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Curren's Song
by Laura Resnick
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Science Fiction

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In the sixth century A.D., Saint Columba left Ireland and ventured into Scotland where he preached to the Picts, whose warriors were covered with blue tattoos or body dye. According to the saint's biographer, he saved a swimmer from the Loch Ness Monster by ordering it away. This so impressed Brude, the local king, that he and his people converted to Christianity.

One theory about the Loch Ness Monster is that a small herd of plesiosaurs have survived in that isolated environment -- like the coelacanth, some thirty of which have been caught in the South Atlantic despite prior belief that they had been extinct for seventy million years.

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The sky was grey, a wet, mourning color that did not change from dawn till dusk. A misty rain fell softly upon the steep green hills, its rhythm soothing and hypnotic. The steady, gentle sound comforted Curren's wounded spirit as he crept beneath the sheltering branches of a clump of fir trees overlooking the loch, the great inland sea which split the land like a deep wound.

Curren sat on the damp ground and hugged his knees, gritting his teeth and refusing to cry as he stared at the black surface of the water. He was too old for tears, he told himself.

Why had the gods cursed him with their visions? What sort of life was this for a boy about to become a man? To be forever an outsider, forever different, forever apart from his own people. Laughed at by some, shunned by others, ridiculed or feared since his birth, each day of his life brought a fresh, piercing pain.

This morning he had done it again, had spoken when he should have kept silent. He could never separate the things everyone knew and saw from the things that he alone knew and saw, and so he was forever alienating everyone around him.

He had, of course, known it would rain today. He had seen the soft, watery sky in his mind, had heard the gentle drumming of the rain many hours before its arrival. Old Daron had also known it would rain today, and he had told everyone. No one seemed to find it strange that the gruff, gnarled old man knew when the weather would turn. Yet everyone had looked at Curren with contempt when he had once told them the moon would hide the sun in the middle of the day; and when it had happened, only his position as the king's nephew had kept the people from burning him alive as a demon.

Curren didn't understand why Daron knew about the coming of the rain but not the changing of the sky, or why Daron's knowledge was accepted and his

own was not. He didn't understand why no one minded when a flat-bellied woman suddenly knew she carried a baby inside her, while he himself was loathed for knowing the color of the glowing mist which surrounded each person. Why was it normal for a woman to know in the summer that she would bear a child at winter's end, while it was considered evil for him to know whether the child would live or die?

So this morning, out of respect, hoping to please, Curren had told Brude, the king himself, to prepare for the visitor who was coming from across the water. How was he to know that no one else knew about the big, dark man whose long journey brought him at last to their village by midday? Why did old Daron see the coming of the rain but not the coming of the man? Why was Daron's vision good and Curren's bad?

But Curren had not run from the village and come to hide under the trees because of the way the king glared at him, the way the women shied away from him, or the way the other boys whispered about him. No, today he had run away because of the way the stranger had pointed at him, cried out to the crowd that he must be cleansed, and ordered him to accept a new god.

Columba was the stranger's name, and Curren hated him already. In shame and anger, he had run from the village and come here, to the only place in which he was never lonely. For it was here that he heard the silent songs from beneath the water, here that he had friends.

"Curren?"

He flinched, turning suddenly at the sound of the wholly human whisper. It was an intrusion upon the wordless welcome which rose out of the murky loch and curled around him.

"Curren? Are you here? Please answer."

"Aithne," he said, surprised. He hadn't known she would come. Would someone else have known? Was he as strange in what he didn't know as he was in what he did know? "I'm here."

She came toward him through the descending mist, her red-brown hair gleaming with droplets of water, her cheeks shiny with rain, her dark lashes sticking wetly together. She was his age, and almost a woman. She was, he noticed suddenly, ripening quickly. She smiled when their eyes met, then sat down beside him. "I've looked everywhere for you."

"Why?"

"So you wouldn't be alone."

"I'm not alone here."

Aithne's head turned sharply, looking around. "Oh? Who else is here?"

"They are."

She blinked at him. "They who?"

"They are. Don't you hear them?"

