

*Danny Weston*



**A  
HUNTER'S  
MOON**

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Where there are sheep  
the wolves are never far away  
*Plautus*





# PROLOGUE

For perhaps the fourth time that night, Hamish Gilmour got up from the uncomfortable stool he'd been sitting on and walked over to the open door of the bothy. He gazed mournfully out across the deserted moorland. There had been bright moonlight earlier, and he'd easily been able to make out the splash of white that was the dead ram's fleece, lying on a ridge several hundred yards away to the east. But now thick clouds were moving in to obscure the moon, and he could scarcely make out any details.

The little shepherd's hut was bare and the stone chimney long since blocked up by a whole succession of birds' nests, so there was no hope of a fire tonight. Besides, the smell of woodsmoke might alert his quarry to his presence here. So he would just have to suffer the chill of the advancing darkness. He thought wistfully about his croft, less than a mile's walk from here and he pictured the big iron pan of broth, bubbling over a wood fire. He thought about his wife's delicious homemade bread and he pictured his two children, resisting their mother's call for them to go to bed and waiting hopefully for their father's return. But it could be a long time before he was able to head back. For a moment, his resolve weakened. He considered packing up his flintlock

and trudging homewards before the rain began; because the smell of it was most definitely in the air, that strange, sulphurous tang that always preceded a storm. *Just my luck*, he thought. But he told himself, no, he'd lost two sheep in as many days and he could ill afford to lose any more to whatever it was that was preying on them.

He went reluctantly back to the stool and slumped down on it, running a hand through his thatch of dark hair and scratching at his ragged beard. His gangling frame made the rickety stool doubly uncomfortable; his long legs bent at an awkward angle. He thought again about finding the remains of the slaughtered ram this morning – a powerful adult – and how shocked he'd been at the state of it; how very mangled it was. It had resembled something he might expect to see on the counter of a butcher's shop, and he'd felt devastated by the loss. This had been a fine beast. It had required constant care and regular feeds and, what's more, he'd paid a pretty penny for it. His first thought was that it must have been killed by a wolf.

Oh, yes, he was well aware that everybody said that there were no wolves left in Scotland, that they were long gone even from the remotest areas of the Highlands, but what manner of dog – even a pack of them – could have done such damage to the poor creature? One thing was for certain, whatever had killed it had left enough meat to make it worth returning to and that was why Hamish had been waiting in the bothy for several hours now, passing the time in silence, waiting for the predator to return to the feast. Then all he needed was one clear shot.

As if in answer to the thought, a sound reached him; a prolonged howl. It started low and then rose in pitch and

volume until it echoed eerily across the moor. It sounded uncomfortably close and despite himself, a chill ran through him. *Right*, he thought, *a wolf it most surely is*. People would hardly be able to argue its existence when he dragged its carcass into the market square tomorrow morning.

He took a deep breath and got up from the stool. Picking up the heavy flintlock rifle, he walked over to the doorway. As he stepped cautiously outside there was another sound, away to the east, a deep ominous rumble of thunder as the impending storm moved rapidly closer.

*Perfect*, he thought, but steeled his resolve. The beast seemed to be returning and he needed to be in position when it appeared. He must also act with caution, he reminded himself. There would probably only be time for one shot, but provided he managed to get it in before the rain fell and dampened his gunpowder, then he should be all right. He prided himself on being a decent marksman and there was no wolf that walked God's earth that could withstand a well-aimed lead ball. Hamish lifted the gun into a firing position and began to move slowly across the moor towards the ram's carcass, straining his eyes to get a visual fix on it.

Again, that eerie howl echoed in the night, sounding much closer now. Hamish looked all around him, but the visibility was bad and was getting worse by the moment. He tilted his head and gazed upwards, saw a broiling mass of cloud moving across the puny smear of light that was the moon. *Why now?* he wondered. It was as if something had it in for him.

Despite himself, Hamish's heart began to thud in his chest, the beat quickening as he got steadily closer to the carcass.

Once again, he considered turning back, but shook his head to dispel the thought. It had to end here and now. He would take no pleasure in ending the life of such a rare beast, but he simply could not afford to let his livelihood be taken away from him in this way. He kept putting one foot in front of the other and finally came to the low ridge, on top of which the ram had been lying. Only now, it didn't seem to be there. He frowned and toiled upwards. He crested the rise and stared down into the declivity beyond. Sure enough, there was a smudge of white down in the gully – the ram, lying on its side, but only half visible because a dark shape was crouched over it, as if inspecting it before it began to eat. It was the sheer size of the creature that caused Hamish to let out an involuntary gasp. Then, whatever it was raised its head to look up at him and Hamish's blood seemed to still momentarily in his veins.

