

The Ulhbunot

Even the clouds, thick with disdain, could not obscure the creature's approach. Though it was far away from them and far behind them, it pierced through. Its face surround in wings, three, naive to mortal shapes yet seeming, all the same, to glare upon that lonely coast where, over cracked leaves and chained metal's groan, Shorah raised skyward a shackled hand.

"Do you see it now, Morhann?"

"Aye."

"These waves. They are just the progeny of its beating wings. The Ulhbunot will eat this island whole when it gets here."

"Aye. I see it," and so Morhann would, that night and all others, between damp and beam, watching as it stayed the dawn.



"We're dismantling it today then, Morhann?"

"We can probably get away with a few more nights if you wanted."

"No, let's just get it done. I can barely move as it is. I'd rather not wait any longer."

"Aye, alright. It is a pretty shanty though. Almost seems a shame to take it down."

"We're getting good, at least. I'm sure we can rebuild the thing just as well - better, even."

"Aye, some of this wood'll need replacing first."

"Is there any left back home?"

"Maybe a bit. I don't think I took it all last time."

"Well, I'll get started if you want to head over there."

Morhann went inland for the old house, where it once was, farther now than ever, beyond the impressions of their past settlements, each dotted with twine and odd nails just about twinkly beneath the rust, the dirt, the rocks.

Written in mud by suppler hands, the worn signature of their first home held still a little timber; way deep and rot-full, it would take some digging.

"Shorah... Shorah?"

“Yes. Is everything alright?”

“I’m back.”

“How was it?”

“Ah, a half-dozen planks maybe. This one here’s full of worms and this one’s sodden as anything. How’re you? Lazing around, I see.”

“Oh, really? I’ve practically disassembled the whole hut while you were away getting that sorry prize.”

“This one plank is pretty good, actually.”

“Alright, I’ll let you off then. Now, come on, feel free to help.”

“I reckon that was our quickest job yet.”

“Yeah. Impressive, given you didn’t arrive till halfway through.”

“It’s definitely all in the sheet? You haven’t forgotten any this time?”

“Yes, it’s all there.”

“Right. You ready to start dragging, then?”

“Not especially. Are you sure we can’t do two trips?”

“Aye. It’s easier this way. More efficient.”

“Here? Morhann? Plea- please can w- can we stop here?”

“No, bi- bit further. Save having t’ rebu- rebuild again too soon.”

“How about now?”

“Aye. Here works.”

“Ahhh, thank goodness. Give me a second.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Right. You lay the wood, I’ll bash it into place.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“You can pick.”

“You’re entrusting me with designing the hut?”

“Well I don’t trust you with a hammer and I’m sick of doing all the work meself.”

“Ha! I’ve never told you how funny you are, Morhann.”

“Haha. No, you haven’t.”

“No, I haven’t”.

“There we are.”

“It’s crooked, Morhann”

“Ah, you won’t notice from the inside.”
“I don’t need to, I’ve already noticed from out here.”
“It should do us for a while, either way.”
“Yeah, there’s a decent amount of slack in the chain now.”
“Aye.”



Shorah’s chain ran ever rustier along its passage to the sea. It creaked at quieter moments, for attention, to make naked the daintily covered truth that it was pulling Shorah away and down, with it, into the ocean.



“What’s in the pot?”
“Nothing. It occurred to me that we haven’t done your wrists for a while, Shorah. I’ve just boiled some water for them.”
“They don’t feel too bad.”
“Even so, I can see that they’re sore around the shackles. It should’ve cooled a little by now. Here, give us your hands.”
The circles Morhann drew in Shorah’s palm traced themselves upon the base of the spine and up the neck. Whatever embarrassment remained in these moments was wiped away in the blisterous pus, leaving only the shame of it ever having been embarrassing at all. Morhann’s face, looking down, ugly with concentration, was a gift, an imposter to the featureless backdrop upon which it lived.
“You alright, Shorah?”
“Yes, I’m fine. Carry on.”

