

MIASMA

Hunting for humour in our hateful hearts.

Anathema Morgan

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This novel is dedicated to every life lost to the grinding, lumbering machine of colonialism; to every innocent victim and civilian casualty of war; no matter their nation; to every family shattered by foreign crusaders; and to every man, woman and child paving the enemy's path.

Dedicated to, as of the date of this writing, the 110,887+ martyrs of Palestine's 108-year war for freedom. Dedicated also to the 996 Israeli civilian casualties of the war's most recent escalation.

Palestine will be free, from the river to the sea.

Dedicated to, as of the date of this writing, the 84,515+ fallen Ukrainians lost in defense of their homeland. Dedicated also to the 394 Russian civilian casualties.

Slava Ukraini.

Dedicated to, as of the date of this writing, the 150,000+ Sudanese civilian casualties and every life wasted and shortened by the devil of militarism. Dedicated also to the 522,000+ children lost to famine.

Free Sudan.

Dedicated to Éire, Alba, Cymru, Breizh, Kernow and Mannin. Your stories will not be lost so long as you remain to tell them.

Éirinn go Brách.

Dedicated to Hind Rajab and her family. Nothing I can say can make right what was done to you and every other Palestinian, but I can fight for a free Palestine — and a free world — with every breath in my lungs.

رحمه الله.

Charity is dead.

—Guy de Chauliac

*Oh, bitter is the patriots meed
For in him the heart of a woman combined
With heroic spirit and a governing mind
A martyr for Ireland, his grave has no stone
His name seldom named, and his virtues unknown.*

—Thomas Davis, *Tone's Grave*

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

—Dylan Thomas, *Do not go gentle into that good night*

Red Blood

Cycle One

The Night Honour Died

/// 21 September, 1170. The Cathedral Contritus.

A dismal downpour murmurs a funeral dirge, humming a holy show for a town broken beneath its impudent children. Duiblinn's flag flutters in the storm, its azure ambition abolished in the ashen evening sky, its three impotent watchtowers ripe for revision.

He raises his haunted head, the pants of a predator echoing down the long row of pews. A blood red cross adorns his crusader's helm, but the broken halo above it is his alone to bear. Another crimson cross dangles from his neck, stirring like a serpent with every steadfast step forward.

Striguil Ó Murchadha pushes open the cathedral's creaking double doors, traitor tears of rain and blood trickling down his chainmail. Every sodden link shudders as the Father's chosen chalice lurches inside, the blood of his people a rust upon the mesh. His kilt scatters scarlet across the polished wooden floor, grime and guts girdling his glory. Scorched strips of steel swallow stiff his skin, fastened

too tight over the leather that armours his legs. They would need to be re-adjusted after tonight. He molds himself into a walking shrine for the Father, in the hopes that the Father will cleanse him of his sin. He begs Him for the mercy that'll wash clean the deeds of the eve, this eve and every one thereafter.

Deus help him, for he walks the road of the Seven Hells.

A nun rises from her pew, one of the two sharing his Father's Fruit with him this solemn night. *Sister Breena*, he should say – it would be presumptuous and improper to call her a nun until she takes her solemn vows. Calling her a sister troubles him not, besides. They were raised like family, chasing each other around with sticks in places of swords in this very kingdom of Laighin. It is only one of Ériu's constituent crowns, but it is the coat of arms he's borne from the beginning of his days.

He remembers all those times he and Breena would argue over who got to pull the sword from the stone; the way she'd coyly avert her gaze when he'd rescue her from her "maiden's tower"; the way their brother in all but blood, Crimthann, would joke that he never got a turn at maidenship and rescue.

Striguil hadn't ever known his parents, so the entire village had found fit to step in — and somehow, juggled between all these well-meaning souls, he had never really developed an identity of his own in the process. The tenuous siblinghood the three children formed had been the closest thing to a personage he had ever found, and even now, the stories they told in their childhood play wrote the words his tongue twists into treason.

