

SEASON'S  
END



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Springtail



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*Cover design by J A Bowler*

*In Gaelic mythology (Irish, Scottish and Manx) Cailleach is a creation goddess. She is commonly known as the Cailleach Bhéara and in Scotland also as Beira, Queen of Winter. In partnership with the goddess Brighde, they rule the seasons. (Douglas MacQueen 2020)*





## Season's End

““Oh my God, Yolanda! What have you done?”  
he said, as soon as he stepped through the barn door and saw Kayley, in all her glorious splendour, seated on one of the hay bales.

“Please don't, Sam,” I replied. I wasn't in the mood for his 'I-told-you-so' nagging right then.

“You know who this is don't you? We haven't got time to argue about it. It's all gone horribly wrong and I need your help!”

Kayley smiled sweetly at him and gave a little shrug of her shoulders. Butter wouldn't melt. She was glowing again (of course) - bathed in the shaft of sunlight breaking through the clouds outside. It shone in at the barn window like a spotlight illuminating the star performer.

Sam gawped for a few seconds, blushed, and then was forced to look away. It was still difficult to gaze at

her for very long. Instead, he turned to face me with that wide-eyed, excited look of someone who was both impressed and appalled at the same time.

“So it worked, then? You did it? You stopped them?” He stayed near the open door, keeping his distance from the great wolf, I supposed.

I sighed. That all seemed so long ago and unimportant now. It had worked brilliantly. Kayley had been magnificent. How could she have been anything else? An ancient goddess I had conjured from her world to face the men and women in suits. There they had sat with their frowns and their impatience. Who was this teen eco-warrior come to nag them again about a warming Earth and their failure to act? I was just a nuisance to them. A momentary irritation reminding them of their guilt before it was back to business as usual, making money and destroying everyone’s future. It had all been condescension and platitudes before I had found the runes and brought Kayley into the equation. She wasn’t concerned with our fate but had been amused by my request, as though she were bored and could do with a little distraction.

We had waltzed straight through security into their meeting – the movers and shakers and the law makers.

And there Kayley had stood before them, a divine presence from another age. There was no resistance. Kayley had laughed at the humans and held up both hands as if to command silence, though it was unnecessary. All attention was already on the goddess. The only sound the panting of the great wolf at her side.

“Do what must be done, or all your kind will end before their time.”

It wasn't the words. They had heard this so many times before. But the speaker of the words rattled the souls of those old men and those ambitious young women. Before the week was out, we began to hear of the changes they would make.

I didn't know how to tell my brother that yes, it had been successful, but I'd unleashed something far more terrifying and I might have just messed up everything, for ever.

“They are not far away,” Kayley said. Her voice made me think of the sweet ripple of a mountain spring falling over mossy rocks.

“What does she mean?” Sam demanded. “Who?”

His question was answered by the throbbing, mournful wail drifting to us across the fields – a distant

but approaching threat of something unspeakably horrible. Sam's face visibly blanched and I could see him shudder as he stared at me in dismay. The great beast at Kayley's feet rumbled a low growl and leaped up, hackles rising. I grabbed Sam by his sleeve and pulled him into the barn. Though I shut the door, the unearthly sounds continued to grow louder.

“Hush, Magadir,” Kayley whispered, rising gracefully and silencing the wolf with a touch.

“There is not much time, little ones,” she said, in a voice that implied we had all the time in the world. I glowered at her. Did she even care about returning to her own realm? Was she not in the slightest bit concerned about the fate of our world or the dire creatures I had brought into it? I felt the familiar cold surge of adrenalin; it made my head fizz and for a moment I was frozen with panic. Someone shook me by the shoulder.

“Yolanda – are you listening?” Sam shouted. “Look, she's telling us something!” Kayley had raised one slender arm and was pointing towards the closed door of the barn.

“The door is yet open,” she murmured.

“Great! That makes sense.” Sam snorted and rolled his eyes at me. “Trapped in a barn with my little sister, a crazy lady, a vicious predator and God-knows-what coming to devour us from some hell-realm! Just how I wanted to spend my day off. Thanks, Yo!”

“It’s not a hell-realm,” I replied. I knew what Kayley meant. It was our chance. “Sam, we have to get her back and send those creatures with her. They’re not meant to be here and neither is she. Every minute she stays brings us closer to disaster. Closer to a world of never-ending winter. Look at her – she’s changing already.” Sure enough – it was subtle, but there was just a little less lustre about her – a tiny but perceptible shift away from her overwhelming youthfulness. I spoke to her, keeping my eyes fixed on the door; I still had that sense that I was committing a transgression just by daring to be in her company.

“Kayley,” I said, “You can show us the way, can’t you?” I glanced up. By answer, she smiled and wafted her hands like a ballerina.

“Show you the way,” she said. “Yes, I can show you the way,” she giggled. Her laughter sounded ominous but I knew we had to go.

“Sam, we have to follow and make sure she gets back through. I’m so sorry to rope you in, but I need you and your bike.”

If Sam had some doubts, these were cut short by another blood-curdling banshee wail, louder this time. He swore but nodded. We both ran to the door. Sam kicked the bike into life making the engine roar in that way that had always annoyed me before. Now it was a comforting sound, solid and earthly and drowning out those others I did not want to hear.