“There you go.”
“Thanks, Morhann.”
“Does it feel any better?”
“Yeah, yeah. Thank you.”
“Good. Do you fancy a walk?”
“Sure, that would be nice.”

“The ground is softer here, at least.”
“It is, yeah.”
“Bit cold though... Shorah?”

“Sorry. Yeah it is quite chilly... Is it bad to admit that I often can’t think of something to say.”

“You’re allowed to not say anything.”

“Ha. Okay then.”

“No, I mean, I agree. We do the same stuff all the time, there’s nothing else to do. What is there to talk about, really?”

“Yeah. It just feels like a waste.”

“Aye, I know what you mean.”



“You’re going to miss the sunset, Morhann.”

“I’ve seen plenty of them already and this food isn’t going to cook itself.”

“It literally will, it doesn’t vanish when you stop staring at it. Come over here.”

“Right, what is it?”

“The sun, Morhann.”

“*Aye... pretty, that.*”

“Your sarcasm isn’t clever. Just watch it, it’ll be done in a bit”.

“*Very nice.* I’m going to carry on cooking now.”

“The Uhbunot is slightly easier to see in the dark, don’t you think?”

“I guess.”

“The way it moves is much clearer. It almost has a certain majesty up there... some things look better from a distance, I suppose.”

“Big things, perhaps, aye”.

The clouds softened into their rosy twilight dress. Misery’s passing peaks and troughs slowed to a steady sway.

“You don’t have to stay here, Morhann. You could leave.”

“For where, Shorah?”

“Take the last of the wood, build a boat.”

“Even if I made it past the waves, I’m not certain I’d like the company of seafoam.”

“There could be other islands. Ones with more than just this. You’d soon forget about here.” Under the couple’s toenails, sandgrains blurred the threshold between their bodies and the beach. Water jumped to glisten in the dusklight, falling down with an ill-earned silence. “Morhann?”

“I know how this ends, Shorah, too well. Leaving won’t change it - if anything, it would only invite it sooner. Plus I don’t want to be someone who could live with doing that. No, all that concerns me now is being here with you. That’s been true since we met. Some great monster in the sky and a few high waves has nothing to do with it.”

For all its warmth, their embrace, fumbling and steel-wrapped, was gristly with earth and wind. Tightening, their chests each caved more inwards, repulsing as they each sculpted from one another all and everything they had.



Making love was common, here, at the edge of the world. To water that desert with something besides apathy as days languished past on their bellies, crept unseen, a visceral trail for legs.



“It’s alright, Shorah, I can drag this lot on my own.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine. Maybe just keep an eye out for any wood that escapes the sheet as we go.”

“We might need to think about building a floor on this one, I don’t know how the sand will be.”

“Mmm, perhaps, let’s deal with getting there for now.”



The shallow cave was a frequent getaway, being, as it was, a place other than their diminishing hovel. Its far wall was split into a pursed grin; too slight for an entrance no matter how obviously it led somewhere.

Denying any eyeing interest, the fissure was fonder of voices which it savoured for a moment too long.

“AAAAAAHHHHH, EEEEEEEEEEE, OOOOOOOOOO.”

“Haha. You’re allowed to use words, you know.”

“Ha! Listen, Morhann, it goes on for ages. It’s still echoing! Your go.”

“What shall I do?”

“Sing into it, like last time. It sounded great.”

“Ah, why? It’s embarrassing.”

“What? Don’t be silly, Morhann. Please.”

“Alright.”

Noises of an old song, half remembered, felt their way down tunnels, filling every dead end and back. Some found avenues far into the hillside, giving life to buried rocks which had not heard anything like it for an age.

“That was amazing, Morhann.”

“Thanks.”

“Honestly, it was lovely.”

“Thanks, Shorah.”

“Seemed like you couldn’t remember all the words though.”

“Ha, yeah, you might be right. Shall we head back then?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Shorah’s chain was taut about the cave entrance. This might be their last visit. An ill relief for Morhann, who had increasing dreams of beyond the cave’s cleft wall, unable to see, locked and twisted between juts of granite, no life save for the grinding sparks of hysteria and the resonant gasps they drew which, with every exhale, made tighter the rocks around the stomach and impossible the hope of crying help to those smiling onlookers who watched uncaringly through the window.