She shook her head, studying him warily. He flushed and cursed himself silently as he realized he had done it again. She couldn't hear the silent songs, the ancient stories, the aching welcome of the lonely voices in the loch. She couldn't hear, and she would be disgusted because he could. How could he have known? He knew she heard water kelpies in the dark, even though he didn't, for she had told him so when they were much younger. But now she couldn't hear the watery sighs which rolled around them.

He looked away, afraid and ashamed. If only he could learn which visions were allowed and which weren't, then he could pretend to be like everyone else and hide the visions which made them all hate him.

"I don't hear anyone," she said.

"It doesn't matter," he said gruffly.

She was silent for a long moment before asking hesitantly, "Why did you run away?"

He shrugged, not looking at her.

"I wish you had stayed," she said, her voice as soft and soothing as the rain. "You were right. I wanted them to admit that you were right. Again."

Curren glanced at her bashfully. Encouraged, Aithne continued, "A stranger came from across the sea, just as you said. They should see that

you're blessed, not cursed."

"I don't feel blessed," he answered bitterly.

"That's because of the way they treat you. But I think you're blessed. I think your mother was seduced by one of the gods, and he gave you some of his powers. How else could you see colors around my skin that no one else can see? How else could you know about things before they happen, and hear what no one else hears?"

He felt like crying again, and it confused him. "Aren't you ... afraid of me?" he asked thickly.

"No." The touch of her hand on his was cool, yet it made him burn deep inside. "No, I'm not afraid."

He looked into her eyes. Green, they were, green like the rain-drenched hills, like sprouting leaves, like moss on a rock. "I'm glad," he said at last.

Her fingers tightened over his. After a while, she said, "Tell me what you hear."

"It's not important."

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "I want to know things. Things that no one else knows, that only you and I will know."

He shyly laced his fingers with hers. "There are living things in the loch," he began.

"Salmon, eels -- "

"More than that," he interrupted. "This is like ... a clan."

Aithne frowned at the opaque water far below them. "No clan could live in the water."

"These aren't people."

"Then what are they?"

"I'm not sure. They're ... like monsters, I suppose."

Her eyes widened. "Monsters?" Her voice quavered slightly.

"They look like, oh, like things you see sometimes in paintings left by the Old Ones. They're big, bigger than anything you've ever seen, with long necks, flat heads, and bodies like giant serpents. They have long tails, wide backs with humps, and thick grey skin with deep lines and furrows. They have no arms or legs, just big fins." Aithne looked so horrified he stopped speaking.

"You've seen them?"

"Only in my mind."

She glanced fearfully at the loch. "I thought ... I thought it was just a story they told children to keep them away from the water. So they wouldn't drown."

"No. They're real."

"And they eat virgins," she breathed in terror.

"No. Just fish."

"How can you be sure?" she asked doubtfully.

"They talk to me."

"Why?"

"_Why_?"

"Yes. Why do monsters in the loch talk to you?"

He had never even wondered about it before. He shrugged at last and said, "Perhaps because I can hear them."

* * * *

Curren stayed away from the village as much as he could now that Columba was living there. The priest harassed, pursued, even frightened him. Columba claimed Curren's visions were evil and must be expelled from his soul. This could only be done, the big man said, if Curren accepted the new faith, the new god.

"The story makes no sense," Curren told Aithne when she joined him beneath the clump of fir trees where they often met now. "His god was killed by Romans. Our grandfathers' grandfathers drove the Romans away, but Columba worships a god who let the Romans kill him. Some god." It felt good to sneer

at someone else for a change.

"It's a strange story," Aithne admitted. "But he says many across the sea believe it. He says there is even a village on Iona where they make more priests."

"Like him?"

She nodded. "You didn't know?"

He shook his head. "No. But I believe it. I can see Columba's god chasing away the gods who live here now."

"But you said he's a weak god. He let the Romans -- "

"It doesn't matter what I think of Columba's god. Others will turn to him. Many others." He looked down at the blue tattoos on his body. More would be added soon, when he was old enough for battle. "Columba wants us to stop painting ourselves. He says it goes against his god's wishes."

"Brude will never agree to that," Aithne said with certainty. "Our men will always be painted."

