

## Until Then

My name was Calum Na Ròsaich. I had no set home and enjoyed it that way. As a hunter, I'd gather enough pelts to afford me a nice, warm place in a keep during the worst of winter. I was in good standing with my clan and had a number of friends whom I'd see every year or so. And then in one day, my life changed completely.

Hunting as usual, I was far from home in the untamed lands. I'd been out for several weeks and had a number of fine pelts to show for it. Though the hide was of relatively poor quality, I had been dining on wild boar for the last two days. Life was good. And then it got even better.

Or so I thought.

I'd just led my horse and mule deep into some really old woods which were new to me. I'd be hunting in them a bit later. At the time I was looking for a good place to setup camp. And I found one near a sheltered pond. Setting up camp, I heard a noise from the direction of the pond. Sliding silently through the trees, I found myself a good vantage point to see who or what was making the noise.

It was a woman.

But not just any woman. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on. She had flaming orange hair and lovely, pale skin. She stood up to her waist in the clear water and was obviously bathing. After some unknown amount of time had gone by, she noticed me. Probably because I was just standing there, gaping at her open-mouthed.

"Who are you?" she asked. Most women I'd met would have covered themselves up but she did not. A fact for which my eyes were grateful but my mind regretted the distraction.

"I'm Calum," I managed to reply on the second or third try. "Who are you?"

"My name is Seònaid," she replied with a laugh. "Are you a man?"

"As a matter of fact I am," I answered a bit puzzled.

"I thought so. My father told me to stay away from men. He says they're filthy, vile creatures. Is that true?"

"Well, I was planning to take a bath in yonder pond to take care of the filthy part. I've been riding for the last few days without shelter or a nice pond like this one. So, that at least is sometimes true. However, I certainly don't consider myself to be vile. As a matter of fact, a number of people consider me downright charming."

"Oh. Well, there's certainly enough room if you wish to bathe," she said by way of invitation.

"I believe I will, thank you very much," I replied and began disrobing on the spot. As I walked towards the water, her eyes got very round.

"You're... different," she said in amazement.

Looking down at myself, I replied, "I assure you Seònaid, I'm pretty much the same as most men. Perhaps a little better endowed but basically the same."

"I'd heard rumors," she said, staring in a rather flattering way. "But I never believed them. So, men *are* different. I suppose that explains why father never bathes with us."

"Us?" I asked, looking around.

"My sister Raonaid. She's up in the north wood today. Father raised us away from the lands of men. Father doesn't like them very much. We do occasionally go visit the Sidhe but Father makes sure we don't spend too much time there. He says that sometimes the Sidhe make men look clean

and moral.”

After blinking for a moment as this information sank in, I replied, “I always thought the Sidhe were a myth. I guess we’ve both learned something today.” It was so cute that she believed in the legendary folk.

“I’m sorry for staring,” she apologized a moment later. “It’s just... well, as I said, I never... how does it work?”

“Well,” I replied with my most charming smile. “I’m glad you asked.” Action is worth a bucketful of words. After a whole trough full of action, she had a very good idea of how my parts worked. And a much better idea of how her own worked as well.

Come evening, she left to return home with a promise to return in the morning. I set up camp whistling a happy tune. As my fire caught and I started reheating some of my swine, I heard a terrible roaring sound. A deep, reverberation that fairly shook the trees themselves. Worried there might be some monster about, I set several arrows into the ground next to my blanket and strung my bow. I also kept my hold upon a pair of sheathed long knives and slept with them crossed over my chest. Just as I was laying myself down to sleep, the terrible roar came again. I got my boar-spear out, too. Just in case.

It took my some time to sooth the horse and mule. Still feeling wary, I gathered more wood and added some of it to the fire. I distinctly remember laying down to sleep. And I vaguely remember something hitting me though that is a very fuzzy and dream-like memory. And then I woke up chained to a wall.

But I wasn’t alone.

There was another fellow chained up in here as well.

“Who’re you?” I asked when I was able.

“Name’s Eideard,” he replied muzzily, working to focus on me.

After introducing myself, I asked, “How did you come to be here Eideard?”

