

THREE GIFTS

by Dean Whitlock

On her sixth birthday, Moira laid her right hand on the belly of a sick child, and the child was cured. For the next six years, farmers and townsfolk came from miles around to feel Moira's healing touch.

On her twelfth birthday, Moira went into a trance and, through her left eye – the blue one – foresaw the death of the old king. For the next six years, commons and gentry came from throughout the land to pay for a vision.

On her eighteenth birthday, the Secretary to the Throne himself brought Moira and her parents to the capital. There she was given apartments and fine clothes and rich food. In exchange, her only labor was to use her gift of Sight. That, and bear the fears and follies of those who sought her visions. Early on, one or two who remembered came to her for healing, but that gift faded beneath the power and demands of her Sight. For twenty-one years, whether she wished it or not, the king and his cabinet and his generals and priests came to her daily to demand what futures she might see with her blue eye. Her parents died, and all that remained to her was her Sight.

She grew to hate it.

On the morning of her thirty-ninth birthday, Moira left behind her fine clothes and wealth and the daily impatience of the court. All she carried with her was a bit of bread, a small bag of coins, and a life of bitter memories. Wrapped in a loose cloak and hood that hid her dark hair and mixed-color eyes, she slipped out through back doors to back alleys traveled by tired people with no will to guess at the quiet figure who walked past them. She kept her head down like theirs and avoided their touch, sick to heart of the company of all people. She stayed head down with her hood pulled low till she came to the first muddy creek that fed Great Bay. Then, with the tang of salt and marsh grass lifting her spirit, she lifted her head and walked upright, hood flung back and both eyes staring forward toward the present.

In another three days, she came to the cottage on the leeward brow of Weather Head. There, in the home she had left twenty-one years before, she made a simple meal of food bought in the village beyond the marsh and drank a homecoming toast of new wine. Then she settled like a seal on a sunny rock, content to watch the days go by her door and the tide turn in a simple pattern that anyone could divine, with or without the gift of Sight. She would have stayed there, too, and grown to an old woman, happy to be alone, but for the coming – and going – of Brother Simon.

On the very next morning after she reached the cottage, in the middle days of September, Moira rose to fog, a cataract of swirling cloud borne in off the sea on the back of the full moon tide. The soft new world beyond her doorway beckoned. She stepped out into curling damp and felt the grasses catch at the clinging hem of her skirt. With a skip in her heart she bent to kilt it up and saw a blue flower turned pastel in the fog. The sky was gray, the grass was gray, the very air was gray. Only the color blue remained, in a petaled wheel. It was the color of her left eye.

She took that as an omen and turned toward the sound of waves to walk by feel and memory down the narrow path to the beach. The way seemed longer than she remembered, and the path more rugged, but then it took the final turn and led her out onto the granite ledge that dipped into soft sand, the only sand for miles on either side of Weather Head. She pressed her toes through the few grains of damp into dryness. She sighed with a memory of childhood. The fog swirled past her face on a warming breeze.

Without a thought to the future or a care for another soul, she walked down through soft sand and firm sand to the edge of the ebbing tide. Thin lines of gray-white foam lapped gently at the shore. The quiet waves still held the leftover warmth of summer. Moira shrugged off her blouse, slid from her skirt, and walked into the water. She swam and floated, tasted salt, and felt the cool touch of the sea caress her tired skin. Standing waist deep where the gentle swell could rise from thigh to breast, she closed her eyes and saw nothing. She opened them and saw only gray. For the first time since her youth, she was truly alone, far from the grasping eyes of her daily audience. She felt free.

Then, in a sudden twist of wind, the gray fog thinned above her head and sunlight came down in a gold nimbus that seemed somehow both dim and too bright at once. She looked up at a circle of hue that was not quite a rainbow, then looked back down to see the whole length of the beach bending out to the granite ledge of the lesser headland that had no name but served to

frame the sand. And standing on the beach was a man.

At first Moira thought it was her Sight, and the figure a vision of someone's future. She closed her eyes and rubbed her hand hard against the left one, willing it to normal vision. "I left you in the city," she muttered, commanding her unloved talent to leave her. So, when she opened her eyes again, she knew that what she saw was real, even though the man was still there, swirled round by broken strands of fog. She felt anger at his presence. It marred her solitude.

The man was bent over with his back to her, standing on the hard sand in the range of the tide, just beyond the reach of the ebbing waves. The fog distorted his image, and Moira wondered if he were sick, or if he had lost something, or if he were crippled. As if to answer her, he made two or three sharp gestures against the sand with his right hand and stood up, straight and easy. Then he turned toward her. His eyes were closed, and his face held a look she had seen only half a dozen times in her thirty-nine years. One of those people had just given birth to her first child. One had just triumphed in battle. One had just knelt in prayer.

