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 ounce, 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 SCHRECHES 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.