

MELOR'S TALE:

A SHORT STORY

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For your parents.

However you got them, cherish them.

Melor listened to the rain drumming on the window as he dressed and yanked his boots on. The coin he had given the inn boy to watch his sheep overnight had probably been a wasted expense – assuming the boy had even held up his end of the bargain. The rain had not 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 wintry weather, he had a good feeling about today's market. He rarely came to Dorster, despite it being the nearest town for him; instead he did most of his sheep trading in Waymes. However, a longer journey in this weather was just asking for the herd to pick up some kind of infection, so he had taken a chance on Dorster. His sheepdog Trafferth was reliable and although the dog did not know the route here from the coast, it was only a small herd he had brought. Between them they were well able to manage.

After three years of shepherding he had finally stopped eating into his savings from his sailing days and was starting to turn a profit. Thankfully. He had struggled with his conscience every day of those three years. His ship money had little to do with his sailing skills, and a lot to do with the crew's ability to strike terror into the hearts of other sailors. Sheepfarming was a lonelier life, without question; but truth be told, the camaraderie had never made up for the guilt.

He would be the first to admit he had misspent his entire youth. As a boy he had 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, profiting twice over by gaining their undeserved respect while younger, more foolish boys like him felt the *Hendynion*'s disapproval. Once he had 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 had not been the best of decisions.

It did serve to 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 did not 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, which turned out to be fortunate for Gwilym as well as Melor. He had little evidence he could show when he realised they had a Revenue spy on the crew, but luckily he had spotted the man while they were still at sea and Gwilym had had enough faith in Melor to believe what he had seen but could not prove. Gwilym's solution had been a final one for the spy; Melor did not know what had actually happened, but the man walked into the captain's cabin late one night and never walked out again. Knowing it would only raise the Revenue's suspicions further, Melor had persuaded him to step away from piracy before the Revenue decided to dig further. Gwilym had even darker secrets; if they got out the Revenue would be forced to act. The ship made for Ilmaen where Gwilym sold it and dispersed the crew with their prize money within hours of making port.

Melor had kept Gwilym's secrets so well (if so reluctantly), Gwilym gave him enough to walk away from sea-robbing alongside him. He was only too happy

for Melor to return to his old village, too. Gwilym knew if the Revenue men did ever turn on him (unlikely, given their head answered to his father), they would need witnesses to his misdeeds. Melor's home village was insignificant, its menfolk mostly farmers, coast fishermen and ropemakers, not open sea sailors, and far from the ports Gwilym had sailed from. The Revenue would be unlikely to find him. The parcel of cliff-top land Gwilym had given Melor – deeds and all, no rent to pay – that was on top of the prize money. A sweetener for rarely showing his face in Dorset, where he might bump into Gwilym or anyone wanting to know more about Gwilym's business.

The land was a reward that intrigued his villager neighbours. They still asked the cause of it, after three years: he still wasn't telling. Even 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 most 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 everyone there was Chapel, and they found it easier to 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 in charge, so they must be right. Sometimes he wished the world was as black and white as they saw it.

They had been equally intrigued by what he had made from such an unpromising patch of land. A home carved out of the sandstone cliff, precipitous slopes fenced in to make safe grazing – he had a talent for taking sow's ears and working hard to make a silk purse

out of them. So they had welcomed him back (along with his coin), and they were always happy to take a drink with him at the Road House Inn (so long as their wives and the preacher did not spot 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 recommend his plan. What he had not 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 along the befuddled lane his brain threw possibilities at him. Scours? Scabies? –Oh please, not footrot. He had checked every beast he had 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 harbour 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 expression he would 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 to debate the shakiness of her morals.

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 had managed to catch most of the coughed-up blood. Tuberculosis, he would 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 had stopped crying now, 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.