The man stood that way, erect and wordless, moving slightly to the pulse of the waves. The fog swirled back and forth. Then the man turned away and walked a few steps down the beach, bent again, and swung his hand across the sand. Moira saw that he was writing.

The shielding sea was around her, but it was getting cold, and he seemed so intent she decided to try for the shelter of her clothes. She moved quietly sideways through the water, then made quickly for them. Halfway up the hard sand, she stepped on a row of script drawn in fine lines along the beach. Surprised, Moira forgot she was naked and stopped to study the characters. They were no writing she knew. They were more like pictographs inscribed in the sand with a sharp blade. She saw one like a fish and another like a bird, but there were many more that were simply curved lines and intersections, circles and patterns of quick slashes in the gray-brown parchment offered by the beach.

She frowned with the effort of reading something that would not be read. Then she laughed wryly at her stubborn efforts. "You've given up the Sight," she told herself, "yet here you are fixed on seeing the meaning of everything. And you are naked."

She looked around furtively, and found herself watched by the man. He was yards away, at the other end of the line of drawings or words or whatever it was in the sand. She saw he had blue eyes, like the blue of her flower, incongruous under dark hair and heavy brows. They were both blue. And they were quite startled.

Moira blushed. She turned away and went quickly to her clothes. She looked back at him, and saw he had turned away and was facing the sea. His lips moved as though he were speaking to it. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, then flushed when he saw her looking and turned farther away. Moira, grateful for his uncommon grace, quickly donned her clothes. Brushing back her dark wet hair, she turned to him and called, "Good morning."

He glanced at her and away, nodded. "It is," he replied. "The sea is calm." His voice was a bit rough, a match to his hair and brows. His words seemed a match to the enigmatic line of text that stretched between them. It wasn't what he said, for the sea was truly calm. It was how he spoke. He made the words a benediction.

"Forgive me the embarrassment," she said curtly. "I had no idea there was anyone here."

"It's no bother," he replied. "I shouldn't have stared so. It was just . . . when I saw you step from the sea . . . the fog made me think . . ." He seemed at a loss for words and glanced down at the line of marks he had made in the sand, bent as if to write more, but hesitated. "I thought perhaps you were an angel," he admitted finally, and he blushed a little as he said it.

Moira laughed, but not in humor. "I've heard many people call me devil," she said. "Never an angel. My name is Moira. I live up there."

She gestured back toward Weather Head, and he glanced up briefly.

"It is a gifted spot," he said.

His choice of words made her turn and look up at the headland, with its sweep of grass and the blunted trees that stood barely roof-high behind her little cottage. Her eyes followed the seamed granite down past roosting gulls to the gray-blue water, now almost clear of fog, then back along the tidal shelf to the beach. The lifting sun turned the tops of the waves silver.

"Yes," she agreed, coming back at last to face him. "It is."

He was writing again, or whatever it was. He broke off once more, and they stood a moment, regarding each other in silence. He glanced at Moira's left eye, then brought his gaze back to the rest of her face.

"Do you have a name?" she asked brusquely, resenting that glance.

He blushed again beneath his sun-browned skin. "I do," he admitted, standing straighter. "I am called Brother Simon."

"Well, Brother Simon," she said, "where do you live?"

"I live here," he replied, with a gesture toward the far end of the beach.

Moira saw nothing that resembled a house, and suspected he was a homeless wretch who had settled for the season on this, her beach. She hoped the coming fall would send him inland to warmer nests.

“Well,” she said again, “I enjoy walking and I enjoy swimming. I hope that won’t disrupt your daily tasks.”

He shook his head. “I let nothing disrupt my prayers. When I see you come down, I will move to the little head and make them there.”

“Thank you,” Moira said dryly, but he had already bent again, to mark quick, slicing figures on the sand.

She turned and walked back up the path, her enchanted morning spoiled, and her curiosity over his strange writing unsatisfied.

She saw Brother Simon only at a distance the next day. He was there on the beach when she came out in the morning, but he moved away as soon as he saw her. She swam with a wary eye his way, but he stayed a dark spot at the edge of the far headland. Then she walked along the mile or so of beach, and he disappeared around the curve of the rocks. She spied his home, a shanty of grayed wood thatched with salt-marsh hay and hardly large enough to lie down in. An outdoor hearth of rounded stones showed the remains of last night’s fire. She smelled cooked fish. His strange script covered the sand by the water. The tide had erased his lines of the day before, yet he had already covered the better part of the beach with new designs. Her curiosity rose.