"No," Curren said, for he saw it. "Not always. Some day, their skin will be plain."

Aithne was distressed enough by this information to want to change the subject. "Let's not talk about the priest anymore. Tell me instead about the monsters in the loch."

"You believe me?" he asked.

"Of course, I do." She looked at the opaque surface of the inland sea. "If anyone could hear them, it's you."

He felt an absurd pleasure where he might have felt shame. If Aithne admired it, then the knowledge must be good, a thing of pride. "There are many of them."

"Ten?"

"More."

"A hundred?"

"Less."

She sighed. "Where do they come from?"

"Once, long ago, they came from the open sea."

"Why did they come here?"

"They came in search of food. It was plentiful, and they stayed and mated here. But the path to the sea filled up over many years. Sand and silt blocked their way until, one day, they became prisoners of the inland sea and could never again leave."

"Was this in the time of the Romans?"

"Before that."

"The time of the Old Ones?"

"Before that."

She frowned. "There was nothing before that."

"Oh, no, Aithne, there was a great deal before that." Curren closed his eyes, swaying as he listened to the songs and turned them into words for her benefit. "There were giants in the earth. Great creatures whose footsteps shook the mountains and made new valleys, whose weight could sink an island, whose reach extended into the sunset. They roamed the earth and the seas. They were the rulers, the kings, the first true conquerors."

"Were they ... Were they beautiful or ugly?"

"Beautiful?" Curren's head tilted back, the images flying behind his closed eyelids. Strange, terrifying, devouring creatures of immense power. "They looked like gods of the underworld," he croaked, the words harder to push out of his throat as the dreams enveloped him.

"Curren!" Aithne gripped his hand, frightened by his manner, his descriptions.

"They weren't evil," he murmured dreamily. "Nor were they good. They knew the hunt, the chase, the kill. They knew the taste of plants and trees and water; they swallowed whole forests, whole rivers in their hunger."

"Where are they now?" she asked. "I mean, what happened to the rest of them?"

The songs which came in answer of Curren's searching mind were sad, so sad. The mournful, watery echo of the memories broke his heart as it wailed over and over in loss, in loneliness, in sorrow and bewilderment.

Where are they? Where are they?

"Dead," he sighed, "all dead. Dead for longer than this hillside has been green. They died so long ago."

"How?" Aithne asked. "How could such great creatures simply die off?"

"Everything changed, changed and turned and became something else."

Curren saw the disaster, felt the fear, heard the terrified howling of a billion sunsets past. "The earth shook, the skies grew dark. Wind and water swept the land for endless years, destroying everything."

Aithne looked down at the depthless water which legend said was deeper than the open sea beyond the hills. "But they survived."

"Yes." In his heart he was singing with them now, learning their songs, tumbling into the murky water to share their sorrows.

"All the others are gone, except for them?"

"Gone, gone," Curren wept. "All gone, but we remain. For all eternity, we remain, alone in this strange world."

"Curren, stop." She shook his arm, frightened for him.

"We do not belong here," he cried. "This place is so strange. Who are these creatures, these hunters? What is the burning, orange magic that they bring with them?"

"Curren!"

"Alone. Oh, we are so alone here." He wept, his heart broken beyond bearing, recognizing the only loneliness in the world which matched his own. To be so different. To never, ever belong. Forever apart. "Oh, so alone..."

"Curren!" Truly terrified now of this power that had taken hold of him, she struck him with all her might. His head snapped sideways, and his eyes flew open. With bewildered eyes and a tear-streaked face, he sat gazing at her, blinking as if awakened from sleep in the middle of the night. Aithne knelt at his side and cradled his face between her hands. "Are you well?"

"I ... Yes."

He looked so very young and helpless now, so different from the angry, black-haired, fire-eyed boy who stalked around the hills and the glens with the solitary pride of a king. Afraid for him, afraid of what those ancient creatures in the loch may have done to him, she took his hand and pulled him to his feet. With a fearful glance at the water, she said, "This is an evil place. We must go home."

Curren looked away. "All right." She didn't understand, he realized. She believed him, but she could never really know what it meant to be like him. But they knew.