He dearly hopes that Crimthann's body is not among the mounds outside. Striguil prays, even, that Crimthann's Viking idolatries hadn't led him to an early grave in defense of Duiblinn — his "second and greatest mother", as he'd proudly proclaimed whenever the opportunity struck.

That tower Breena always found herself in had been nothing more than a reprieve from Striguil's duties as a farmhand, an escape from the sludge-like monotony of an orphan's eroding reality. These days, the only towers he approached were the ones that fell with a swing of his flaming sword, and the only maidens he met were the ones he brought wailing back to the Lord.

One day, they'd thank the price he paid. He has to keep telling himself that, if he's going to

make it through the ongoing reclamation of Laighin intact.

Alongside Breena stands a man he knows like a father, for they have shared all but blood.

Curator Geoffrey peruses the pages of his Doctrine with the same adoration a mother would afford her blossoming child, the stained glass above bathing his balding head in crimson moonlight. The window is graced with the image of the Father and the Mothers Merry themselves, seven maidens crowded in breathless, prurient worship at Deus' feet.

"Striguil, you're alive," Breena breathes, a need she seems to have spurned for the last several hours. The practiced restraint in her clenched jaw betrays her desire to embrace him.

Striguil nods, repressing regret with reticence. Sentiment is the sand a soldier must sift through, seeking greater purpose in the sky beyond it. *What I do, I do for the good of my people. Not now, not here, but for their children, their children's children...*

He's thought it a thousand times, and if he keeps saying it, he'll quell the Lady Wrath, find no worth in the Prideful Pariah.

"Sister Breena," he greets, taming the tremor in his tone. "I bring good tidings, Curator."

The Curator hums, welcoming Striguil in his usual, theatrical fashion – Doctrine verse. "And it was in blood our Father's Son found himself... in the blood of maidens malcontent, in the blood of rebirth, in the blood he left for us below. Thus, it is in His blood we find ourselves, and when we join Him, it is of our blood we wash ourselves clean."

He snaps shut the Doctrine with apocalyptic aplomb, fixing upon his follower his stormy eyes.

"As above, so below," he quotes with a grim smile, his ornate robes woven in many colours.

"Koheleth 6:7," Striguil supplies, every last screed of the scripture sewn into his skin.

"How you have grown, my boy," Curator Geoffrey sighs. "I could swear, you came of age in the blink of an eye... and now you toil for the Father, like none I've ever seen."

"You are an inspiration, Striguil," Breena says, smiling shyly. "I can only hope to follow in your footsteps."

“Quiet, girl,” Geoffrey snaps. “We have little time to fawn. Striguil, you must beg forgiveness.”

Striguil doesn’t need someone to tell him that — the trail of his soaked, scarlet kilt does the job just fine on its own. This observation is hardly worth verbalising, however – to curtail the man who raised him like his own would coat him with the sort of blood one could not simply wash off.

Striguil drops to one knee, clenched fist fixed to the floor. He bows his head, the weight of his wrath weaving knots in his shoulders. “O Father... please forgive my sins, for in their doing I have besmirched your good name. Please forgive my Wrath, for she holds no harbour over my heart. Please forgive all I have done, for I have martyred myself to save my people. To bring them to you.” He raises his head, the deceiving release of fine autumn breath threading through his teeth. “Amen.”

The Curator plants his palms upon Striguil’s helm, the crimson cross indistinguishable from the fresh coat it has earned. “The battle was a success, my boy?”

“Aye, Curator. Duiblinn belongs to Ériu no longer. We have our foothold on Laighin.”

“Engleterre’s Crown will be pleased,” the Curator says, his lips curling. “As will the Father.” Breena stirs, animate with excitement, a curl of her long blonde hair escaping her robes.

“You must understand,” Striguil says mournfully, “my people... the Ériuann, they are a steadfast sort. They do not pray for progress. The ones who have not already seen the Father’s light? They will fight to the last soldier and resist to their last breath.”