The next morning, he was nowhere to be seen, and she walked all the way to the rocks at the far end of the beach, studying his writing. Just as she got there, Brother Simon clambered over the top of the little head and stopped with an *oh* of surprise. His hands were full of mussels, wet and black and barnacled.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I didn’t know you were here.”

His presence irked her, but she said, “There’s nothing to forgive.”

He smiled pleasantly, almost with relief it seemed, and showed her the mussels.

“Breakfast,” he said. “Would you like some?” Moira started to refuse but he insisted. “There are plenty,” he said. “Our Father is generous.”

“I will take a few then,” she said.

“As many as you like,” he told her, offering the handful.

She pulled out three and dropped them into her pocket, where they immediately soaked through to wet her thigh. Frowning, she turned and walked back toward Weather Head. Simon walked beside her, and Moira tried to ignore him, but soon enough she realized he was limping.

“What have you done to your foot?” she asked.

“It’s nothing,” he replied. “I stepped on an urchin.”

She thought it served him right and walked on in silence, but the pain in his step was so obvious that she couldn’t ignore it. “Did you get all of the spines out?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said.

“Let me see,” she ordered. He started to protest, but she insisted. “They can fester.”

She made him sit, and crouched in the sand to look at his foot. In the peak of the arch she saw a pattern of black spots in his thick brown sole. Several were already ringed with red.

“Hold still,” she ordered, and she squeezed at one of them with her fingers, trying to force out the broken spine. Simon gasped and gritted his teeth, but kept his foot still. Moira looked at the pain on his face and back at the red spots. Her right hand began to tingle, a tiny feeling, like the distant memory of a touch. Uncertainly, she placed her palm upon his sole and closed her eyes, letting happen whatever healing was there. When she lifted her hand away, she was almost surprised to see that the spots were smaller and the redness had begun to fade.

He was staring at her with amazement. “The pain is almost gone,” he said. “What did you do?”

“Very little,” she said dryly. “There was a time I was a healer, but that was long ago.”

“Not so very long,” he remarked. “My foot is now healed.”

“Not hardly,” she told him, “and it wasn’t much of a wound to begin with. The real power has left me.”

“How so?” he asked. “To lose such a gift?”

She rose stiffly and brushed the sand from her skirt. “I saw too much that took the joy out of healing.”

She started walking, and he scrambled up and hurried to match her pace. His limp was gone. She stared at the sand, squinting in the bitter glare of memories. The silence grew awkward. As they neared his little hut, though, she realized she was staring at his pictures in the sand, so she asked him, “What are these writings?”

“They are prayers,” he said simply.

“I can’t read them,” she said. “What language is that?”

He flushed a little and admitted, “No language. I never learned to write words.”

“Do they mean something?” she pressed.

He nodded. “Yes, they are prayers.”

The naiveté of his answer irked her more than his company. How could there be meaning without words? “To who?” she demanded. “Who reads these wordless prayers of yours?”

He looked out toward the blue-gray lens of the sea and said, “Our Father. Two times each day He feels these shapes with the fingers of His waves, and then He knows the prayers that are in my soul.”

Moira looked up and down the beach, at the long lines of design scratched from one headland to the other in the sand. She looked out at the long lines of waves that waited for the tide to push them over the beach, so they could scour the sand clean.

“Twice each day?” she wondered. “Is this some penance?”

“No, it is prayer.” He grinned self-consciously. “I was a farmer inland,” he said. “I never saw our Father Sea until this year, though I had heard tales of His great size and depth and His constant tides. When I saw Him, I knew the tales were but whispers of His true glory. I knew I was meant to worship Him.”

“You think the sea is God?” she asked in disbelief.

“God is everywhere,” Simon told her, “but I see Him best in the sea.”

“Oh,” Moira replied, and felt stupid saying something so plain in response to a statement so vast.

He stared out at the sea, as if transfixed. “What do you see when you pray?” he asked.

“I don’t pray,” she answered. “Thank you for the mussels, and wash that foot well in the salt water. It can still fester.”

She turned and walked away, feeling his startled eyes upon her.

Moira stayed at her end of the beach for several days. Simon stayed at his end when she was out, though she saw him bent to his twice daily task whenever the tide was low. He came to write on her end of the beach only when she returned to her cottage. She was surprised to find his prayers waiting on the sand no matter how early she rose. Curious, she watched late one night, and saw him writing by firelight, dragging an old brazier along the beach beside him with a rusty chain. He lived by the tides, not the sun.