It was lucky nobody was about that day. I could not imagine what they would have made of the sight of us: the two teens tearing through the countryside on their dirt-bike, and the half-naked goddess sat astride a giant, hairy wolf. It was lucky, too, that there was no-one to see the three dark spots in the sky, far off still, but coming closer all the time. I gripped the saddle more tightly with my knees and I had my arms locked around Sam’s waist, mentally spurring him on, as the bike skidded and bounced over the uneven ground. I had to give it to him – he knew how to handle this little machine. Now I just prayed it was fast enough.

Kayley seemed to be loving the race. Her golden hair streamed out behind her as Magadir led effortlessly and

we struggled to keep pace with him. I did not know where we were going.

The old portal was closed. Kayley now sensed where the new one would be – I knew that – but she was a whimsical law unto herself. I needed to see with my own eyes that she had gone through and was no longer in our world. That was if it we could get there. That was if it was still open.

Suddenly Sam spun the bike round in a skidding arc, nearly throwing both of us into the mud. Ahead of us, the river which usually flowed lazily between grassy banks, had become a white, raging torrent. The bridge to the other side was completely submerged beneath the foaming peaks of the waves. Magadir took a huge leap and disappeared under the churning water while Sam and I stared in disbelief. Then the great wolf was on the opposite bank, briefly shaking his fur, while Kayley remained seated and unperturbed. I swear I could hear her laughing, again! My heart sank. There was nothing for it but to follow them on this side of the river until we could find somewhere else to cross.

It did not take long. Carpets of spring flowers gave way to lush, green meadows and then, on one side of us was woodland in full leaf and on the other, the river,

now not much more than a pathetic trickle through dry, cracked mud. Sam gave a whoop of triumph and flung the bike down the bank and up the other side, while I clung on with far less cheerfulness. I knew the changes were a bad sign. Overhead, the sun had burned away any vestige of cloud and it now blazed relentlessly out of a clear, azure sky. It was hot. Hotter than it had been for months. This was summer and time was running out.

I heard a brief shout of alarm and my brother slammed on the brakes, pitching us both forward. He had narrowly missed hitting Kayley and Magadir who had stopped abruptly in front. She turned and smiled at us. That same stunning, mesmerising smile but somehow different – more mature – middle-aged even. Kayley made a grand, sweeping gesture like she was introducing a rare gift. Sam turned round, pulling a displeased face at me.

“She means up there?” he groaned. “I’m good but I’m not that good.”

Kayley was pointing the way up a densely wooded hill. I gazed at the top. Was that the telltale shimmer of the portal? My heart lurched. We were nearly there, but

there was no way we could continue on the bike. It was going to be a desperate scramble on foot.

“It’s OK, Sam,” I said, “You can stop here, if you want. You don’t need to come with, but I have to hurry.” Already I could see the leaves of the trees turning brown and beginning to flutter to the ground. The heat of the sun was waning. Then in an instant, something blocked it altogether and a supernatural chill fell over our group. Dreading what I would see, I peered upwards just as dark wings flapped over our heads and a pair of claws descended towards me.

Beyond the claws, was something like a human face but hideous and unnatural. The mouth opened too wide, like a dark cavern, and revealed two rows of long, pointed teeth. From the gaping chasm came a ghastly shriek and the cold stench of death. I closed my eyes and prepared for the worse.

Death did not come for me then, though. The shriek became a clamour of snarls and cries and when I dared open my eyes, I saw my saviour was the great wolf, Magadir who had the banshee in his jaws. He shook it like a terrier with a rat and flung it to one side while its sisters battered him in their fury.

At last Kayley's mood changed. She clapped her hands together and held her palms out towards the dark, flapping shapes. An icy blast rolled down from the hill and lifted the two creatures high into the air along with their lifeless sister. The wind rose in a spiral over the hill and spun the helpless dark forms like they were no more than wisps of burnt paper. Kayley dropped her arms and all three fell at once with a great rush of air that knocked both Sam and me off our feet.

“Hush, my dear one.” Kayley's voice roused me to consciousness. She was talking gently to her great beast who now lay, panting on the frozen ground. I watched as Sam crawled towards the wolf and placed his hands on Magadir's flanks, trying to stem the flow of warm blood from two gaping wounds. The banshees had taken their toll.

“Can he walk?” I cried. “We need to go on. We must almost be out of time!” Kayley shook her head.

“The door is closed,” she said simply, and then I saw. The skeletal forms of bare trees now covered the hillside, their leaves all shed. A few still raked the sky but the rest had been knocked over in the blast. A path of devastation led to the top of the hill where I stared in desperation, but there was no shimmer. The banshees

had gone through the portal and it had closed behind them.

I gazed back at my companions. Sam's face was pinched and pale, the blue of his lips a testament to the bitterness of the wind. Kayley was already looking older – much older. The dishevelled strands of once-golden hair now turned ashy as I stared. That beautiful face was changing too – lines where there had been none – a cloudiness in the eyes. When she spoke, it was no longer the sound of spring water, but the dried-up whisper of old leaves. She smiled an old crone's smile.

“You mustn't blame yourself, Yolanda,” she said.

It began to snow.



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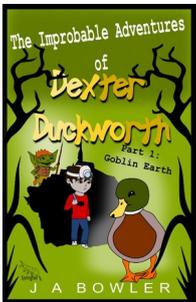
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### Ice Cooper and the Depton Shadelings

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