“Well,” he replied as he awoke more fully. “I was doing some fur hunting and I happened upon a lass collecting berries. You won’t believe what she told me.”

“Let me guess, she’d never seen a man before,” I suggested. He looked rather surprised.

“Yeah, that’s right. Well, we got to talking. She was quite curious about what it was like to be a man. As you can imagine, one thing led to another and before long... we were experiencing life to the fullest... if you catch my drift.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you mean,” I replied. “Did she mentioned she had a sister?”

“As a matter of fact she did,” he informed me. Then I saw understanding strike home. “Ah, so while I was with Raonaid, you were with her sister.”

“Seònaid,” I agreed. “I wonder what....” Which was as far as I got before the door opened and a very, very large man squeezed his way through the doorway at the top of the stairs. Except he wasn’t quite a man. There was something wild and bestial about him. He had red eyes and almost a mane of hair. And claws. And long, sharp teeth. Oh, shit.

In a deep, belling voice, he said, “I am called Dul i Bhfiáin. And the two of you have soiled my daughters.” Uh, oh. Dul i bhfiáin meant ‘to run wild’. And if Seònaid had actually been correct about occasionally visiting the Sidhe.... Oh, this was bad. I’d talked my way out of situations as bad as this before. I decided to give it a try.

“Sir.” Which was as far as I got before his ham-sized hand smacked me across the face. My nose broke and my eyes watered and I stopped paying attention for quite some time. Eideard’s screams brought me back around.

Dul i Bhfiáin sat off to the side of the room. There were now three old women in here. Eideard was now naked, chained in the center of the room with his wrists held by chains in the ceiling and his legs gripped by wide-set chains in the floor. They’d brought a dead wolf in here and had skinned it for some reason. Along Eideard’s back, they were making a lot of small cuts, several of which split open because of his hanging from the ceiling.

“Whad are you doi’g!” I tried to say. Evidently, having a broken nose hindered speech.

The big, man-like person turned his red eyes upon me. “I’m getting even for the crime committed against my family. This man,” he said with the utmost disgust. “Has violated my daughter Raonaid. Rutted with her like an animal. So I’m going to bring out the animal in him. And it will be an animal which my daughter fears. A wolf. Raonaid hates and fears them. And this should ensure that she learns to stay away from men as I command.” The old women proceeded to sew the wolf skin to Eideard’s back using the cuts they’d made to thread the leather cord through. He screamed some more. Quite a bit more in fact.

When they finished, One of the women looked to the red-eyed monster. “My lord, we’re going to need your help with this part.” He nodded and walked over to join them. One of the old women sang something to her knife for a moment. There was something odd about the metal but I couldn’t really tell what. She then began cutting Eideard’s wrist and continued cutting. Eideard screamed until he couldn’t scream any more. The sounds coming from him became pitiable. I must admit that this caused me more than a little concern for my own future.

That’s when things got worse. Something I hadn’t really thought possible short of them doing the same thing to me.

Dul i Bhfiáin picked up the wolf.. and it whined. It was still alive. The old woman took one of the wolf’s paws and shoved it into the cut in Eideard’s arm. I stared in fascinated horror as another old woman came over and began sewing the cut closed with the wolf leg inside. When the woman with the knife got to his chest, Eideard managed to scream a little more. I wondered why he didn’t pass out. And worried about that as well. The harridan with the knife opened up his chest, his belly, and both his arms and legs. The second hag with the help of Dul i Bhfiáin pushed the somehow still living wolf into Eideard’s mangled body. The last woman sewed the wolf into Eideard as she slowly chanted under her breath.

“As the wolf howls,” the monster told the women. “I want the beast within this man to come forth. Let the animal within the man be released as he released his primitive urges upon my daughter.” Oh damn. That sounded really bad.

All three hags joined in the chant. Eideard began convulsing and screaming anew. He then fell limp. I hoped for his sake that he was dead but I doubted that was the case. Hanging there, he looked once more like a normal man. Very faintly, I could see where he’d been cut open and sewn shut again but there was only the faintest of scars now. Poor bastard. Then the red-eyed monster turned his gaze upon me and all thoughts of charity for Eideard fled before an enormous wave of self-concern.