His drawings were always close enough to the water that the tide would reach them, and they always stretched the full length of the beach. And though they were graceful and often beautiful, she was irritated when they blocked her way to the water. She found herself reluctant to walk on them, and that irked her even more. She picked her way between them at first, feeling constrained to a path that was not her own choosing. She remembered her daily walks through the palace and the shuttered glances of everyone she passed. She had walked a maze to avoid those prying and fearful eyes, till she had finally learned to ignore them. She tried to ignore Simon's writings and walk straight down to the water. If he noticed, it made no difference. Every day and every night he wrote his prayers.

She realized eventually that his presence had constrained her to less than a quarter of the beach. She also realized that it was she who let his presence meddle in her life. On that morning, when she ended her swim, she set off again to walk all the way to the little head.

The tide was high, covering all sign of Simon's prayers. Moira walked briskly at the top of the beach, enjoying the work of stepping through soft sand. She saw Simon ahead of her, sitting outside his little hut, but kept her path straight. When she reached him, she stopped and said good morning, determined to be civil. He looked up from his work and smiled.

"It is a good morning," he said. "The Sea is calm."

He was bending saplings into a hoop as tall as himself, tying the ends with rawhide strips that were soaking in his old pot. There were more saplings beside him, and as he spoke, he lifted one and tied its end into the join of the hoop.

"What's this you're making?" she asked.

"A coracle," he replied.

"To use on the sea?" she asked skeptically.

"Yes," he said, "on calm days. I admit I'm no sailor, but I thought I would like to float on the breast of our Father." He grinned at her and added, "I might even catch more fish."

She laughed. "Aren't you afraid of offending him? They are, after all, his fish."

He became serious. "He provides them for our use, as He provides barley and wheat, goats and sheep. We are all His creatures, and we all serve His purpose, each in our place."

Moira had no quick answer to such calm assurance. "How will you cover this boat of yours?" she asked, changing the subject brusquely.

"A farmer a little way inland has given me an ox hide and this rawhide," he said.

“A generous man,” she commented dryly. “There are few of them in this world.”

“I have found many,” he said.

“And how did you repay his kindness?” she demanded.

“With prayer,” Simon replied.

And just as he spoke, Moira heard someone cough. She looked inland to see a young woman coming down a path that ended at the line of grasses just above Simon’s hut. The woman stopped when she saw Moira and hesitated at the edge of the beach, but she gathered her resolve and stepped down onto the sand. Simon put aside his sapling hoop and stood to greet her.

“Good morning, my child,” he said, and Moira saw that the woman was indeed just past her childhood, a pale, thin girl of a woman with a great sadness in her eyes. She glanced again at Moira, who didn’t try to hide her irritation at this new intrusion on her solitude. The girl looked away quickly.

“Good morning. Brother Simon,” she said faintly, and coughed again. She stepped forward and a little away from Moira.

Simon waited patiently, with his hands folded before him. “What can I do for you?” he asked gently.

“I . . . I’ve brought this,” she said, taking another step forward and holding out a round, striped squash.

“Why, thank you, my child,” he said. He took it from her and she stepped back. Her movements were quick and timid. “I will pray for you,” Simon told her, and her great sadness changed to great hope.

She bobbed her head and mumbled her thanks. Then, with another stifled glance at Moira and another cough, she turned and fled up the path.

Simon watched her go with a look on his face that was both calm and troubled at once. His hands cradled the squash absently.

“Another pilgrim come to barter for your services, I see,” Moira said sourly. “Soon the whole village will be here.”

Simon seemed not to hear. “She was married last year,” he said, “and has still not conceived. I write prayers that she will.”

“Some women are barren,” Moira remarked coolly, “or, more likely, their husbands are.”

Simon looked at her. “She coughs night and day,” he said. “I sometimes wonder if there

might be some illness in her.”

“Then perhaps you should pray first for a cure,” Moira said, “and then for a baby.”

“I have prayed for a cure,” Simon replied, smiling, “and now you have come.”

“What do you mean by that?” Moira demanded, though she well knew.

“You are a healer,” he said. “The next time she comes—”

“I am not a healer,” Moira snapped. “No longer.”

“It is your gift,” he said. “I have felt it myself. My foot is completely healed.”

“The salt water did that,” Moira told him.

“No,” he insisted, “you have the gift.”

“Damn your gifts,” she said angrily. “I have had two too many of them and they are worthless.”

“But to heal . . . ,” he said, his voice rising in awe.