The docile cousin of relief would arrive someday, when the pain and discomfort of immobility had become well studied. If only those last hazed flickers of imagination would, too, petrify so that nothing was felt at all.



“... it’s the thought of not being here. That I’ve got to leave while the world carries on without me. A world in which maybe, given enough time, I could have been happy. But now I’m being called away and the illusion is gone. I’m sat here, talking to this stewpot, counting the bubbles for a reply, as the entire universe commands me and I can’t say anything at all.”

“I didn’t know you were up, you should’ve woke me.”

“Morning, Morhann. Sorry, you just looked so pretty in your sleep I thought I’d leave you to it. I’ve used the time to make some breakfast though.”

“What is it?”

“Soup. Something like it at any rate.”

“Nice. It smells half decent.”

“Help yourself, I’ve had some already.”

“Looks like more rain’s coming.”

“It’s to be expected. The Ulhbunot is much nearer now. Look, the ocean’s more riled than it ever used to be.”

“I’m just glad our sheet’s waterproof.”

“Yeah.”

“Soup’s nice. Well done.”

“No problem.”



“No, it’s the ninth day. Remember? Yesterday you were here, the day before you had to go out in it and we agreed, then, that it had been a week since it started.”

“Aye, you’re right. Still, it’s been raining a fair while hasn’t it.”

“It has.”

“How’re you? You cold?”

“I’m not warm, but I’m okay.”

“Take my blanket.”

“You sure?”

“Aye. I’m too hot if anything. It’s getting stuffy in here.”

“Yeah, I’m a state. What I would do for a bath.”

“Why? Who’re you trying to impress?”

“There’s nothing impressive about being clean, Morhann. I’d feel better if I were though.”

“Well. It’s full of water outside, if you fancy it.”

“Wash in the rain?”

“Aye, it’d be a laugh.”

“Haha, yeah, that does sound fun. Okay.”



The shedded skin of their hut lay dotted up the island, turning to fog. Morhann thought of the old house. It seemed odd to suppose that it still existed somewhere in that fret.



“Any luck?”

“No. How have you managed to lose something on an open beach?”

“I’m not sure to be honest... Have you noticed that there’s mushrooms growing in here now? Saves me a walk I suppose.”

“Morhann! Look!”

“What is it?! What’s happened?!”

“Just come out and look at this... I’ve never seen it line up like that. Have you?”

“No. Never.”

Crowned in flames, the eclipse, the Ulhbhunot, cut the light to ribbons. It hummed as it did, the full breadth of its voice too deep to be heard, a dread sound on the wind, as if the starry film had ruptured and millennia of pressure released.



“I’ve thought of a new game.”

“Exciting. What is it?”

“The stick in the ground over there. First one to hit it with a stone wins.”

“Haha. And how long did it take you to come up with that, Morhann?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a few days.”

Shorah’s chuckle perfumed the air, filled the belly, as Morhann breathed every swirl of it in.

“What are you waiting for? You best get some stones.”

“Alright alright, you’re not doing too well yourself.”

“I’m just saying, given you’re the inventor of this game, you aren’t very good at it.” Morhann carefully flung the stone wide of the mark. Perhaps those shackles would lighten a little, if Shorah won. “See, you’re rubbish”

“Whatever. You do better then.”

“That’s such a lame question. I’ve never really thought about it, I’m not five years old. What’s yours?”

“Yellow.”

“Really, Morhann?”

“Aye.”

“Yellow’s insipid.”

“I thought you didn’t care.”

“I don’t but, given that you seem to, I just think you ought to have a better answer.”

“Okay, green then.”

“Ha, you can’t just change--”

“I can do what I want, as long as it’s not hitting this stick - ah, way off”. Morhann’s stone stopped dully in the wet, shoreline sand.