* * * *

Aithne found him at the water's edge often after that, sitting a little closer to the flat, murky waves each time, as if gradually approaching the creatures who called to him from below. And each time, it was a little harder to coax him away, to bring him back to the village, where Columba's new god was taking root and starting to change their world, as the world of the great monsters had once been changed so thoroughly.

"Columba has said he would like you to be at the ceremony this evening," she told Curren one day, trying to pull his gaze away from the water.

"What has he planned for tonight?" Curren asked distractedly, attuned to the beckoning voices in the water.

"Some kind of ritual. It involves water and accepting the new god,"

Aithne answered vaguely, wishing she could wipe that dreamy look off his face.

"I know why he wants me." Curren's voice was rich with contempt. "If he can silence the voices and blind my visions, he'll be able to make everyone believe that his god is more powerful than any of the old gods, even the demons."

"Curren..." She bit her lip, aware that this was dangerous territory.

"Don't you want the voices to stop?"

His face clouded. But he sounded more weary than angry when he said, "Go away, Aithne."

"No!"

"Go home."

"No! I want to stay with you."

"No, you want to make me like the others. Why don't you just settle for one of them?"

"No, I want you to be only like yourself. But I'm afraid for you, Curren! I have been ever since they started calling you to them." She waved toward the water. "You think I don't know how they're tempting you? You wear the look on your face that my father wears before he mates with my mother. You wear the look of a man who wants to marry! But what will you marry, Curren?"

"Be quiet!"

"An ancient monster from a dead race of creatures that belonged to a world that disappeared long before the Old Ones built the stone circles?"

"Go away!"

"Curren! This is madness!"

He hit her. She had never thought he would do such a thing. No matter how his eyes glittered when he looked at his brothers or the king, they had always been soft when he looked at her. His hands, his voice, his smile had always been so gentle. But now he struck her with a fury that knocked her to the ground. She put a hand to her bloodied lips and turned away from him, curling herself into a little ball. She had never loved before, would never love again. How could he not see the gifts she offered him? What did he hear that drew him away from her?

She lay there for a long time, unwilling to leave him, unable to look at him. Finally, when the sun had passed over her shoulder and cheek and began to die softly against her back, she heard him gasp, a sound of mingled fear and joy. As she rolled to face him, he scrambled to his feet and stood staring out over the water.

"Curren?"

His whole body was rigid with tension, his gaze fixed in the distance, his expression alight with wonder. "They've come for me."

"What?" Terror made her bones liquid as she clumsily struggled to her knees and squinted into the distance to see what held his gaze. "No!"

The creature was as big as Curren's description. Its neck alone was as long as two full grown men, and the body which stretched out behind it, though mostly hidden by water, was much larger than any boat or building Aithne had ever seen.

"No! Curren, come away!" she urged, horrified into motion. He resisted her insistent tugging and stood transfixed as the monster peered at them across the water.

Though the creature's head appeared small and flat from this distance, Aithne guessed that it was easily twice her size. The eyes were like slits, and Aithne could see no warmth or welcome in them, despite the excitement which vibrated throughout Curren's body as she tried to drag him away.

"They want me, they want me," he murmured ecstatically. "They know."

"No, you mustn't, you mustn't!" she babbled, chilled anew as she realized his intent. "Curren, please!"

"Let me go!"

The creature began to swim slowly toward them, its long tail propelling it with lazy, powerful strokes. The great body undulated with hideous grace, neither fish nor serpent, yet reminiscent of both. Aithne shook violently as tears of helpless fear spilled down her cheeks. She swore to all the gods above and below that she would not let this thing have Curren, and she held her ground. But when the monster looked directly at her, its flat, expressionless eyes revealing nothing, Aithne forgot everything but her blind terror, and she turned and ran.

She never remembered climbing the hill, tearing her garments against

the clinging branches, or screaming for help. She remembered nothing between the moment she fled the ancient monster and the moment she found herself in Columba's arms, sobbing with anguish and begging him to save Curren.

"My god is more powerful than this monster in the loch," Columba promised Brude and his men.

"Save him! Stop talking and save him!" Aithne cried.

"And will you come to the one true god, then?" Columba asked. "Will _he_?"