“To heal! To see!” Moira spat into the sand. “I will tell you a story about these gifts. Once a prince, a man whose stupidity was outmatched only by his greed, came to ask a vision of me. ‘Who will I marry?’ he demanded. Would it be the daughter of a certain rich noble – whose lands, I might add, the prince greatly desired? I tried very hard not to have a vision for this man, but there is no denying this so-called gift, and it came upon me anyway. I saw him old and alone, with neither wife nor heir. And do you know what he did, Brother Simon? He had the girl killed for refusing him, though he had never yet asked for her hand.”

Simon shook his head, horrified. “The man was evil,” he said. “You can’t judge everyone by him.”

“A matter only of degree,” she told him. “Princes and peasants and priests, you are all alike. You exclaim about my wondrous gifts and how they help the poor and sick and powerless, when all you want really is the power they can give you. How nice for you that my gift would give power to your prayers. I tell you, Brother Simon, I have seen how men use these gifts. I have seen—”

Moira stopped shouting and stared at Brother Simon. His coarse face began to waver before her eyes. The beach darkened and blurred as though underwater.

“No,” she said, lifting her hands to cover her left eye.

It was too late. In a rush, her world went black and a vision came upon her.

When real sight returned, she was kneeling on the sand, and Simon was holding her head

to keep her from pitching headlong into his hearth. With a strange attention to detail, the first clear thing she saw was the girl's squash, lying half buried in the sand where he had dropped it. She looked up and let her body sag back. Simon slowly let go.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded and muttered yes with a dry mouth. He seemed to know and brought her a cup of water. She drank gratefully. Then she stared out at the sea, letting the last of the dizziness fade with the receding image of her vision.

"What did you see?" Simon asked, squatting beside her. His voice was gruff with wonder and a little fear, as if he had guessed.

"I saw your death," she told him simply, because she could not lie or refuse to tell. That was a part of this hated gift.

He drew in a breath and sat back on his heels. After a long pause, while he searched her face and the surface of the sea, he asked her, "How?"

"In a storm," she said. "You were standing knee-deep in the water, and a giant wave swept you under. You didn't try to swim."

"I don't know how," he said calmly.

Moira shook herself and sat more upright. "Then you should learn," she told him, feeling not at all calm.

He shook his head and said, "No."

"Do you want to drown?" Moira demanded harshly.

"If God wills it, it will happen," he said. His calm unnerved her and she felt tears start in her eyes. Simon's look turned to one of concern. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she snapped, but she was shaking. "I'm sorry," she said then, taking a deep breath. "The Sight does this to me."

"It is a frightful gift," he said.

"No gift," she muttered.

"As you will," he replied. "Let me make some tea."

Simon dumped out the rawhide and boiled chamomile and mint in his old pot. Moira drank the tea gratefully while he went back to work on his coracle.

"Thank you," she said when she was done. She set down the cup and rose, stiff and still shaky. "I must go back to the cottage."

He set aside the frame of saplings and rose with her. "And I must begin my prayers," he said. Moira stared at the waterline, surprised to see the tide already so low.

Simon picked up a thin shard of broken shell from a small collection by his hearth and stood a moment, watching her face. "Will you visit again?" he asked.

She sighed. "Will you promise to forget that I was ever a healer?"

"I will promise," he said, "if you promise not to walk on my prayers."

Moira promised.

She found it an easy promise to keep, even if it did seem like tracking through a maze at times to get near the water. But the weather grew cold soon and put an end to her swimming. She still took her walks, but they paralleled Brother Simon's prayers.

The cold did not stop Simon from his twice-daily task, nor from setting out in his little coracle whenever the weather was calm. He did catch more fish that way, and shared them willingly with Moira. She returned his kindness with bread and turnips and cabbage and other items that she had laid in with the coins she carried from the city. She would not take gifts from him; she would only share.

And she was not alone in that. The young woman came again, still coughing, and there were others, men and women, who came with food or sandals or an old cloak. They came at high tide. If they didn't – if they arrived when Brother Simon was writing – he greeted them brusquely and made them wait by his hut. For hours, if need be. He would not let them disrupt his prayers. Which were what they all came for. He honored their wishes, scribing the sand diligently whenever the tide was out. He did this in cold and mist and even in rain, though the raindrops speckled his drawings and a downpour washed them away.

"The rain washes them into the Sea," he said. "It's all the same."

The storm season came then, and still Brother Simon worked. Moira brought him tea and hot stew, which he accepted with the same serious grace as he had her turnips. He had less to offer in return, for the heavy swells were more often too much for his coracle. Still, he found mussels and whelks and clams, and there was always an abundance of snails. Moira took some, but never many. On a gray windy day in November, she brought him a blanket, which he held gingerly for a moment, as though he would refuse.

