

Assynt

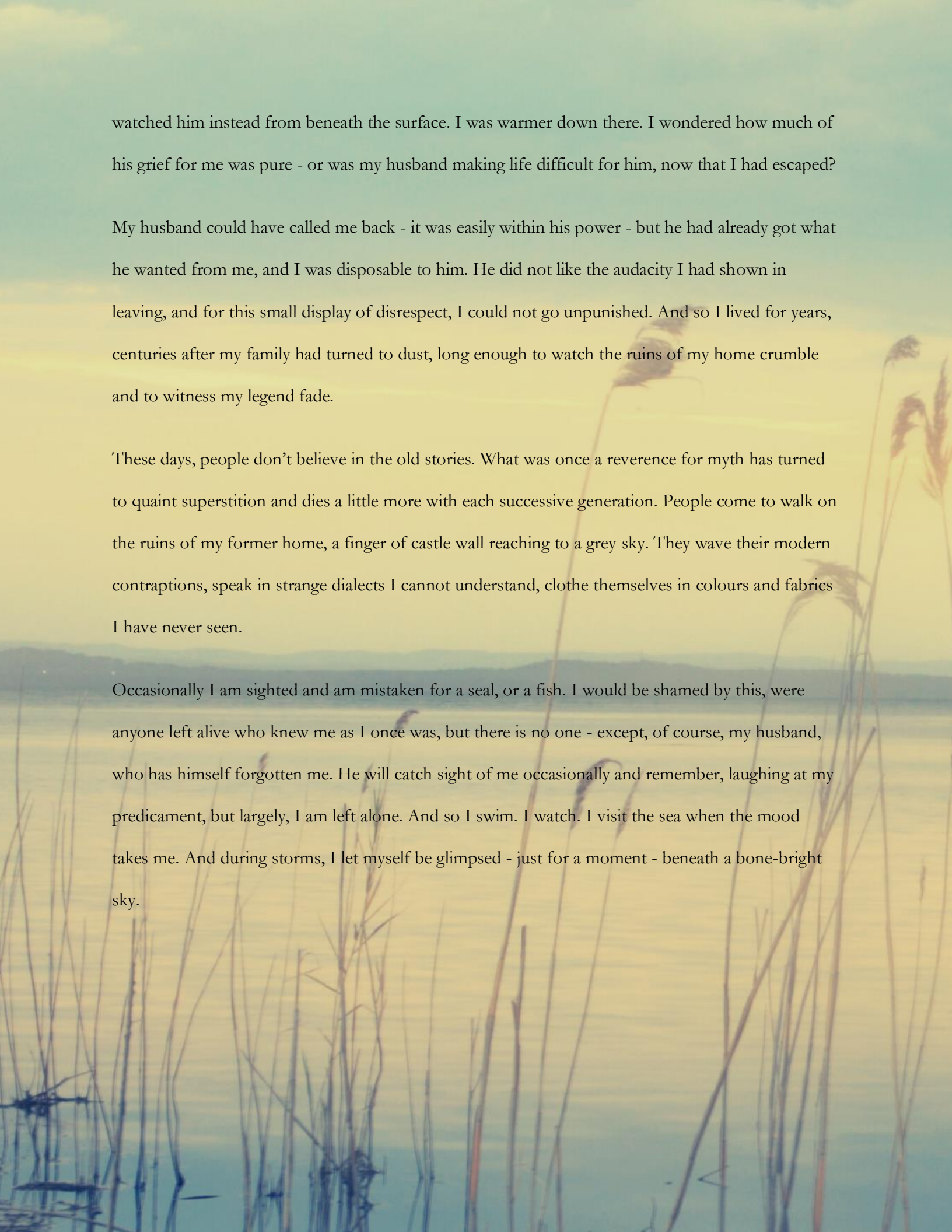
by Emily Prince

They used to call me Eimhir, when I was a daughter of MacLeod. That was when I lived before legend.

Afterwards, I did not hear my old name. The fearful called me 'Mermaid'. The less reverent called me 'Creature'. I let them. I liked them to see me in storms, beneath a sky whitened for a moment, through sheets of rain. They were never certain of their own eyes, and I knew I looked monstrous to them, dressed in weeds. Finned.

I hid myself when I recognised the faces of my visitors - men and women who had known me when I lived as Eimhir, curious to see if the stories were true. They whispered about me, not realising how easily their voices travelled over the surface of the water. They pointed up at what was once my tower room, scanning the window for evidence that I had indeed thrown myself out of it. They even came out in their boats with wine and servants, telling stories of my fate. I could have taken them then, tipped their boats, pulled them beneath the water and held them down until they perished. I would not eat human flesh, but there are many living in the loch that would. I still do not know why I let them live. I grew accustomed to leaving the loch when they came, and I would swim downriver - sometimes all the way to the sea. I could stay away for days or weeks at a time, but I found the sea exhausting, and soon I would long for the fresh water, the quieter weather, the smallness of my cave.

My father himself came to the shore, grown haggard with his grief, a pale shadow of his former self. He cried, of course, his voice wailing over the loch as he called for me. I did not come to him, and

The background of the text is a soft-focus photograph of a sunset or sunrise over a body of water. In the foreground, several tall, thin reeds or grasses are visible, their heads slightly blurred. The sky is a mix of pale yellow, orange, and light blue, suggesting the sun is low on the horizon. The water reflects the colors of the sky, creating a shimmering effect. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

watched him instead from beneath the surface. I was warmer down there. I wondered how much of his grief for me was pure - or was my husband making life difficult for him, now that I had escaped?

My husband could have called me back - it was easily within his power - but he had already got what he wanted from me, and I was disposable to him. He did not like the audacity I had shown in leaving, and for this small display of disrespect, I could not go unpunished. And so I lived for years, centuries after my family had turned to dust, long enough to watch the ruins of my home crumble and to witness my legend fade.

These days, people don't believe in the old stories. What was once a reverence for myth has turned to quaint superstition and dies a little more with each successive generation. People come to walk on the ruins of my former home, a finger of castle wall reaching to a grey sky. They wave their modern contraptions, speak in strange dialects I cannot understand, clothe themselves in colours and fabrics I have never seen.

Occasionally I am sighted and am mistaken for a seal, or a fish. I would be shamed by this, were anyone left alive who knew me as I once was, but there is no one - except, of course, my husband, who has himself forgotten me. He will catch sight of me occasionally and remember, laughing at my predicament, but largely, I am left alone. And so I swim. I watch. I visit the sea when the mood takes me. And during storms, I let myself be glimpsed - just for a moment - beneath a bone-bright sky.