Melor had done even better at the auction than he had hoped, thanks to the two well-dressed men by the pens. He did not think very highly of men of God or Charity Recorders (that was the man in black, who had bent his ear all the way back to the inn earlier), but they had 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 he was the shepherd who had heroically rescued her from the pen and found her a bed at the inn. They had not even known his name, nor troubled to ask it; but when he got back to the market they had pointed him out and gossiped and so word had got around. That was why his lots in the sheep auction had been so popular. On the strength of that, he had sent a call out for the apothecary to attend later at the inn.

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

She had managed to get a name and some use out of the boy Velohim; he was marching about serving drinks when Melor returned, while the toddler clung to her like a limpet. As soon as money changed hands for the extras (all-day use of the room, a hot meal laid out 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 did not 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 his name, since he had heard his mother use something like it. The boy looked up, set down his tray and hurried over.

Upstairs, their mother found the bed 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 the 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. But 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 back to the inn, insisting all the way 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 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 could not go on the Charity. Not here. Dorster was too close to her uncle, the one man in Mhrydain who knew who she really was, and in his position, he would have some kind of role overseeing the Charity’s work. She had already gone to him in desperation, only to be physically thrown out. She had been beyond despair when he dismissed her without even acknowledging her. She should have expected it; he had known she would not dare shame him publicly in front of his people by revealing the connection. But his cruelty had shocked her. He had 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 even 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. He had 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 being used to hunt them all. She was confident her trail had gone cold long ago and far away, 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 on the East coast, letting the Recorder in Wymond know of the only place she had left to turn, her Gruffydd relatives in the south. And the man hunting them 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 once, of one of his targets: 'I know what lies ahead of him, and death is a kindness I'm in no mood to offer.' Like her, he had visions. 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. But then something unexpected had happened. One evening she had glanced across a room at the next man he had sworn to ruin. In that single moment her own vision had shown her the ultimate, terrible toll he would take – on herself, which had mattered most if she was honest, but on so many innocents too. She had known then her children would be among those innocents. Back then she had been naïve enough to think she could influence him, could change his mind; now she feared there was nothing left but to pray. He was not the only

mistake she had made in her life. Now they were all 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 to read his mind as she normally could, even right beside her as he dragged her down the corridor. But when he reached out to give a small boy that vicious smack, his grip had slid from her sleeve to her bare wrist. Skin to skin, a flood of information poured out of him 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 had no 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. Obscure enough 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 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 had confirmed that she would not recover from this illness. It was also long enough for the landlady to realize she had been tricked. Knowing her sickly tenant 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.

She knew at once she had intrigued him. 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 he 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 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 the meal laid out on 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 and joined the children. When he was done he saw Velohim was bored so he took up a map and explained in Mhrydaineg where they were. He had a lovely lilting Mhrydaineg accent; it must have been his voice that kept her son’s attention from her constant coughing. She doubted Vel understood a word Melor was saying.

Even Renia felt safe here. For the first time in ages she had voluntarily left her side. Having finished eating, she went 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 did not want her rescuer wasting his money. 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 in front of 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 used it to rinse his hands. 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, 'Laddie, will you take my dog out to do his business in the ditch?' – he mimed what he meant – '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!' She cried out, before going into a paroxysm of coughing. Melor waited to speak till she was done. Her exhaustion would at least allow him to 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, then 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 murmured, weakening fast.

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 the words, 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 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 did not 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 would never be able to do the same to them without thinking of this little one.

Vel returned. He was old enough to understand the explanation, even in broken Ilmaenese. 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 monster for what he must do tomorrow.

The Recorder agreed: as Melor had been so good as to pay the woman's overdue rent to get the children's few things back, 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 the two of them, the children and the Rector attending. It was still raining that next morning so 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 details with as much information as Melor could give – which was scant. He never did get 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 offered it to Trafferth, who grasped the knotted handle gently in his mouth. Renia came and leant on Melor's arm.

'You're a smart one, aren't you, jewel? We'll let him carry it for you for a little while, 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, face brightening, brought him his crook and pack.

'Hey. 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 reached in his 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 was. Good luck to this supposed father ever 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.’

‘And sir... Don’t bring them back.’

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