Finally, he folded it square and laid it beside him on the cowhide that floored his little hut. "I will say a special prayer for you," he said.

“No,” she told him, “waste no prayers on me. Save them for the others.”

“No prayer is ever a waste,” he said.

“You can give me your next fish,” she replied. “I have missed them.”

He smiled, and she smiled back, realizing how much she had come to appreciate this odd neighbor, despite the too many supplicants his presence drew to her beach.

As she walked home in the early twilight, though, she felt the wind freshen and turn about to blow in from the sea. The waves rolled heavily onto the beach in unbroken lines edged with blowing spume. The prayers of the last tide were already washed from view. She glanced back at Simon’s tiny hut and wondered how it would fare the night. A fitful light shone through the doorway as the flap of hide blew in the wind. She saw his silhouette tie down the hide, and the hut went dark, a squat cone huddled at the edge of the sand.

That night, the wind and the booming sea kept Moira awake through the darkness. It rained in brief gusts that rattled against the walls of her cottage. There was no sign of moon or stars. She looked out once and saw total darkness. She looked out later and saw the gleam of a light on the beach below. The tide had gone out, and Simon was at his work. She could see the light flicker madly in the stiff wind. She could just glimpse the edge of his body, outlined in the wavering glow. The lines of foam were edged with red from his fire, and they seemed to rear up behind him to twice his height and plunge up the beach to the very shadow of his heels.

The storm continued into morning, and at midday Moira went down onto the beach. Simon was there again, his back turned to the surging waves. His lines of prayer were broken here and there by loops of sand scoured smooth by rogue waves that ignored the march of the tide.

She walked to where he worked and stood with the lines of words between them. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Simon,” she called, shouting against the wind.

He looked up vaguely, as if he were under a spell.

“Turn around,” she called. “Don’t turn your back to a storm like this.”

He frowned, nodded, and bent back to his work.

Again she shouted, “Simon!” Again he lifted his head, not rising, hand still stretched toward the sand. “You could be swept away,” she called. “Turn around.”

He turned then, to look at the sea with an expression of awe and devotion. As if the sea

had heard her, a huge wave broke right before them and rushed up the beach, wrapping their legs with foam and icy water. It carved the sand from under Moira's feet and made her stagger against its pull. Simon reached down and let it drag at his hand as it rushed back out to meet the next wave surging in.

Moira stepped to Simon's side and took his arm. "Move farther up the beach," she asked. He obliged her with two steps.

"Farther," she told him, but he resisted and she grew angry. "Don't be a fool," she snapped. "Do you *want* to be drowned?"

"If it is God's will," he replied, in a voice so soft she almost couldn't hear it.

"What?" she demanded, jerking at his arm.

Quickly, firmly, he removed her hand. "If God wills it," he said, "I will be drowned."

"God does not will it!" Moira shouted, with more force than the wind demanded. "Why would he want you to die?"

"I can't profess to understand the ways of our Father," Simon answered. "Perhaps he is pleased with me and is calling me to him." He stared pensively at the sea. "But maybe I have angered him in some way."

Moira gestured at the sea and said, "Take the shutters from your eyes, Simon. There is no malice in this storm. These waves are not messengers. The wind blows over the whole coastline, not just this tiny beach!"

But Simon shook his head. "You are thinking in human terms," he said. "You yourself saw me drowned. How else could you have seen it were it not a part of God's plan?"

Moira turned away, cursing her baneful eye. Then she spun back and cried out at him, "For all you know, it's the devil's plan! I have been blessed and cursed and prayed at and reviled by thousands of fools, none of whom understood my Sight any better than you. Do you see now why I curse these so-called gifts? Because people like you treat them as gospel in spite of all reason."

He straightened again. "Why do you curse your healing?" he asked.

"Because it stopped working!" she shouted.

Then, with an effort, she calmed herself. She stood between him and the sea and took his arm again. "Simon," she pleaded, "don't by foolishness make my vision come true."

He tried to remove her hand again, but she wouldn't let him.

He glared, stifling impatience. "Have any of your visions not come true?" he asked her.

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No," she admitted. "None that I know of."

"Then who is the fool?" he demanded.

"The vision didn't show the season," she insisted. "It doesn't have to be now."

"It will happen when it happens," he agreed. "It is God's will."

She dropped her hand and said, "No, Simon, no. I have seen years of visions, years of deaths and births and wars and plagues and quests and findings. Never did I see a pattern, never a reason. Never did I feel the hand of God, any god."

"Then how do you explain this?" He raised his hands to the majesty of the churning, blowing sea.

