

Know When to Hold Em
Companion to Scottish Lullaby

by

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INT. DEIDRE PUB, GLASGOW, SCOTLAND - NIGHT

Closing time at the small, seedy nightclub, empty except for a handful that wait expectedly at the bar.

The proprietor, GORDON, 50, a bull of a man, his gray hair traced with a few remnants of its former red, turns bar stools onto the tables.

GORDON

Brian, did ya lock it yet?

BRIAN, 25, the bar tender, average sized, meticulously groomed, replies attentively.

BRIAN

Be right at it, boss.

The door blows open and with a powerful gust of wind enters an OLD WOMAN, 70s, wet and chilled, in a black hooded coat.

GORDON

We're closed, mum.

OLD WOMAN

Might I just have a wee bit of whiskey to warm me bones. It's a miserable night the gods have set upon us.

GORDON

You have money?

OLD WOMAN

Of course.

GORDON

Brian, get her the shot. Then lock the damned door.

BOYD, 33, dirty blond hair in a pony tail, oozing confidence, stands at the bar holding a deck of cards.

BOYD

Can we start the game, Gordon?

Gordon looks with annoyance at the old woman just receiving her shot.

GORDON

Go ahead. Brian, the door. We'll let the old woman out after her whiskey.

The remaining customers seat themselves at a table.

The old woman sips her shot, eyes the activity.

OLD WOMAN

Might I buy into the game?

IRISH, 26, a charmer, smooth as silk with a distinct Dublin accent, is dressed to impress the ladies.

IRISH

Dear woman, this is a serious game we're about.

OLD WOMAN

(smiling dangerously)

My favorite kind.

GORDON

Hundred dollar buy in, mum. House gets ten percent of the pot.

BOYD

Don't expect any special consideration. Same for everyone.

The old woman, smiling, walks to the table, opens her purse. A peak inside reveals a COPPER FLASK, CASH, and a large pile of SKELETAL HUMAN FINGERS.

INT. DEIDRE PUB - LATER

Seven are seated at the game: The old woman, Brian, Boyd, Irish, FENELLA, 22, DR ALASTAIR, 45, and RHONA, 50s.

Gordon watches the action from a nearby bar stool.

The old woman, down to a few chips, does not look discouraged.

OLD WOMAN

Very kind of you to let me play.

BOYD

Your money's good, ain't it mum?

The game is Texas Hold Em. A large pot rides this hand.

The last card is turned giving Fenella, a petite girl with a street hardened personality and dangerous good looks, the hand and the chips.

Brian watches her every move protectively.

BOYD

Looks like that's about it for you, mum.

OLD WOMAN

Indeed, young man, t'is almost. I've got perhaps enough for one more hand. Meantime I'd like to thank you good folk for sharing your company on this special occasion, the day of my birth.

A few lukewarm mumbles of 'Happy Birthday'.

The old woman produces the antique flask from her purse.

OLD WOMAN

From an old family recipe. It's traditional to share a taste on such an occasion as this. I hope you'll indulge me.

IRISH

Well, we can't turn down a free shot can we now?

OLD WOMAN

Proprietor, if you will.

Gordon, slightly annoyed, reaches behind the bar and grabs shot glasses.

The old woman pours a portion in each glass.

OLD WOMAN

It gives me great pleasure to share
this elixir with you.

Brian shoots Fenella a dirty look.

FENELLA

I promised Brian no more hard stuff,
but t'is a special occasion. A wee
shot won't kill us now, will it?

Rhona, a plump woman in too much makeup, has already knocked
down quite a few tonight.

RHONA

Speaking of hard stuff, husband, more
gin when you can.

GORDON

Get off your fat arse and get it
yourself.

The shot glasses have been passed around.

OLD WOMAN

The gods too appreciate a game of
chance. To the forgotten gods!

They watch her down her shot, then follow suit.

Dr Alastair, impeccably attired, his proper English crafted
from the finer schools, deals the new hand.

DR ALASTAIR

What a fowl concoction!

BRIAN

Twasn't so bad.

RHONA

I rather liked it. Got a mean bite.

While they look at their cards, the old woman produces a small glass vial, removes the cap, and downs the liquid within.

BOYD

Medicine?

The old woman flashes a smile of pure evil.

OLD WOMAN

Antidote.

DR ALASTAIR

Excuse me?

OLD WOMAN

In the days of old, our people honored the gods. On occasion a sacrifice was demanded. Sometimes several.

GORDON

What are you about, mum?

The woman dramatically tosses her flask into the chip pile.

OLD WOMAN

You should begin to feel it any time now. A tingling in your legs, a slight reddish tinge to your vision.

The old woman produces two more glass vials, holds them securely in her ancient hand.

OLD WOMAN

I have two remaining antidotes. One will go to the owner, for keeping the peace. The other we will play for. If anyone moves on me, I will break the vials.

Nervous looks are exchanged. Brian touches Fenella on the arm, she avoids his touch.

