



Severed Knot – Excerpt

The song ended, and Iain watched Alastair as he entered the crushing mill. He disappeared for a moment, and when he reappeared, he cradled a violin in the crook of his arm.

Iain couldn't sit there any longer. Passing by the keg, he dropped the cup on top and manoeuvred through the crowd to head back to his hut.

Tam stopped him. "Where are

you off to, Scotsman? You're truly sour, man."

"I've had enough." Iain patted the man on the shoulder and attempted to move past him. Before he did, he glanced to the crushing mill in time to see Alastair handing the violin to Mairead. The rapt expression on her face made Iain pause. She handled the instrument reverently, as carefully as a woman cradling her bairn. Iain had never seen her eyes so round, her normally wary expression soft.

Mairead lifted the violin to her collarbone and adjusted her grip. She tried a few tentative plucks and adjusted the tuning until the chord sounded right. She lifted the bow against the strings and started to play.

The sound that came from her violin was low, wistful and with a melody that stirred long-buried hopes. Both light and dark notes rounded each other out as she pushed the tune farther along. A low drumbeat joined in, and she adjusted her rhythm slightly to hit the rising notes with the downbeat.

Then the main melody started.

Iain knew this song. An old Scottish ballad, one of his favourites. It called to mind the longing of home. It had been the song that he had sung to himself during the gruelling journey from England.

How was it that she stood there playing that very song?

The melody had always stirred him, providing comfort during all those times he had been away on campaign, far from home. But Mairead's rendition added layers he had never heard. The mournful tone of the violin spoke of the wind in the firs and smoky twilight clinging to the mountains. A flight of swallows darting in a cold twilight sky and the cry of terns riding a lonely sea breeze. It called to memory swiftly flowing burns bordered with purple heather, and the hope of love reunited.

As she played, the lyrics flowed through his mind: *An' what will be the love-tokens that ye will send wi me . . . A kiss, aye, will I twae an' ever she come to fair Scotland . . . I the red gold she sall gae . . .*

Iain felt it deep in his bones. Each note ripped through his defences, stone and mortar.

Everything melted away. He forgot the crowd, forgot his situation and the harshness of the sugarcane fields. Only Mairead and her song remained.

He moved closer to the platform. Mairead stood several feet away, her eyes closed and head tilted sideways. Her lashes fanned her flushed cheeks, and her mouth was slightly parted. At times, a smile flitted across her lips, while at others her brow puckered into a frown, but always her expression remained enraptured. He watched, fascinated, as the bow danced over the strings, directed by nimble fingers.

Iain hung on every note as though it were the last. Good, sweet Lord, he didn't want it to end.

The song finally ended, and Mairead drew her last pass with the bow. Her hand stilled, and her shoulders went limp. A single tear traced down her cheek. When she opened her eyes, her unfocused gaze found his, and the look shot right through him.

Around Iain, men whistled and clapped, not realising that the earth had just shifted.