

Rock fall

Brothers Joe and Jack clambered back up the cliff face to admire their progress. Down below their ledge was greening, beginning to sprout. The potatoes might grow. Something had to. Between the rocks and the scream of seagulls, the swish of hissing waves, the whistle of lost currents, there wasn't much else to hope for. Spray stung their eyes, salt twisted their tongues.

They stared suddenly, legs tensing, hair matting in confusion. Squinting through the hail they spotted the boat approach. It bobbed and hobbled between the waves. The ocean was unforgiving, little better than their rocky outpost. Storm rain, howled, screeched and stank to high heaven: no wild animals to haunt their dreams but the whirling winds did the job just as well. The monks slowly crawled up the rocky steps to the mound they called home, that twisted rock tower they had gutted out of the cliff. Faith: there was little other reason to persevere in this wild chaos, this blind oblivion, this chasten bareness, without love, hope or fury to relieve. That may of course have been the attraction: the lack of distractions.

And then there was one. They stared as it slowly gained pace, came closer.

The boat curdled between the foam, her shadow slipped through the rain. They hadn't been expecting visitors. And certainly not a woman. A nun they presumed. A barrel of a man rowed her closer with the firmness of a person who respected the waters. He dropped her at the base rock and stormed off, catching the tide before he was stranded for the night. He didn't look back; he knew what he was doing. They had no idea what they were supposed to. She looked as if she was going to tell them.

Brother Joe waved Brother Jack down to meet her. She grasped his hand. Brother Jack nearly let her fall back into the surf in surprise. Softest thing he'd touched since that boiled seagull two weeks past.

She grunted, silent as a man, features twisted into a determination the monks recognized as their own. Slowly they clung to the rocky steps clawed out of the cliff edge and fumbled their way up, towards the shape they were carving out as a monastery.

The nun followed. She didn't miss a step. Their stomachs rumbled: it was a strange sensation having to expose your work to an outsider; frightening how a human instinct for approval could override spiritual frugality.

All three wolfed down the stew, dried fish greased up with whatever greenery they had managed to coax from the scarce soil perched on their rocky terrace. She drank rainwater from their homemade reservoir, snorted, blew her nose and lay back on the dried seaweed. Brothers Jack and Joe fuddled about, then decided to go up to the next level to stretch out, fart and struggle to sleep. Outside a gale howled in disbelief, grating through the slips in their rocks with the fury of sirens unleashed, caged into an out haven that was too distant to be punished.

She smiled in the morning. The two monks provided everything they could find for breakfast, birds eggs, more dried fish, the ribs of a dead seagull.

They'd taken a vow of silence. She was glad. She'd promised herself the luxury of being a kept woman. She looked at their battered faces, the way they fawned over her: she'd made the right decision.

They might all end up saints in the end.