Boyd's usual confidence is unshaken.

BOYD

Crazy old bat. Let's get on with the game.

IRISH

Wait.

Irish looks slightly ill.

IRISH

I feel the tingling. And things are looking a bit funny.

The others glance at each other. Effects of the poison set in.

Gordon stands to move on the woman, finds his legs too shaky.

OLD WOMAN

I would not be trusting my legs if I were you. The poison hits there first.

Brian grabs Fenella's arm.

BRIAN

Come on, let's get to a hospital.

OLD WOMAN

No good, boy. Your legs will not carry you far. Even if you made it to the hospital, it would be too late. In about a half hour, paralysis will spread from your legs. Soon after, death. Even with the flask, they would never discover the antidote in time.

Shocked looks are exchanged. They eye the vials in her hand.

DR ALASTAIR

She may have more antidote on her.

OLD WOMAN

I assure you I do not. And you will certainly lose the two I have in my hand.

RHONA

I can hardly feel my legs!

All now struggle with discomfit from the poison.

OLD WOMAN

I suggest you take stock of the situation, play the percentages. That is what card players do. Attempt to attack me, and none of you will live. If you wish to live, you will play the hand as best you can.

BOYD

So one of us is to get the antidote?
What of the rest?

OLD WOMAN

As you said, this is a serious game.

Dr Alastair looks at the old woman's hand on her cards. It is a withered old thing, except for the index finger, which looks strangely young.

OLD WOMAN

It is my bet I believe?

Gordon nods while the others observe in stunned silence.

The old woman raises her right hand to her face, smiles, inserts her pinky into her mouth and gnaws viciously at the base. She holds the vials steady in her left fist.

Blood spurts onto her face, onto the table. It is over in a few seconds. The severed pinky is between her bloody teeth like a little gnarled cigar.

She smiles, removes the finger with her remaining fingers. The stump spurts blood.

The finger is thrown into the pile of chips.

OLD WOMAN

I raise. One finger to call. Must be your own, of course.

The players stare at the finger in horror.

OLD WOMAN

All players will have to match to stay
in the game.

BOYD

Are you fucking crazy?

IRISH

You want us to cut off a finger?

OLD WOMAN

Look at your hand. Evaluate. Make a
decision.

DR ALASTAIR

You can't be serious?

OLD WOMAN

Proprietor, a knife please. Time is
wasting.

Gordon thinks a moment, then reaches for a cutting knife on
the bar behind him, throws it onto the table.

Dr Alastair looks aghast at the knife before him. Beads of
sweat on his brow, he looks at his cards.

DR ALASTAIR

No bloody way!

He stands on shaky legs and staggers toward the door.

He makes it about six steps then grabs his chest and
collapses, his face wrenched in pain.

BRIAN

Someone do something for him!

OLD WOMAN

It is too late for him, boy.

Dr Alastair slumps to the floor dead.

OLD WOMAN

Boyd, you are on the clock.

Boyd takes the knife, studies it with a kind of awe. He looks at his cards: pair of kings.

He looks at the old woman, the vials in her hand. Though perspiring, a vestige of his confidence remains.

With a determined look, he places his pinky on the table and saws at it.

BOYD

Jesus...fucking...christ!

Blood spurts all over the white shirt of Irish seated next to him. Irish tries to avoid it.

Boyd is struggling with the last piece of bone. He lifts his hand to his mouth, chews on the flesh while pulling with the other hand.

He BANGS the table in triumph and throws the finger into the pile of chips.

BOYD

Happy, you old bat?

OLD WOMAN

The gods demand their pound of flesh.
Irish, are you in or out?

IRISH

Give me the fooking knife!

Irish places his hand on the arm of the chair and slices into the pinky.

BOYD

Give me a fucking towel Gordon, will ya!

Irish mutters and swears in pain.

OLD WOMAN

You supplicate yourselves before the gods of the modern world: science, information, reason. You kneel to that fool who prostrated himself on a cross of wood. You abandon the gods of your fathers, but they have not forgotten!

Irish looks up finally, his face pale and swimming in sweat. He smiles weakly and flicks his finger into the pile.

OLD WOMAN

The Shadow is in the room. You will soon see it.

BOYD

Christ! I see it! It stands near the doctor!

The others look but see nothing.

OLD WOMAN

Young lady, your bet.

BRIAN

Please, for the love of God!

(beat)

I'll give you two fingers!

OLD WOMAN

Who says chivalry's dead? But to call it is your own flesh you must wager.

Fenella slides the knife to Brian.

BRIAN

You can't fold!

She looks at her cards.

FENELLA

Cut it for me. Cut the finger off!

Brian is white with horror. It is clear he loves the girl.

He glares at the old woman.

BRIAN

For the love of God, there must be
another way woman, please!

OLD WOMAN

As it was said, no special
consideration. You've about thirty
seconds, lad.

Brian takes Fenella's dainty hand and holds it on the table,
holds the knife over the pinky.

BRIAN

I'm sorry love.

