

Before

The first Callanish knew of the Circus Excalibur was the striped silk of their sails against the grey sky. They approached her tiny island in convoy: the main boat with its bobbing trail of canvas-covered coracles following like ducklings, chained in an obedient line. Ships arrived a dozen a day in the archipelagos, and Callanish knew that the circus folk would have to fight for their place on her island. Tomorrow the dock would be needed for a messenger boat, or a crime crew, or a medic. In a world that is almost entirely sea, placing your feet on land was a privilege that must be earned.

As dusk fell, Callanish loitered at the blackshore, her slippered feet restless on the wooden slats. She watched as the circus crew spilled ashore: a red-faced barrel of a man, trailed by a bird-delicate boy; a trio of tattooed ladies, hair bright as petals; two gleaming horses left to gum at the seaweed. To a chorus of shouts – *hoist! hoist! hoist!* – the crew pulled ropes in unison, their limbs slick with saltwater.

Callanish tugged at her white gloves as she watched the circus unfold. She saw how the boat's sails would become the striped ceiling of the big top; how the wide, flat deck would be the stage. With each billow of sail or tightening of ropes, she inched further off the dock and on to the shore. It was only when the sun dipped below

the horizon that she felt the damp chill in her toes and saw how her slippers had darkened with seawater. Oh, she would be in trouble now.

She ran home doing giant steps, leaping high into the air like a circus acrobat, hoping the wind would dry her slippers before her mother saw.



That night Callanish huddled under the striped canopy, mouth open as she gazed up, gloved hands gripped between her knees. Not all the landlockers on her island found the circus a glad sight: there were enough people on the island to crowd out the big top twice over, but it was only half full. Still, Callanish was excited enough for every single landlocker in the whole archipelago.

Her mother had scrubbed and scrubbed at the white silk slippers, muttering that Callanish would have to skip the performance. Callanish had shut herself in the wooden chest, hiding among the sealskins, until her mother relented. She promised that she would not fiddle with her gloves and slippers, and she would be silent and good and unnoticed, and it would all be worth it for the circus.

‘We shouldn’t welcome dampplings like this,’ murmured Callanish’s mother, folding her bare hands on her lap. ‘And at night-time, too, when good people should be tucked up safe in their houses! What are those circus folk hiding in the dark, hmm?’ She patted Callanish’s hands, making sure the gloves were on. ‘Some islands don’t even let dampplings come above the blackshore. If they want to perform, they can do it in the daytime with waves lapping at their ankles like they’re meant. Those people belong in the water. They’re dirtying the land.’

But Callanish knew that would never work. The circus would not look good in the bland, bright day: its colours would fade against the clouds, spitty rain would threaten the fire-breather, the acrobats’

sodden feet would make them shiver so much they missed their catches. What would be the point of an imperfect circus?

The red-faced barrel-man strode onstage, dressed in a ringmaster's costume of an elaborate hat, black trousers, and a shirt covered in rows of paper ruffles. Even Callanish's mother gasped at that: so much paper must have cost a fortune.

At the ringmaster's urging the circus burst into colours, lights, the death-mocking glory of twists and catches and bright gleams of skin. To Callanish it felt more daring than secrets, more vivid than memory, and her eyes opened wide as eggs. After each act - acrobats! horses! fire-breathers! - the landlockers rushed to fill the ringmaster's hat with lumps of gold and coal and quartz and copper. By the time he was introducing the final act, he had to drag his treasure-filled hat offstage.

On to the stage stepped a family: a man and a woman with a girl of about Callanish's age. They were all dark-haired and draped in fabric, pure white and shimmering. The woman held one end of a golden chain, the other end hidden behind a curtain. They bowed to the crowd, then the woman tugged the chain. An enormous shadow lumbered towards her.

'A bear!' cried out Callanish. 'From the storybook! A bear and a baby bear!' And sure enough, padding unsteadily in the big bear's wake, came a bear no bigger than Callanish.

Offstage, a needle whined on to a record. Violins swooped around the big top. The man and woman began to dance. They waltzed around the golden-chained bear as it reached its heavy paws out for them, at first in play, then in frustration. The song eased into another rhythm, and the woman slipped away from the man and into the bear's grasp. The crowd gasped, shrieked, stood as if to run - but the bear was turning and stepping gracefully, its paws clasping the woman's hands. They were dancing. After a moment, the little girl and the little bear joined

hands and danced too, a mirror in miniature. Callanish clapped with glee, and even her mother seemed charmed.

In the years that followed, Callanish tried many times to remember exactly what happened next. It did not help that as soon as the big bear roared, her mother wrapped her arms around Callanish's head and pulled her close, the world instantly reduced to the earthy, floral smell of her mother's skin and the scratchy wool of her dress. But Callanish could still hear the screams, the roars, the chaos of running feet. She felt herself lifted as her mother hefted her on to her hip and ran.

Jolting with movement, Callanish fought to peer back over her mother's shoulder. She saw landlockers scrambling to the exits. She saw the dropped bodies of the man and woman, their white clothing stained dark, their skin sheened red. She saw the bright gleam of a blade in the woman's motionless hand. She saw the big bear, belly sliced open, a shadow heaving its final breaths.

And in the centre of it all she saw two figures: one draped in white, one furred black; both with eyes open moon-round and empty. A small girl and a small bear, hands and paws still linked.