“Afraid?” he asked. “You should be. I’ve saved the worst for you. You who violated my youngest child.”

“She wadn’t a chid!” I screamed at him.

“You know what to do,” he told the hags. Turning back to me, he said, “Seònaid fears blood-

sucking bats. Can't stand the things. Don't much care for them myself really. Too weak. If it can't stand up to punishment, what good is it in a great hunt? That's where we're going to start with you. But for you I have something extra to add. Something to further lessen the chances of you meeting my daughter again. For you, I'm going to take away the sun...."

As the harridans approached, I began screaming.

Time passed and now I roam the night as though it were day. As for the day... the monster had been right, it was now denied me. The light was too bright for my eyes by far and a great lassitude fell upon me as the sun raised above the horizon. Even the smallest touch of sunlight burned as though I were being branded.

I year ago I ran into Eideard. He sat in a pub in Londinium trying to drink himself unconscious. He seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see him. He bought me a drink but I could not join him. In addition to my other punishments I could no longer drink anything but blood. With a sigh and a nod, he took it for himself. More than any other soul in this world, he understood. Far too well he understood.

He told me that he'd gone back once he'd recovered. As predicted, Raonaid now feared him. The scent of the wolf was upon him. However, Seònaid walked the woods as well, and she did not fear wolves. Eideard had explained to her what had happened to us. Neither woman had known, they'd only heard us screaming. When my screams had finally fallen silent, they'd feared us both dead. After taking a long drink, the other man said, "There's more."

Wishing I could take a shot of whisky, too, I closed my eyes briefly and said simply, "Tell me."

"We're both fathers, you and I. Seems both of the girls caught preggers. According to Seònaid, her father thinks it was another god messing with him. Both them catching preggers from us and us both being there in the first place. Which means we both tuppèd with the daughters of a god." He emptied his cup quickly.

"I don't think you were awake," I began quietly. "But one of the old women warned the monster." Despite the drink, Eideard was now sharply focused on me. "She told him that cursing us like this would have a side-effect. It would also convey power. And the hag was right. Sometimes it burns in my blood almost as much as the memory of Seònaid's touch does."

"Me as well. On both counts. I remember the feel of Raonaid's skin, the warmth of her body, her scent..."

"Yes," I agreed, almost choking. "I have much more control over myself and my... abilities now. I was thinking about going back. Now that I know I have a child there as well... perhaps I might free my lover. Free her and my child." Eideard shook his head sadly.

"Raonaid, Seònaid, and the bairns are only allowed outside during the day. At night they are kept within Dul i Bhfiáin's great fortress. And Seònaid warned me that her father had called home a portion of his hunt. By now they will be patrolling the woods both night and day. Fearing that one of the gods will further bother him, he's enchanted the woods as well. A mystical fog now enshrouds the woods. Seònaid warned that the fog will take the unwary into the lands of the Sidhe." Shaking his head, he continued, "I always thought they were myth. Heck, I thought the god's themselves were myths. Else, why would they allow the Romans to come? At least now I know the answer to that last part. They don't give a rat's ass about us. Look down on us they do." Shaking

his head again, he drained the last from the second cup. "I didn't even find out the name of my child." Seeing my look, he shook his head, "Nor yours either, Calum. I'm sorry. I truly am."

"These curses grant us power," I stated after a long while causing him to startle. "I will build up these powers. And I will use them to hunt those hunters in the woods. I will build up the powers he has given me along with his curse, and I will regain the touch of the woman who brings fire to my slumber."

Eideard looked at me for a long moment and then looked down at his hand. Claws slowly grew from his fingertips. "Yes!" he snarled, slamming his fist down, making the heavy table jump. "Beast or no, I am still a man. And a man of determination. I'll not give up the woman of my dreams without a fight!"

"When the time is right," I told him nodding. "We must seek each other out. The first time we went to the wood, we went there separately. Next time we will go together and we will be the stronger for it! Until then," I told him holding out a hand. He shrank away his claws and grasped my wrist as I grasped his.

"Until then."