“It seems such a long time ago, when we weren’t always thinking about the sea.”

“It does, yeah - ah, that was a good throw, almost.”

“It’s not too far now.”

“There’s still a ways to go yet.”

“But we will get there, Morhann. What then?”

“I don’t know, but we aren’t there right now.”

“Do you remember, Morhann, back at home, when we’d stay up late and talk and play like this?”

“I mean, we still do.”

“Yeah but it’s not quite the same, you know? Like, before all this, how I’d come and sit down at the end of the day. You’d always be--”

“Aye... I don’t like thinking about that kind of stuff.”

“What, why?”

“I just...” That garden fine, tucked between the sheer, sharp cliffs, the last perennial blooms Morhann could still recall, was nourished on the soil of the dead, their laughter and cheer. Every pretty petal ran cold with despair, reeked of it. “I like to concentrate on now. You know? Make sure everything’s okay.”

“Right, yeah. I understand”.

“It’s your go, Shorah?”

“Sorry.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I might go fetch some fish from the rocks. May as well, while there’s still the length in this chain.”

“Aye. Which way we going?”

“I’ll go on my own, I’m fine.”

“... okay.”

“You alright, Morhann?”

“You’ve been wandering on your own a lot lately.”

“I know. I just feel the need for some solitary time.”

“Right, okay.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. It's just. I spend all day thinking about you, looking after you.”

“You could go for walks on your own, if you wanted to. I wouldn't mi--”

“I don't want to, that's my point.”

“That's...”

“What?”

“Morhann, I don't not want you around. I need you with me. I know that and I'm grateful for it. And I hate it. If I weren't tied down by this damned chain, I'd stay with you for the rest of my life. And if you weren't here, I'd want nothing but the sea to take me away. But those are choices I don't have now. Yet, ha, the irony of it all, both of those things will come to pass without my say so. I wish I could reconcile that in my head, but I can't. Let me walk on my own, Morhann. Please. I won't be long.”

“Aye. Aye, alright.”

Rock Basket, it had been named, an outcrop half hanging off the shoreline. The old obelisk had fallen long ago yet still stood quite proud on the sandy flats which led its way.

Both the wind and waves between them spat at Shorah's approach. In that same temper the sea had begun to hurl fish up onto the farside of the outcrop, into a large basin. Neither Morhann nor Shorah ever saw it happen though, only the aftermath, only a handful of limp beachings come to be dinner.

The causeway was wide, despite the wave's best efforts in closing the gap, yet Shorah found the passage difficult. Some steep pungence was sneaking its way under the rasp of the sea and to the back of the throat. Except in gagging, Shorah's mouth daren't open.

The basin, Rock Basket, was brimmed with spoiled fish, to the knees, an unmixing phlegm of grey and brown bits too. A ruin of eye places and slack mouths, demulsifying into pieces to create another form, a single fish of many heads and fins, every aspect of it some new horror in decomposition.

Still the gulls had at it. And when the sea vomited more rotten specimens up, they fought over the latest bloats and rags as if there weren't already enough.



“I think the doorway’s better off facing the other direction.”

“I guess you’re right, it would let the wind in as it is.”

“Aye. Although I was more concerned about the view. I don’t much fancy staring at that sea all the time.”

“Fair point I guess... It’s not like you to make an artistic complaint, Morhann.”

“I’m actually very cultured.”

“You’ve hidden it well.”

“Aye, I’m just not snobby about it like you.”

“Haha. Right, well, in that case, maybe you’d like to help shimmy the hut around to wherever your artist’s eye thinks is best.”



The billowing flesh of the ocean tore itself apart. The writhing guts of a sickly world. They breathed, breathed to scream and their breaths drew further, every day and day the next, further, exposing that blackened sea’s bedding.



“Shorah! Wake up! The waves have gotten in. Come on, get out! Back up the beach as far as you can. I’ll grab our stuff.”

“Did you get it all?”

“Some. The storm’s had away with most of it.”

“Look at it, Morhann. It doesn’t stand a chance.”