"Yes! I promise! I _promise_. Only save him!"

They rushed forward in a great mass of rattling weapons and war cries, swooping down the hill and toward the water's edge. Columba led them, weaponless, his exultation plain to see, bearing his faith as his only banner.

Where Curren had stood a few minutes ago, now only his clothing remained, an untidy heap from which his footprints led to the water.

"There!" Aithne screamed, seeing him swimming through the water, eagerly approaching the creature who waited silently for him. "There! Stop him!"

The men looked to Brude for an order, their voices gruff with terror, their eyes wide with shock. No one there had ever expected to see the beast of legend with which they threatened their children and grandchildren.

"There is nothing in heaven or earth more powerful than the love of Jesus Christ!" Columba cried, climbing onto a rock and raising his arms toward the sky.

"Help him!" Aithne screamed, certain the beast would devour Curren at any moment.

"God Almighty, I call upon You and Your son!" Columba shouted to the empty skies.

Aithne sank to her knees, hating Columba, hating them all.

With grand, sweeping gestures, Columba pointed directly at the enormous, undulating creature, drawing the gaze of its flat, staring eyes.

"Touch not that man! Go no further!"

"Talk will not help," Aithne snarled.

"Quiet!" Brude ordered her.

The monster stared. Its undulation slowed, then ceased. Aithne's next breath burned her lungs.

"Quick! Go back!" Columba cried, his voice booming around the hills and across the water.

"Please..." Aithne whispered. "Please," she begged the new god, the god who had died at the hands of the Romans. "Please, I will worship you forever."

The monster seemed to sink deeper into the water.

"Wait!" Curren screamed, his exhausted voice carrying faintly on the wind.

"Touch not that man!" Columba exhorted.

"It's ... It's going away," Brude said slowly, his tone throbbing with disbelief.

"No! Wait!" Curren cried, his voice raw with anger and despair.

"Go back to the bottom of the darkness from which you came!" Columba cried. "Go!"

They would never agree on who the monster was looking at -- Columba or Curren -- when it finally sank, silently and completely, back into the opaque depths of the loch. A series of ripples on the surface marked the creature's passing, and then the loch looked normal, as it always had, with no trace of the struggle which had just taken place there or of the ancient secrets which had briefly revealed themselves to this new world.

Only Curren remained, his cries assailing Aithne's ears with their rage and desolation, his arms beating angrily against the water, sending up showers of spray that glistened in the dying sunlight.

It was Columba who swam out to save him, to haul him in against his will, dragging him back to shore after exhaustion had put an end to his violent struggles. Curren lay unconscious and half dead as Columba prayed over

him, anointing him in the name of the new god. Aithne saw the expression on Brude's face as he looked down at the boy's motionless form, and she knew that he would have preferred to let his nephew drown that day. But Columba was not about to relinquish his first convert among Brude's people.

The priests who had held sway in Brude's kingdom began to lose their power that day, and it was not long before Brude himself accepted Columba's god and joined in the foreign priest's strange water ritual. Aithne and Curren married when the time was right and their bodies had ripened, and, as she had promised, they, too, joined the new faith.

Now a quiet young man and obedient warrior, Curren bore the pain of his new tattoos to please Brude, just as he bore the water ritual to please Columba. Most of all, though, he bore his loneliness to please Aithne. How could she know that the pleasures of the flesh she so enjoyed, the pleasures which had left Curren's seed in her belly, were as nothing compared to the remembered pleasure of the silent songs which had reached out from the loch to dance in his head?

The songs were gone now, as were the visions. They had disappeared with his rebirth at Columba's hands, disappeared with the horrifyingly beautiful creature who had slid into the darkness without him, leaving him behind to forever bear this strange new world in utter solitude.

Sometimes, when his king did not need him, when his wife would not miss him, he slipped away for a while, to hide beneath a clump of fir trees and gaze at the flat, opaque waters of the loch.

Somewhere down there, somewhere so deep that no one could find them, they lived and died, they ate and mated, and they waited, waited for another who could hear their song. They had waited millennia for him, and he wondered, with a heart made raw with longing, if they were now doomed to wait for all eternity.

-- The End --

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