In the darkness, he couldn't make out much detail but he heard the low, rumbling growl that issued from the creature; a sound that echoed the thunder he'd heard a moment earlier.

For an instant, he froze, staring down open-mouthed, teetering on the brink of panic. But then, the shocking realisation that the beast was already off the carcass and climbing the slope towards him, galvanised Hamish back into life. He snapped the rifle upwards, willing himself not to waste the shot. He needed to wait until the thing was so close, he couldn't miss. Now it was climbing towards him at a terrifying speed and his nerve broke. He lifted the rifle to his eye-line and aimed the sights between those two red orbs. He snatched in a breath and squeezed the trigger.

The weapon bucked in his hand, the stock punching against his shoulder and the smoke of the burning powder blew back

into his eyes, temporarily blinding him. He blinked, coughed and shook his head, then stared apprehensively down into the gully. The ram still lay below him but of the creature that had been approaching, there was no sign. Hamish looked around in bewilderment. Where had it gone? At such close range, he surely couldn't have missed! Had the impact of the bullet flung it to one side?

He began to descend into the gully, looking cautiously to right and left and reaching instinctively for the powder horn that hung across his shoulder, meaning to reload the rifle, just in case he needed to put the beast out of its misery. But then something cold and wet splashed his face and he hesitated, realising that it was beginning to rain.

A heartbeat later, a giant hand plunged an invisible knife into the sky and ripped it wide open. The rain came down in icy rods, battering his head and shoulders and soaking through the thick fabric of his coat, chilling him to the bone. He stopped in his tracks, aware of his breath clouding in front of him and realising that it would be pointless now to try and reload the gun.

A deep rumble of thunder appeared to shake the very earth beneath his feet and he decided to head back to the meagre shelter of the bothy. As he turned, forked lightning split the sky and for a horrible instant, he saw that the creature was somehow perched on the top of the ridge that he had just descended and was gazing down at him, its eyes blazing like red hot coals, the rain bouncing up from its head and back to form a kind of iridescent halo. Hamish got a brief impression of its size, its open jaws, its long, shaggy, rain-slicked fur and he knew in that instant that it was no wolf. This was something beyond his ken.

Then darkness returned and he sensed, rather than saw, the beast hurtling down the slope towards him.

At the last moment, instinct made him turn the rifle around in his hands and hold it like a club, in a last desperate attempt to defend himself.

And then the thing was upon him. The last image he saw was of its hellish crimson eyes staring straight into his . . .



# CALLUM

The sound of metal-shod hooves clattering on cobbles awoke Callum suddenly from a disturbing dream. He'd been out alone on the moors at night, walking to an unknown destination. He'd crested a hill and gazed down into a valley where he saw the edge of a dense forest running from right to left across his field of vision, as far as the eye could see. There were lights shining in the midst of that forest; strange ethereal colours that blazed amidst the dense vegetation. As he stood there he'd felt the lights somehow pulling at him, exerting a powerful hold. And he knew in that moment that he wanted to go towards those lights – he wanted to walk in among the trees to discover the source of the colours . . .

He sat for a moment, befuddled, and then realised that he was sitting at the kitchen table. He must have drifted off in the middle of Old Mother McCloud's constant prattling, as she busied herself at the kitchen stove. He glanced guiltily up at her and saw that she was studying him, her wizened features arranged into a questioning look, her milky blue eyes staring accusingly at him. She must have just spoken to him, but he didn't have the first idea what she might have said.

'Er . . . I'm sorry,' he muttered. "Did you . . .?"

‘I said, you’d better shake yourself,’ she snapped, in her croaky, dry-as-a-bone voice. ‘You’ll catch it if you keep him waiting any longer.’

Callum needed no second bidding. He had worked for Fraser McCloud for three months now and knew only too well the consequences of not following instructions the moment they were issued. Fraser had a harsh tongue and no qualms about using his fists whenever he felt his young assistant was being tardy.