“It needs to be rebuilt. Maybe raised? Ah, there’s not the wood for that - it’d just sink anyway.” They watched as with one arm the sea beat the hovel and, with the other, tried to pull it away.

“What are you thinking?”

“I can use the wood to make a raft. We’d still have the sheet for cover”

“I don’t know, Morhann.”

“No, it’ll work. Wait here, I’ll do it.”

In the lighting were violent dioramas, broken by darkness, held together by the thousand ocean roars. Scenes painted in sweat and the Ulhbunot

watched them, now more a part of the sky than anything else, its dominion over the jagged waters grossly plain.



Neither really wanted to look out from their floating tent, knowing that nothing was to be found. There was, though, at least a small victory, perhaps, in the world being just as bad as they thought.

“Aye, we’re quite a ways from shore now. It’s choppy as anything - the raft’s doing well.”

“I didn’t notice us leaving the land.”

“No, but it seems we have. Maybe last night? Day before? Not sure... How’s the chain?”

“It’s heavier. Much more so than it used to be. That’s to be expected I guess, I don’t have the ground anymore to help take the weight. It wakes me when I sleep - if it lets me sleep. It sways in the current, more gently as it goes down and it goes so far, Morhann. I don’t think it ever ends. How could it not end? I’ll be dragged away, farther and farther from the surface, yet not go anywhere.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I try to think about old times but - I don’t know - those memories seem to belong to someone else now.”

“I think about them too, often.”

“Take me back there, Morhann. Please. Anywhere but here.”

Laughter and tears in those last days, finding merriment in whatever salvage they could, on their wooden world, before the Ulhbunot came.



Morhann’s grip on Shorah had become a fact of the body, muscles taut. Bobbing from grey water to grey sky, Morhann watched the outside through a tear, a tear in the sheet that syphoned away thoughts as the sharp instrument of the ocean slurred and the waves lost their harsh overtones. But then an explosion. King amongst the thunders. Felt more than heard.

“What was that, Morhann?!”

“I don’t know.”

The sheet of their raft, by a second explosion, became a banner in the storm, heralding the Ulhbunot’s arrival. To all measures good and decent,

the creature was still far away but for it the sky was a puddle and the distance a footstep in a lifetime of footsteps.

Silver flesh peeked from oily fur, up to exposed wingtips which razory shone. Affront the planetine mass of its body was a floating shadow for a face. A stark and perfect circle which existed not like any known aspect of reality, but as a blindness in the bearer's vision, and all who bore it saw that same pitch well for it stared in every direction at once.

The sky, the clouds, shrivelled and frothed as it's limbs cocked back into a three-spiked star, snapping the ligaments of the atmosphere as they did and carving a great gash through the ocean, deep enough to fester, deep enough for Shorah to stare into and fill with every anxiety before the sea could pull back shut and send the raft tumbling down mountainsides of water, spurred by the wind's spiteful cheering.

“Shorah, get up! Shorah! Get back on the raft! Get your arms back onto the raft!”

“I can't, it's too heavy! Morhann, please!”

“Hold on! Hold on!”.

Morhann would come to hope that those parting words, so hollow and light as they were, might have been carried off in the gale; not taken down to where Shorah's own desperate goodbye existed merely as a gurgled something, lathering the damp cerement. The regret would rot, in vivid fumes, of missing what Shorah didn't say, of being distracted. As if the moment were better spent staring longer into that face, made a stranger's by fear, as it drowned.

Their island, as small and alone as it once felt, was beset by a winged vice and rendered, fast, to noise and dust. In its place the Ulhbunot lay half submerged, the water thickening with its low drawl, making the entire ocean its mouth. Look away, it said. Look away, for I am always here and my face is unchanging and there is nothing you will ever see in it.

Turning back to the space where Shorah had just been, an outline longing to be filled, Morhann sat as the storm settled, as every wisp and drop of it turned to memory and memories each fell towards the heart, once their clarity had flaked away, to become formless in the blood. And Morhann sat on that raft and drifted, as a knot along the thread of the horizon.