The Burning Road: Book One: Moorland

By Yvonne Lyon

Prologue: *The Offering Lake*

The gods know it all. Who will die who will escape who will forget.

My name is Berdic. A man whose shoulder is weighed down by a heavy bag but when he peers inside to find something he needs, he finds it’s empty.

Was it here in Lagole where memories first began to slip away or earlier on the slave march through Prytain? Or perhaps it was the sea journey which scoured my mind clean.

I have become used to not having a full story to tell but sometimes memories will return. The first violets of Imbolc remind me of working in the woods near my father’s home. Roasting meat carries me to older Bel-taine celebrations. When the first snow-fall covers the mountain tops, I remember icy paths out of Gwag where I was born. Forgetting has its good side. These days I scarcely remember the weight of the slave collar around my neck or the heaviness of chains fastening my ankles. Though the smell of iron will bring them back.

Covos’ plan to escape from Lagole the day our master, Firmus, was to be married forced me into remembering.

“We head west over the mountains till we reach the coast then find a boat to take us home,” Covos said.

It sounded easy said like that but it was not a journey I would relish.

Four summers ago I’d endured the voyage but in the opposite direction - in a heaving boat - rammed against a dozen other slaves; the vessel carrying me away from Prytain. The slave master had unchained our wrists so we could put our strength into the oars and said, “If you’re thinking of jumping, you take the sea-road at your peril.”

Death didn’t seize me on that occasion but for a while it stalked me when I became one of Firmus’s slaves in Lagole, a large farmstead at the foot of high mountains. Half a dozen summers younger than Covos, I gave him my story in the quiet of the pottery sheds where I learnt how to pummel the clay. With every punch I talked of capture, forced marches, beatings and heart-sickness. Each sunrise the clay was re-shaped and new pots emerged and in the quiet evenings I decided I would not turn my knife upon myself. By the end of my first summer in Lagole, Covos knew me better than the gods did.

Submitting to his persuasiveness, I agreed to make the escape from Lagole in the early morning before Firmus’ wedding, well before our master’s family descended on the farmhouse. I’d argued for going later. In the evening Firmus would give us our freedom and present us with two pairs of green plaid trousers, the symbol of free-men. It meant we could move in and out of Lagole unnoticed rather then escape dressed in our slave gear.

Covos folded his arms. He kept his voice low, “Berdic, we can’t travel at night. It must be early morning and we leave as slaves. Once he frees us we will be indebted to him forever.”

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We muddied our yellow tunics; cloth woven and dyed in Lagole, the colour chosen by our master so they would always be seen. Cypress trees grew on both sides of the road, their wedge-shaped shadows swallowing us as we darted from one to another. I pressed my back against a trunk before sprinting out into the light. Covos reached the second tree… then the third, took a quick breath and looked back. The white road was in plain view of the stone farmhouse on the hill.

Panting, I reached the last tree. “We’re safe so far, Covos said, “now for the next part,” and he sprang off again.

 I lifted my head; my back rigid as if tied to the tree. I knew there’d be no one on the road. Covos wouldn’t lie about a thing like that but I needed one last look.

The clutch of low farm dwellings squatted on the horizon. Thick stone walls kept them cool inside. I imagined the bustle of preparation for the marriage, the promised wine, the platters of duck, goose and boar - as much food as a man could eat – for a feast where all were welcome.

A flash of yellow caught my eye. Covos was waving, wondering why I wasn’t following. I set off at a run. Faster now. Sprinting. Hadn’t I agreed to leave this life behind? I must look for the gap between the clumps of silver thistle which signalled the place to leave the road. Covos had already disappeared, had found the opening and gone into the forest. I readied myself to leap away from the road.

Light summer rain spattered our heads and backs; came and went. Yellow-green sunlight flashed between larch and spruce; a jay’s harsh warning sounded overhead and a small tribe of siskins danced through firs. We smelt pine on our fingers and on each other. It was slow progress uphill with our shoes slipping on wet, fallen needles. We grabbed out-flung branches to steady ourselves. Eventually, tough bearberry gave way to soft grass as the trail emerged into a meadow where sunlight shone on blue and white flowers. Covos halted and shaded his eyes, fixing them on a range of distant mountains topped with snow. A lone goat at the far side of the field stretched its neck and gave a mournful bleat.

“That’s our route and it’ll be a hard climb,” Covos panted, “but before we take it we must go to the lake. The track’s easy to find and smooth from all the grateful feet. We’ll do our duty to the goddess Sainatei before we leave.” As he pulled his clinging tunic away from his back, I saw that an irregular stain of sweat, like a figure with a large head and thin body, had appeared on the cloth. I looked away, unwilling to think it was an omen – either for good or ill. The brief rest over, we trod lightly through the short meadow grass, buoyed by the sight of the mountains**.**

I caught sight of a glint of grey water, of the lake hidden by fringes of trees. It was not what I’d imagined, expecting a smaller pool like the ones which appeared haphazardly in the fields where our master’s cattle thronged in the evenings. The lake dedicated to Sainatei, the healer, lived deep under the mountain’s shadow, far from human activity.

Light showers, which had ceased for a while, began to fall again, pitting the lake’s surface. I saw a flurry of activity in the distance as choughs and gulls shrieked and flew from one bushy island to another in search of food. Heedless of the leaping lake water, Covos knelt at its edge, his knees in mud. He pulled a bronze cup from his bag. Remaining in the bag’s depths, rolled up tight, was a spare tunic and a piece of broken pottery with his name stamped upon it. At the top of the bag wrapped in clean cloth lay a hunk of cheese, bread, olives and grapes for the journey.

I hesitated then copied Covos, hoping I’d remember the words he’d taught me. As we prepared to give our offerings the sun appeared and the lake glistened undisturbed and waited for our gifts. I turned my own small ceramic cup around so the inscribed name faced me. I felt a jolt of pride. The quality of the lines and curves had improved under Covos’ teaching and I could hold the shape of each letter in my mind. Covos’ skill was older and stronger and his offering contained his name and a dedication to Sainatei for curing his grinding belly pain.

Covos and I bowed our heads, lowered our hands into the water to release our gifts and asked for her blessing. Covos stood up. He narrowed his eyes, alert for signs of movement from dogs or men.

 “You haven’t changed your mind, have you, Berdic? We leave Lagole and make our way back to Prytain as agreed. You know I’ll go alone if you prefer to live here as a free-man. Firmus is a better master than most and will be even more lenient now he’s married.”

Covos was two finger widths taller than me. Most men found his gaze hard to hold but mine did not waver. I shook my head, the movement ruffling my hair.

“I keep my promises.

Covos smiled then looked at the mountain. “If one of us is unable to complete the journey then the other makes it for him. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” I said.