At just fourteen years of age, this was Callum’s first proper job, but he’d always imagined that when he did embark on such an enterprise, there’d be some kind of a wage to go along with it. All he got in return for his labours here were two of Mother McCloud’s stodgy meals a day and a mangy, uncomfortable bed in the attic, where only total exhaustion compelled him to find any sleep. As to how long this wonderful job was going to last, that was anybody’s guess.

He burst out of the kitchen door and into the yard, where he found Fraser sitting astride Mags, his chestnut mare, looking impatiently around. He was a tall, thin man, with straight black hair, which hung to his shoulders from beneath a wide brimmed hat. He wore a long, military style greatcoat and a pair of brown leather boots of which he was inordinately proud and which Callum was compelled to polish every evening. The cruel metal spurs that jutted from his heels were an indication of the kind of man he was. A former soldier – or so he claimed – he seemed to believe that everybody else in the world was somehow inferior to him and he had no problem announcing it to just about everyone he met. His young assistant was the lowest of the low, only here because his father was such a terrible card player and therefore worthy of no man’s sympathy.

‘What kept you?’ snapped Fraser. He glared at Callum. ‘You weren’t sleeping, were you?’

‘No, sir.’ Callum stepped forward and caught Mags’s bridle. He held her steady as Fraser swung himself down from the saddle and pulled the flintlock rifle from the leather holder at the back of it.

‘Did you get that outhouse cleaned as I instructed?’

‘Yes, sir.’ This was true. Callum had scrubbed the filthy old place for hours, which probably accounted for the fact that he had fallen asleep at the table earlier.

‘And do you have anything to report?’

Callum shook his head. ‘All quiet,’ he said. ‘No visitors.’ He knew that Fraser was hoping for offers of work, but in the time he’d been in the man’s employ, he’d seen very little going on that might qualify for that description. Since being discharged from the army, Fraser seemed to be making his living by playing cards for money – something he was adept at – or taking a fee from various landowners in the area to help clear tenants out of properties they could no longer afford. He was, Callum supposed, a bully for hire, and he seemed to have few scruples about who he pushed around, provided somebody lined his pockets in return.

‘I’m going inside,’ he announced. He handed Mags’s reins to Callum. ‘Get her unsaddled and fed – and I want you to wipe her down from head to foot before putting the brush to her. I’ll be back to check,’ he added, managing to make it sound like a threat.

Callum nodded. He turned and led Mags dutifully over to the little stable. He unbolted the door and took her inside and into the stall next to Molly, an aging black mare that mostly served as Fraser’s packhorse. Callum removed Mags’s saddle and bridle and

then scrubbed her down with handfuls of straw, before applying a course brush to her coat. As he worked, he talked to her and, as ever, she seemed to be listening to him.

‘I keep telling myself,’ he murmured, ‘that one of these days, Mr McCloud will come and tell me that the debt has been paid. That I can go home again. But each day comes and goes, and he says nothing . . .’

It galled him to think that his parents’ croft was only a few miles away, and yet he hadn’t been allowed to pay them a visit in all the time he’d been working here. He carried a vivid memory of the day he’d taken his leave of them. His mother’s face, pale and red-eyed as she handed him a wrapped parcel of food for the journey – and his father, watching sullenly from a distance, too ashamed to even look his son in the eye after what had happened. Callum had no idea how much money had been lost in that fateful card game but he assumed it was a tidy sum, certainly more than his father could afford to lose.

It made Callum angry to think that his old man could have been so reckless, so stupid, when the family was already struggling to earn enough money to pay their monthly rent on the croft. But he also knew that his father hated to show the world how poor he was, and how he liked to play the big man whenever he was out with his drinking friends. Fraser would have seen that weakness and exploited it, coaxing Callum’s father to raise the bet higher and higher until there was no backing down . . .

Callum was surprised to discover that his shoulders were now moving rhythmically up and down . . . and then there was the familiar feel of hot tears coursing down his cheeks. He pushed his face up against Mags’s flank to muffle the sound

of his sobs. She snorted and tossed her head, as if sympathising with his plight.

After a while, the tears subsided and he wiped his face on the sleeve of his jacket. Pointless to stand here feeling sorry for himself, he thought, He inspected Mags closely, terrified that he might have missed a bit of dried mud or a speck of gorse, but she looked perfect. He put out some feed for her and fetched a bucket of clean water from the pump in the yard, then closed the stable door and headed back to the house.

