest part of town.

Eight days in the warm and dry confirmed that she would not recover from this illness, and it was long enough for the landlady to realize she had been tricked. Knowing Anesiaren wouldn't be able to pay the rest of her bill, she seized her stuff and sent for The Charity. She had fled before they arrived, and for two wet days she had huddled in sheds and lean-tos, stealing food for the children from animal troughs and staying out of sight until this morning when, lying in a sodden sheep pen, she had opened her eyes and seen Melor.

All her life, everyone who mattered had instantly fallen into one of two camps; those she was destined to enchant, and those who were destined to hate her. And it was instant; people made their minds up before she spoke a word or did a deed. She could only be hated or loved. There were no points in between. Only one person had ever changed his opinion; and Lemno had gone straight from one extreme to the other. Life had taught her to be resigned to this fate.

At least life had let her be loved long enough to have her two beautiful children.

She had lost everything now but them. She had nothing more worth spending her remaining breath on, but them.

A tap at the door and she saw Melor again, a frown on his face and a child hanging off each hand. His dog bounded over to the small fire and lay down. He sent the children to eat their meal at the table by the window.

‘Are you up to eating?’

She shook her head: ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be; that’s my lunch sorted, then.’ He gave her a reassuring smile, took it over to the table and ate with the children. When he was done he took up a book and read to Velohim. He had a lovely lilting Mhrydaineg accent. Most likely it was his voice that kept her son’s attention from her constant coughing. Velohim was a little too small to be interested in training a new sheepdog, and it was doubtful he understood the words Melor spoke.

Even Renia felt safe here. For the first time in ages she had voluntarily left her side, going first to eat and now to lie down on the rug beside the dog, who tolerated a little hand caressing his ear as he slept.

Velohim had nodded off too by the time a gentle tap at the door drew her attention. The man Melor called in was clearly some kind of medical man; he carried a small bag, too small for instruments, so it probably held medicines. An apothecary. That made her feel guilty. She didn’t want her rescuer wasting his money when she was too far gone for any medical help.

He made a visual examination of her, casting an eye over how bony and thin she was. He held a cloth to her mouth as he asked her to breathe deeply. The bloody

cloth went onto the fire after she had coughed long and hard into it, and he took a bottle of alcohol from his bag and unscrewed it one-handed to rinse the hand that had held the cloth to her mouth. Then he went and took a look at the sleeping children before he spoke quietly to Melor. Exhausted, still she forced herself to watch; his gestures towards the children were encouraging. There were no gestures towards her. As he continued to talk Melor frowned and nodded, thanked him and paid his fee.

After the apothecary had gone Melor clicked an order with his tongue, and Trafferth was immediately awake. Renia didn't stir. He tapped Vel and said, 'Lad, will you take my dog out to do his business in the ditch? A bit of fresh air will do you good - but don't wander off. Come straight back when he's done.' That would give him a couple of minutes.

Once the biddable lad had trotted off Melor wasted no time, sitting by their mother.

'Ma'am, while he's gone, there's something I should let you know.'

'I'm dying.'

'...yes. The apothecary can't say for sure, maybe a day or two—'

'—before morning.'

This wasn't going quite the way he'd planned. 'Well, that makes this conversation all the more important then. The Recorder will be back, and The Charity—'

'—are not to have them.' The vehemence with which she spoke sent her into a paroxysm of coughing.

Melor took advantage of it; at least now her fatigue would let him get more than half a sentence out.

'Ma'am, unless you have family nearby I don't think there's any option. But save your strength and let me know more about what family and friends you do have, I'll make sure it gets to the Recorder so he can look for them.' Weasel words, he knew. If she'd had anyone to help her, she'd have turned to them long before now.

She caught feebly at his sleeve. 'You.' It took him a moment to grasp her meaning.

'Ma'am, I'm a single man. I work a plot of land on a cliff-top. I can't take care of them.'

'You will. Promise me,' she said.

Oh, *cach*, he thought. She's got to the delusional stage. Hardly surprising; undernourished, eaten up by illness...