"It is a human thing to feel wonder," she replied.

"But this storm," he said. "So soon after your vision, how do you explain this?"

"The wind," she said. "It blows the water into waves."

"And what makes the wind?" he asked.

"The sun," she said. "Or the turning of the stars. I don't know, any more than I know what caused my Sight. But I don't need to create a God just so I can claim to understand it."

"Oh," he said, "I never claimed to understand Him. But I know He is there. Now, please, you're in my way. I must keep praying. He must know."

He walked around her and went back to his writing, and Moira hunched her shoulders and went back up to the soft sand. She stood there watching him, wondering what she could say to make him at least move higher up the beach. She had given up hope of making him put aside his task. Even she felt awe before this raging sea.

She watched Simon move away from her, slicing quickly at the sand with his broken shell, enraptured. Almost, she could envy him the simplicity of his life. She looked out at the sea again, and tried to let the wonder take her. She tried to see the face of God.

What she saw was a giant wave, cresting beyond the lowest reach of the tide and surging even higher as it sucked smaller waves back from the beach and made them part of its arching mass. It broke with a force that shook the beach and a roar that drowned the wind. Simon stood straight. He turned to face it. He watched, smiling, as it swept toward him.

Moira watched, too, hand to her mouth, unable to speak or move.

The foam was chest high when it struck Brother Simon, but he stood against it for a

moment, long enough for it to surround him. It held him upright, arms and head above the water as it floated him toward Moira. The farthest reach of the wave washed over the soft sand and touched her feet. Then it began to recede, carrying Simon with it. His head went down, his feet showed above the water. He rolled over and over in the dirty brown foam. And he made no move to save himself.

Anger stirred in Moira, anger at Simon and all the other believers who let her visions rule their futures without question. The anger overcame her fear. She threw off her cloak, tore off her dress, and ran down the beach into the cold, grasping water. She stumbled against its mass, using her hands to drag herself faster toward Simon's receding body. He surged up over a smaller swell, then somersaulted backward at the top of the next crest. His arms flailed aimlessly in the swirl of the water. Moira dove under one wave and swam up the face of the second.

It broke in her eyes, blinding her with salt. She gagged on a mouthful of seawater and shook her eyes clear. The water seemed thick. It swirled and shifted in strange currents that broke her rhythm. She swam uphill and ducked under another wall of spray. She came up gasping, searching for Simon in the heaving waves. She swam up the next hill of water, feeling its weight on her arms. Her breath was ragged and sour. She topped the wave only to see another, larger swell bearing down on her. Before she could duck her head, it broke over her, and something large and heavy rolled onto her back.

It was Simon. Moira grabbed for his arms and felt him slipping away in the churning top of the wave. With a desperate effort, she kicked herself forward and clutched him around the chest. Her lungs ached with panic, but the wave was past, and she was able to force her head through clinging foam into air. She gulped half a breath, then twisted around and caught Simon from behind and under the arms. She held his head above the water and drew in breath after grateful breath.

The next wave came and almost tore Simon from her grasp, but it also pushed them closer toward land. Moira put her body between him and the waves and let the tide help her, swimming as much as she could down the hills of water, floating forward in the lines of foam. Finally they were at the beach, where a wave crested high and tumbled them over in a painful tangle of limbs. It tried to suck them back in, but Moira braced her feet in the shifting sand and held firmly to Simon. Each wave pushed them a little higher.

Then she had to drag him, staggering under his weight with muscles that shook with

fatigue. She let him fall where the sand met the grass at the very top of the beach. She knelt beside him, gasping for breath, and tried to find breath in him.

There was nothing there. His chest was still. His eyes were an empty blue. Moira sank back onto the sand, feeling weary and bitter beyond words, but she knew she couldn't just lie there and let him die. She forced herself over onto her side and reached out her hand to his chest. With little hope, she laid her palm over his heart and closed her eyes, letting happen whatever healing was there.

She lay that way a long time, while the wind blew against her numb body, and the waves shook the beach beneath her. She seemed to doze almost, or to enter a trance. When Simon's chest lifted beneath her hand, she hardly noticed.

"What are you doing?" she heard him say.

With a surge of strength and wonder, she opened her eyes and rose onto her elbow, turning to face him with weary joy.

He stared at her, as though confused. "What have you done?" he said, and there was horror in his voice.

"What you wanted," she said. "I used my gift. I healed you."

"Healed me?" he demanded. "By what right? My Lord has called me to Him!"

"No," she said. "Don't you see?"

But he only glared at her and said, "Are you a devil, after all? How can you stand against your vision?"