When he stepped into the kitchen he saw that Fraser was seated at the top end of the table wolfing down a large portion of meat stew, into which he was dipping a hunk of soda bread. Callum felt his stomach gurgle and he looked hopefully at Mother McCloud who was still stationed at the stove. She in turn glanced at her son.

‘Am I to give the boy his ration?’ she asked.

Fraser paused for a moment, as if considering the idea. He looked at Callum. ‘You’ve given Mags a proper brush down?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I’ll not find your work unsatisfactory?’

‘No, sir, I don’t believe so.’

‘Go on then.’ Fraser motioned to an empty seat at the far end of the table, then looked at his mother. ‘Give him a decent portion,’ he warned her. ‘He’ll need to keep his strength up.’

Callum almost winced at that. Who knew what arduous tasks Fraser had lined up for him? He seated himself and watched as Mother McCloud heaped a ration of stew into a clay bowl and tore a chunk of bread from the new loaf. She brought it over,

her ancient figure stooped and wasted, and set it down in front of him. 'There, now,' she said. 'Eat up.'

'Thank you kindly, Mother McCloud,' said Callum, knowing that if he didn't say something the meal would almost certainly be snatched away from him. He waited until she had returned to the stove before starting on the food, tearing wolfishly at the bowl's viscous contents.

'What's the great hurry?' snarled Fraser disapprovingly, and with an effort, Callum made himself slow down. He looked along the table at his employer, wondering if he dared ask the question he'd been wanting to ask for weeks. Fraser seemed to sense this and looked up from his own food. 'Well?' he enquired. 'Something on your mind?'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but I was just wondering . . .'

'Oh, you were, were you? That's an unfortunate habit of yours, boy. We've had words about that before, have we not?'

'Yes, sir, we have, but . . . if you please, I was wondering if you had any idea how much longer you might need to keep me here.'

Fraser smirked unpleasantly. '*Keep you here?*' He studied Callum for a moment in silence. 'Am I sensing some dissatisfaction? Are you not enjoying your time as my assistant?'

'Er . . . well, yes, of course, but . . .'

'Then there's no need for the question, is there?'

Callum looked at Fraser, dismayed, realising that he was already in danger of incurring the man's wrath. 'But . . . if you please, sir, I haven't seen my parents for a very long time.'

Fraser sniggered. 'In the case of your father, that should be considered a blessing,' he said. 'The man is an idiot who thinks he has an aptitude for cards but cannot keep a poker face to save

his life. Your mother, on the other hand, I can see, that might be something a person might miss. She is indeed fair to look upon, is she not?’

Callum didn’t know what to say to that.

Fraser gave his bowl a last wipe with the remaining bread and pushed it into his mouth, then chewed noisily until it was gone. ‘It’s ridiculously simple, really,’ he said at last. ‘Allow me to explain. The day your father comes to me and pays me what he owes, that’s when you shall be allowed to go home.’

Callum nodded. ‘I understand that, sir. But . . . I have worked for three months, so . . . I suppose the sum owed must be less than it was before.’

Now Fraser threw back his head and laughed, before meeting Callum’s gaze again. ‘Forgive me,’ he said. ‘You are just a boy. You cannot be expected to know how these matters work. Perhaps you didn’t appreciate that a debt incurs monthly interest.’

‘Interest, sir?’

‘Yes, interest. So, you see, your efforts here only serve to keep the debt at the same amount.’

‘The . . . same amount?’ Callum struggled to understand. ‘You’re saying . . .?’

‘That the money owed is exactly the same as it was the day your father stumbled away from that card table. So unless his fortunes change dramatically, I’d say you’re here for the long run.’

Callum stared at him, the food in his stomach suddenly turned to cold sludge. He was about to say something else, when the urgent sound of horses’ hooves and the clatter of iron-bound wheels shattered the silence. They both turned to look out of the window. A fine black carriage was pulling

into the courtyard pulled by a team of equally handsome grey horses.

'Hello, hello,' murmured Fraser. 'Who's this coming a-calling? Somebody with money, by the look of those wheels.' He turned back and glared at Callum, who was still sitting there open-mouthed in dismay. 'Well, what are you waiting for, lad?' he snapped.

Callum looked at him, still in shock. 'Sir?' he murmured.

'Go and see what they want!' snapped Fraser.

And Callum hurried to obey him.