FENELLA

Be quick about it!

Brian saws with intensity. Blood flies all over the cards on
the table.

BRIAN

Oh God, Oh God, Oh God!

Fenella bites her lip, makes not a sound.

And then he is done. He picks up the pinky with a mixture of
revulsion and possessiveness, looks lovingly at it.

FENELLA

Throw it in Brian, for God's sake, I'm
bleeding here!

The tiny finger is placed in the pot carefully.

Brian wraps her hand in a towell, ties it around her wrist to
stem the bleeding.

OLD WOMAN

Your turn, son. Unless you wish to
fold.

Brian seizes the knife takes care of business stoically.

OLD WOMAN

The Shadow is impatient. It's hunger grows.

Brian's finger takes its place with the others.

OLD WOMAN

Mrs Proprietor? Do you wish to remain in the game?

RHONA

My husband...

She looks pleadingly at her husband.

GORDON

I would play, woman, if I were you. It is not my intention to use my antidote to save your fat arse.

RHONA

I...I can't.

GORDON

Brian, cut it for her.

BRIAN

You cut it.

GORDON

If you value your job.

BRIAN

You can take your job...

OLD WOMAN

Thirty seconds.

Rhona looks at her husband with begging eyes.

Gordon takes the knife and holds his wife's hand. He studies the hand as though seeing it for the first time in many years.

At last, with grim determination, he places the hand on the bar and pushes the knife through the finger.

Rhona sobs a moment, then stifles herself.

Gordon holds the finger, looks sympathetically at his wife, then tosses it on the table.

OLD WOMAN

As the dealer is dead, I will do the honors.

The old woman reaches to the deck and turns over the card, the fourth of five community cards. Queen of spades.

Her pinky stump has stopped bleeding and the tip of a finger has grown in its place, poking out of the stump.

Gordon suddenly stares in terror at a spot between Dr Alastair's corpse and the old woman.

GORDON

Get out! Get out of my fucking pub!

The others all look, follow the owner's gaze.

FENELLA

God, I see it! Behind the old woman! I see the Shadow!

Irish makes the sign of the cross.

IRISH

Jesus, Mary and all the saints, protect me, I'm sorry for living as I have! Forgive me!

OLD WOMAN

It is not they whose forgiveness you must ask.

BOYD

Come on, let's get on with the game! I can't feel my legs!

OLD WOMAN

Yes, we must be hurrying now. As time is short, for my next bet, I will give you all a total of two minutes to match or fold. All at once, do not wait for the others.

The old woman smirks and reaches her hand to her face. The new pinky protrudes from the stump to the first knuckle.

She inserts her index finger into her eye socket and plucks out her eyeball. She twists to sever it from the nerves, holds it in her gnarled hand, cackling.

She rolls the eye into the pot. The dead pupil stares up at the ceiling.

IRISH

God have mercy!

Cries of terror and disgust accompany the lament of Irish.

Boyd lets out a maniacal laugh.

OLD WOMAN

Two minutes, for all of you. If you wish to live, place an eye in the pot.

Fenella looks at Brian with moistened eyes.

FENELLA

I have a good hand.

BRIAN

No, no, no!

FENELLA

I want to live!

Brian shows her his cards. Pair of aces.

BRIAN

I'll give you the antidote when I win!

FENELLA

What if you don't win!?

Irish tries to rub the blood from his white shirt, mutters.

Gordon looks apologetically into his wife's eyes.

GORDON

I'm not ready to die, luv.

Boyd is still laughing.

Fenella rests her head on Brian's shoulder. He places his arm around her.

FENELLA

Do it, Brian. Do it quick.

Brian moves his hand from her shoulder to her head, takes a firm grip.

BRIAN

I love you.

EXT. DEIDRE PUB - CONTINUOUS

A HOWLING wind whips rain torrents on the deserted, broken street. A freight train SCHREECHES like an angry animal as it runs the tracks across from the Deidre. SCREAMS of pain leech through the pub door and join the cacophony.

INT. DEIDRE PUB

Blood trickles down the exhilarated face of the old woman, a tall shadow faintly visible behind her.

Eyeballs and fingers top the pot on the table. Blood smears the cards, the chips, clothing.

Each of the players holds a hand to an eye. Blood trickles on ashen faces.

Boyd wears the smile of the unhinged.

Gordon sits with his arm around his wife, comforts her.

Fenella holds her cards intensely. Brian has an arm around her.

The old woman places her hand on the deck.

OLD WOMAN

One more card. Who lives and who dies,
all in the hands of the gods! As
always, they are grateful for your
having played.

The old woman cackles long and hard.

EXT. DEIDRE PUB

CRIES of horror escape the closed door of the pub, are drowned out by the HOWLING WIND which carries us with a blowing plastic bag, up the street, down an embankment.

The bag blows to a gate of iron bars, snags there. The bars block the entrance to an old sewer tunnel. The bag whistles as it blows against the bars, seeking entry to the tunnel.