"But the healing," she replied, bewildered by exhaustion and the anger in his voice. "My first gift was healing. It's come back to me."

"I was not meant to be healed!" he yelled, trying to rise. "I was meant to drown. In the Sea!"

"What of the girl with the cough?" she demanded. "What of your supplicants? Who will pray for them? Or should they all drown with you? Is that your God's will?"

He ignored her. He sank back on the sand, too weak to crawl toward the sea, but there was a great force in his eyes. He relaxed against the sand and said, "I am coming, Father." Then he crossed his hands on his chest and closed his eyes.

"Simon!" Moira cried. "You are alive!"

He clenched his jaw, and she was too weak to rise and force his eyes open. She laid her

hand back on his chest and felt his heartbeat, steady beneath her palm. She willed it to stay that way.

But Simon's faith in her Sight prevailed. His breathing slowed despite her, till it was almost nothing. Then, suddenly, as if someone had blown out a candle, his heart stopped. She lay beside him till her hand grew numb and her body trembled from the cold, but his heart stayed still.

The storm blew out by morning. The sun rose over a calming sea, gray-blue under a pale blue sky. Moira still felt numb, but she went down to the beach anyway, to where Simon's body lay on the sand. She sat by him, watching, as the sea grew more and more still. She cursed it silently, and she cursed her Sight as she never had before. She looked at Simon's still face and longed to see his rough smile, or even his impatient frown. She could not bring herself to curse him for dying, only for being so selfish. She cried then, heavy tears that tasted of waves and began to wash the chill from her heart. Slowly, her spirit calmed, like the sea.

When the sun had peaked, she brought the coracle from where he had tied it behind the line of grass. She set it at the water's edge and placed large stones in the bottom. Then she dragged Simon's body down across the empty sand and laid him inside. It took a long time, for her arms and legs still ached with weariness. But finally he was inside, and she tied his hands and feet to the frame. She took off her dress and waited for the rising tide to lift the little craft off the sand. She pushed it out, stepped in beside him, then took the paddle and drew the coracle far out past the gentle swells to deep water.

"Be at rest," she told him, and she took the sharp piece of shell that he had used to draw in the sand and cut a slit in the oxhide shell of the boat. As the water came in, she slipped over the side and began swimming toward the shore.

She had gone out farther than she thought, and the cold water numbed her again. She swam more and more slowly, till she was hardly treading water still a long way from shore. Almost, she stopped completely. Almost, she made the choice to let herself die. But she remembered Brother Simon foundering in the waves. She remembered the anger that had made her save him. She remembered him choosing to die. Moira gritted her teeth and swung her arms harder. She reached the shore.

By the time she had strength to stand, there was no sign of Brother Simon's coracle. Shivering, Moira drew on her dress and walked slowly to his little hut. The storm had torn large

holes in the thatch. The hide flap over the doorway had blown away completely. Moira looked inside, but there was nothing there to set aright, only his old pot and the brazier he had used to light his night-time writings.

As she stepped back outside, Moira heard a cough. Turning, she saw the pale face of the young woman who had come so often seeking prayers. The girl seemed even thinner in the cold light of late day. She bore a pumpkin that seemed bright and huge below her pale, frail face.

“Is Brother Simon here?” she asked timidly.

“No,” Moira said, with a catch in her voice that she couldn’t quite control. “He’s gone.”

All hope fled the girl’s face, and Moira felt a sudden kinship. That barren glance seemed a mirror to her own spirit on the day before she left the palace.

If Simon were here, she thought, he would offer the kindness of prayer.

It came to her then that kindness had been Simon’s true gift, no matter that he held back even that at the end. Whatever his reasons, it was a gift to match either of hers. It also came to her that, although Simon was dead, she, Moira, was not. And life required gifts. Tears came again to her eyes as she thought of the gifts she had to give: Sight that people lacked the wisdom to use, and healing that she lacked the strength to offer.

Then, as if in a vision, she saw the girl holding, not a pumpkin, but a child.

It was her last vision, though she did not know it then. It was the one vision she accepted with joy.

“Come here, child,” she said.

The girl glanced fearfully at her left eye.

Moira smiled. “It’s all right,” she said, “I can’t harm you.” She held out just her hand, knowing that the girl would flee if she moved more than that.

The girl came, slowly and fearfully, but she did come.

“Hold still,” Moira said. “I am a healer.”

She laid her hand on the girl’s chest. The girl flinched, but stayed. Moira closed her eyes and saw Brother Simon’s face, but it was only memory. She felt a great sadness.

Then she put it aside, to let happen whatever healing was there.

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