

Love on an Island

Mel Reeve

1,353 words

A story of queer love in an isolated priory on a small Scottish island: a stolen relic, an unspoken promise, and a pair of soul-friends.

Bio: Mel is an award-winning writer and archivist based in Glasgow. Her work explores identity and history, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ stories and the ways the past shapes who we become. Her short stories have won the Glasgow Women's Library Bold Types Prize (2020) and the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival Grand Jury Prize (2024), and have been shortlisted for the Creative Future Writer's Award, the Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize, and the Scottish Wildlife Trust's Words of the Wild competition. Her writing has been published by Gutter magazine, 404 Ink, Knight Errant Press, Leith Press, The Skinny, Autostraddle, DIVA magazine, and more, and she is a columnist for Mslexia. She is an editor at Fear of Making Art Press and the founder of the Bi History project, which celebrates and preserves bisexual+ history. She also hosts the Bi History podcast and works in archives, improving access to digital collections and shaping guidance on how to celebrate and preserve LGBTQ+ histories.

Moonlight stretches tender fingers through slanted branches until the silver-grey clings to my skin like water from the loch. Heatless and thick, the shadows recoil from the puddles of light which coat the forest floor, only serving to make the surrounding darkness deeper. I follow a familiar path. I could do so blindfolded, the rough surface beneath my feet a rhythmic message that draws me home.

Heavy walls wrap around my hooded form, and the flickering lamplight coats the hewn stones in butter and honey. The darkness looms outside the range of the flame. I am no longer a simple friar; I have become a sainted figure banishing the demons from sight as my weary hand lifts the lantern.

Entwined on a narrow wooden cot, our chests rise in unison, wrapped together like sleeping forest creatures, safe in their burrows. The heat of his body radiates into mine, banishing the cold of the night from my gooseflesh skin. We fit together like two carved shapes, symmetrical and equal. I am a little taller by day, but in the peace of sleep, with our figures matched, we could be just the same.

Thick vellum beneath my worn palms, beaten and treated calfskin as soft as the flesh at the nape of your neck. The whisper of your breath traces my cheek as I lean closer to the manuscript, fresh ink drying before my eyes and the iron tang of it, like blood. You are proud as a hunter with its kill, the sparrowhawk that seizes its prey and feasts with rapturous, savage joy. It thrills me to picture such a creature in your bestiary, spread upon the open pages in a riot of violent colour.

A bee lands gentle and delicate on my outstretched palm, a haze of yellow pollen across its abdomen. It flits away, towards the hives and into the trees. Sunlight warms the nearby stones of the priory just as it brings heat to my cheeks, and so I tilt my face skywards, closing my eyes. I can smell the thick, animal scent of my drying woollen robes, weighted

down by a brief rain shower. Later, you trace circles around my eyes. I know it is your writing hand from the thick pad on your finger where you hold your quill, as you taste by touch the warmth of the sunlight. Somehow, you know I have saved it for you there.

The traveller comes as the leaves turn, verdant green into golden brown. Crossing the shimmering coin that is the water around our home, he enters, stepping across the threshold into the silent sanctity of the priory. During chapter meeting he steps to the front, a worn leather bag in his grasp. That night we dine with honey from the stores, the flavour of hot, endless days beneath the shading trees melting away.

I dream. The light is fading fast from the sky and leaving swathes of inky blues and pinks like oily hand marks across the horizon. I am following a path, but I can tell from how branches push back at me that I am the first man to have passed this way in a while. Underfoot, the ground is damp and soft. The light is fading until the world in front of me becomes grey and silver. Ahead, I can see something shining, catching the moonlight like water.

In the clearing, there is a tree glinting like freshly polished silver, its branches bearing jewels and treasures like heavy, ripe fruit. I approach the curving boughs of the tree, wanting to feel the living pulse under the bark. In the gnarled roots at its base, I see a body. I kneel before you, your skin the colour of warm earth and soft beneath my touch. I lay my head on your chest as it rises and falls.

The miraculous gift of the traveller, those venerated bones, brings visitors to us despite the sheeting rain and violent winds tugging at the loch. Head bowed, I strain down on the oars as we bounce along, my mouth still bitter with the taste of the last wave that broke the bow of our small boat, and my fingers cold as stone. The huddled figures sitting in the stern seem distant, like ragged crows on the priory wall. I lower my eyes and pull.

Disappearing in the early hours of the morning, the fragile bones of the saint somehow leave a bigger presence now that they are gone. The prior frowns when he sees me, his thin-lipped mouth pinching, and the shape of his skull visible beneath the taught skin. I can see the fear in his eyes; to have lost something so valuable has made him vulnerable, and he is unused to that sensation. I do a better job of caring for what matters to me, I think.

You watch me from across the hall as I nod to the prior and keep my gaze fixed on the floor, kneeling now for mass. I think instead about the ink stains that had blotched on the side of your palm and how they now trace faint bruise-like darkness down my ribs. My bed is cold this night, and the next. Waking for prayer by myself leaves me lost. I long to grasp your sleeve and ask questions that buzz on my tongue like hungry bees, but instead, I spoon down thin porridge and dream of sweet honey.

Cells are searched in a frantic flurry, and I wonder about all the skeletal hands to be found buried beneath the earth on which our crops grow. We live and die upon this island, for our mortal bodies it is an eternal home. It is curious, the sanctity of one and not another. Should you find your way to heaven before me, I wonder if I would want the delicate bones of your hand to remain. I find I much prefer the heat of your palm pressing to my bare skin. My own fingers shake a little as I pick up our worn blanket from the floor and replace it upon the narrow cot bed. I would offer you my bones if you asked for them. When I close my eyelids, the bursting colours of your illuminations spring forth, like an unbidden madness.

You layer gold leaf onto delicate vellum, like sunlight breaking through the trees. I can almost see the dark circles of your irises in the shimmering surface, but then they are gone, and I see only the empty shine of gold. Meanwhile, the bees are getting fat, buzzing furiously about the forest on the last few dry days, trying to build stores for winter.

The culprit remains elusive, the relic still missing, and I take your outstretched hand as we walk in the woods, the rough touch of my calloused skin dulling the sensation of your grip. Beneath our feet, the ground is entombed beneath a thin layer of ice, shattering with every step.

Restless, I watch you sleep at night, your even breathing and unfurrowed brow reversed in my creasing forehead and chewed fingertips. I want to slip my hand into your chest and feel the rhythm of your heart, let it flood me with every beat. I picture it in golds and reds like the visions you create. I settle for the soft touch of fingertips on your shoulder, which brings you rolling close to me with a gentle sigh.

Snow comes, bone white and blanketing the world. Our collective silence deepens, even the usual sounds of the priory fading into the ice. My breath mists as I curl around you, hungry for your warmth. You press back into me, unrelenting.

The relic remains lost. No pilgrim could make the journey to visit us now, but still, the prior stalks the freezing hallways with a sharp eye that promises his prize will be uncovered. I dream of a severed hand, fresh blood staining snow, before being snatched and held proudly aloft.

Somewhere, a boat rests on the shore, a bundle of waxed leather hidden beneath the benches, waiting for the thaw.