

The Storm

By B. R. Bloor

Dearbhail wept in the darkness of the stone tower, her sobs masked by the blowing wind that battered the shutters with the dead cold of winter. With only the silent shadows to comfort her she was alone to face the shades that had ebbed within. Once an heiress of a proud kingdom she found herself a refugee in the castle of a petty king, the memory of her burning city still haunting her dreams. She alone had survived.

Heavy with the child forced upon her by the mercenaries who had ransomed her to the kingdom of her grand uncle the tower had become her prison. Surrounded by the luxuries of royalty she was as a leper, hidden away to conceal her condition. As though stricken with a scandalous contagion she was confined within these walls, and within these walls she wept.

The grieving heiress mourned the loss of her grandfather, the great King Ceallach, who had raised her as his own. With her sobs she beseeched the gods to release him from the kingdom of the Other World for she missed him so, with her tears she invoked the mighty Manannan who ruled there.

Never again would she make such a reckless plea.

An errant draft chilled her suddenly, carrying with it the faintest smell of incense. The fragrance took her back to days bygone, to a time long forgotten, to a world that seemed a lifetime ago, to a time when her grandfather had still held on to the tethers of his prime. It had been his favorite incense and his robes had always smelled of it. The memory made her smile a little.

“Grandfather?” she heard herself whisper, but she was answered only by the flurry of the wind that blew in from the far-away sea. The fleeting scent was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving in its wake bittersweet memories that tugged at her heart. She barely noticed that the chill had lingered, coiling about her like an ethereal serpent.

Movement caught her eye, a specter cast by the soft glow from the hearth, a shade entwined within the thick shadows of the room. Dearbhail gasped as her heart leaped in her chest but the phantom was gone, dissolved into the darkness as if it had never been.

“Hello?” she said aloud, sure that a servant had slipped unheard into her chamber on one last errand before bed, but the silence rang in her ears until the wind again rattled the shutters. The young woman rose to her feet, her back to the corner in which she’d for so long sat, and searched the shadows with eyes opened wide.

“Is anyone there?” she called out with feigned apathy, her broken voice betraying her as she stepped away from the heat and warmth of the fireside. Nervously she walked through her rooms, through the cold lightless gloom of her quarters she crept, searching for the apparition now lost amongst the shadows.

Her skin rose in goose flesh as the back of her neck was gently caressed by a sudden cold. She gasped from the chill and silently shivered, folding her arms tight against her, as the ancient smell of incense brushed passed her.

“Wait...” she called after the fragrance as if it were a living thing. Staring into the darkness she saw nothing but imaginings of ghosts forgotten long ago.

A sound jolted her from her thoughts. A crumbling sound, the sound of stone cracking and breaking, filled her small quarters. Quiet at first the sound from outside grew as if something were drawing near her window, her window high in the tower of King Canor's castle.

Casting a long shadow as she passed the smoldering fire that sent thin tendrils of smoke pouring in a constant stream up the flue Dearbhail stood unnerved before the window, suddenly afraid to open the shutters that shook against the violent winds of the storm. Reaching slowly for the latch she hesitated, watching her hand tremble before her. Knowing that she should bar the window shut she unlatched it instead, cursing her own curiosity.

The princess shrieked as the shutters blew open suddenly, filling the room with a bitter gust of freezing wind. The iron bars that spanned the window were too cold to touch, but she leaned as close as she dared to them, weathering the torrents of frigid air to see down the length of the wall. What she saw there froze her more deeply than the winds that engulfed her.

A shadow acceded toward her from the depth of the abysmal night, crawling its way it pulled itself across the ancient stone and crumbling mortar toward her window standing open to the darkness without. Transfixed she watched as the apparition drew near, wanting to believe that what she saw was a trick of light and shadow, an illusion of wind and snow, needing to believe that what she saw could not be.

Her heart beat louder and louder in her ears as the thing grew ever near until, aghast, the young heiress backed away from its long desiccated fingers that wrapped themselves around the iron bars of the window.

"Granddaughter", the whisper seemed to flow from the wind itself.

"Nooo..." she gasped as her knees went weak beneath her. The thing at the window bore a gaping wound where its left eye had been, but its right eye glared at her as she fell to the floor. Blazing with the rage of the storm the eye watched as the young princess scurried across the cold floor to the far corner of the small room.

"Nooo..." she gasped again shaking her head. *"Nooo..."*

"Come to me", the thing hissed, throwing macabre shadows across the walls as it opened its hand to her, unfurling obscenely long fingers. *"I have so much to show you"*.

Like a small child Dearbhail sat in the corner with her knees pulled up to her chest, holding them tight as her eyes welled with tears that streamed down her cheeks.

"You're dead..." she struggled to say, not looking at the window. Her voice was barely a whisper.

"I am undying," the dead king interrupted, his words riding on the very wind, boring into her with the pitiless cold. *"And I will forever exist."*

The failing flame within the hearth danced with the blowing storm and its fading light flickered across the heiress's distraught features and shivering body.

"Then what of me?" she asked weakly. *"Am I not your heir?"*

"You carry my heir within you," the dead king answered. *"You will join me, Granddaughter."*

"What of my child, then," Dearbhail asked. *"What of your heir?"*

"I will forever exist," he repeated, his mouth set maniacally. *"Let me in!"* saliva dripped from his sharp grotesque teeth.

“You want my *baby!*” Dearbhail gasped, her eyes open wide. She sat up straight and her fear was replaced by panic. “You’re here for my *baby!*”

“*What use have I for an heir, Granddaughter?*” the dead thing hissed, the embers of the fire casting a red glow across its face. “*Let me in!*”

“*Never!*” she cried, her tears welling anew. “*Never*”, she repeated softly. “*Never.*”

“*Dearbhail...*” He began.

“SHUT UP!” she yelled. “SHUT UP! SHUT UP!” her hands were balled into fists and her wrists were pressed tight against her ears. “You cannot be...” her voice was weak and broken. “You’re dead.”

“*And yet I am here,*” he countered, his smile alien and predatory. “*Open these bars.*” His words were demanding, his tone a biting hiss. “*Let me in.*”

Squeezing tears from her eyes she shook her head and cried silently for long moments.

“No,” she finally said.

“*Granddaughter...*”

“Don’t call me that!” Dearbhail yelled, emboldened by sudden anger. “My grandfather is *dead!*”

“*I am here, Dearbhail.*”

“You are a Fomorian *spawn!*” she hissed back.

“*I AM AS THE DAGDA HIMSELF,*” the king roared, causing Dearbhail to shrink even further into her corner. “*I wield death as my weapon and restore life to those I choose.*” His stare borrowed into her like a physical thing. “*I would share this with you, granddaughter. I would bid you rule beside me.*”

“But at what cost?” she asked softly, knowing full well the answer.

He again unfurled his fingers and held his hand out to her, “*Come to the window, dear one,*” he said. “*Come to me.*”

Dearbhail rose to her feet but shook her head defiantly.

“*Come,*” her grandfather beckoned.

In the dying light of the fire Ceallach was little more than a dark form from which his obscene eye blazed at her. She crept slowly toward the form, toward her grandfather whom she had always trusted, and stopped short of his outstretched fingers.

“*Give me your hand,*” he pleaded. She could not see his face, only his eye. She lifted her hand to his and stopped, hesitated, rethinking what she was about to do.

“*You will never wake in the other life,*” he whispered as the fireside went dark.