He didn't even know her name. What if the boy didn't know it? They'd have no chance on The Charity if their record said, *Parents unknown*. He could save them from that if he could get the right information out of her. He took a fragile-looking hand in both his weather-beaten ones.

'Is there anything you can tell me? Your name, where you are from?'

She mouthed, unable to speak now. 'East of here.'

'Their father? Where he's from?'

She hadn't the strength to raise her free hand but pointed, south, and her mouth formed the word: 'Ilmaen'.

'Where in Ilmaen? Ma'am, it's not enough!'

She turned the beatific smile on him one last time and mouthed: 'It is enough. Thank you.'

That was her last sentence. She'd slipped into unconsciousness before Renia woke up and toddled over

to lean on the bed, earnestly studying her mother's face. She turned sad hazel eyes on Melor and reached up to him. He pulled her onto his lap and for the first time, she didn't cling like her life depended on it, just tucked her head under his chin. He stroked her hair, silky and fine, and immediately regretted it. If he ever had children of his own, he'd never be able to do that to them without thinking of this little one.

Vel returned. He was old enough to understand the explanation. The armour of fierceness was cast aside and a small boy cried for the mother he was about to lose. In spite of himself, Melor found his own eyes pricking. He felt such a louse for what he had to do tomorrow.

The Recorder agreed: as Melor had been so good as to pay the woman's overdue rent to get a few things back for the children, The Charity would cover the burial costs. It was hurried but dignified, at least as dignified as could be for a pauper's burial with just them and the Rector attending. It was still raining that next morning. No-one else troubled themselves to come.

Melor and the Recorder headed back to the inn afterwards. The Recorder sat at the window table and started an entry in his ledger noting the woman's burial costs with as much information as Melor could give – which was scant. He'd never even got the woman's name. Vel only called her Lakka; Mummy in Ilmaenese. Meanwhile Melor made up little packs for the children, one for Vel to carry and one to go with Renia. The boy shouldered his without protest, his face blank with grief. He knew he was being passed on, someone else's problem now his mother had gone.

Even the Recorder had to smile when the toddler took her pack and solemnly handed it to Trafferth, who grasped the knotted handle gently in his mouth. Renia came and leant on Melor's arm.

'You're a sharp one, aren't you, jewel? We'll let him carry it for you then.'

He patted her head. The silky hair imprinted itself on his memory again. Eyes the colour of a spring forest gazed up at him and for the first time something like a smile, sadder than centuries, flitted across her face.

'I'll need as much as you have on the children now,' the Recorder said, pen poised.

'Will they be able to stay together?'

'...I doubt it. The boy's sturdy enough, someone will most likely choose him quickly. The little one... if we can feed her up, in a year or two maybe she'll find somewhere.'

If. Maybe. Forget the rest of that sentence; the man was as good as telling him the boy might make it, but not the girl.

'I dare say you have rules about who's allowed to choose them?' he asked.

'They must show they have an income, and provide an address in case... in case a parent wants them back. The father might turn up,' The Recorder said defensively.

'Right.' Melor stood. '*Tule kanssani, lapset.*' The Recorder wouldn't know the words, but the children did. Renia reached up to be carried and Vel brought him his crook and pack.

'You can't just—'

'—Technically they aren't on The Charity's books yet. You haven't spent any money on them, only on their

mother's funeral. But if you need reassurance that your rules will be met—'

Melor fiddled in the pack, brought out his bulging purse and bounced it on the tabletop to make it jingle.

'The whole inn will know what's happened,' the Recorder persisted. 'If you're taking the children then I'll need their names, and your name and address for the records.'

'Fair enough. Their names are Laddie and Jewel. And I'm Trafferth Ty'r Môr-lladronau. I'll be taking them to Land's End.'

The man kept his head down as he wrote that in his ledger. 'Trouble' was a surprisingly common name, for people as well as dogs, but 'of the Pirate clan' should have given the Recorder cause for concern. And the land ended wherever the coast did. Good luck to this mysterious father finding them again!

The man shut the ledger, stood and and stared at him, far too straight-faced. Melor stared straight back.

The Recorder said: 'Thank you sir, that's all I needed. I hope it all works out... Don't bring them back.'

This short story is a prequel to

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Restoring the Light

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