He doesn’t know who he’s pleading to anymore, but how could he? Striguil isn’t even sure of who is listening.

The Curator sighs, his sorrow set in stone. He ponderously pets the chainmail binding Striguil’s hair. “My boy... I know this pains you, fighting those you once called your own. But you understand, as do I, that they will falter without the Father. They will drive themselves to extinction with their own misguided, barbaric ways. Since the dawn of time, they’ve fought each other, spilling endless blood upon this land. Their High King is nominal, a tax collector at best. You are doing what is required for the survival of your people. They need a leader, a *real* one... a *strong* one.”

“I know,” Striguil whispers. “I know, Curator.” He has to know. It’s true, all of it — Ériu has always been beset with petty squabbles between even pettier kingdoms. Without the Lord, Striguil earnestly believes the violence will never end. It doesn’t make his crusade hurt any less to know that.

The Curator props up Striguil’s chin, caressing the knight’s cheek. “Let your deeds conflict you not, young one. The Father sees your loyalty, and He is always prepared to forgive. May the rest of us live in His glorious image.”

Striguil nods silently.

“You’re a good man, Striguil,” Breena says, concern composing her clemency. “You must know that.”

The Curator throws her a long-suffering glare, but this distraction from his most solemn subject is brief. “The very best. Rise, Disciple Striguil. You have proven yourself worthy.”

Breena gasps.

Striguil rises, unable to hide his shocked expression. “Disciple, Curator? You would bestow upon me such an honoured title?”

“You have proven yourself worthy. You have sacrificed your own in the Father’s name, acted according to His plan every step of the way. I don’t see you wavering from your course, and neither does the Father. He has decided you worthy.”

Striguil bows his head, his heart light as a feather. “Thank you, Curator. I have worked for this for... for as long as I can remember.”

“May your hardship lead us to His kingdom. As per your new duties, I also bestow upon you a gift, with the Father’s blessing.”

Striguil meets the glassy glint of the stained Deus’ eyes, his Father’s gaze on his every indecisive inch. Does one grow accustomed to the perennial pressure, he wonders, or do men of faith grow solid as stone in their conviction?

He supposes he has all the time in the world to find out.

“Brother!” the Curator shouts. “Has the girl cleansed herself?”

Striguil raises an eyebrow, surreptitiously slipping Breena the slightest of shrugs. Breena furrows her eyebrows, and Striguil can only hope that none of the clergy take this as a form of protest. They’ve never been very fond of that, and they’ve burned witches for less.

The Brother in question arrives through a smaller set of doors, a short, anxious girl trailing behind the rodent of a priest. Her red hair shares the colour of his cross, freckles dotting her pale cheeks. She watches them with wide eyes, a sheep on wolf-clenched leash. Striguil hesitates, reminding himself that any overt attempt at compassion could violate his vows. Chastity, he has learned, comes with a multitude of interpretations.

“Easy,” he soothes. “You are safe now.”

She glares at him like he’s a glimmering ghost, her bottom lip quivering.

“This is Aoife,” the Curator says, introducing her with a tilt of his head. “She is the daughter of Port Láirge’s crown, and he has agreed to give you her hand in marriage after our... assertion of authority, back in Sextilis. A gesture of goodwill, one might say. Incidentally, he also perished in a foolhardy attempt to flee the battle.”

“What are you saying?” Striguil asks, head spinning.

The Curator clasps his hands together, the teeth of his smile gleaming in the torchlight. “The throne is open, my boy.”

Striguil frowns, enduring an itch in the back of his mind, a prickling certainty that none of this is legal. Ériuann kingship is elective, and he certainly hadn’t been chosen for the duty by anyone but his Father. Divine law, however, was transcendent, so it wasn’t that which bothers him the most. It’s the fact that companionship is against at least half of his vows. “When did you make this agreement?”

“Before the battle,” the Curator slyly smirks.

“My father is...” Aoife begins, her voice as soft as her shattered shell. She doesn’t finish, deigning to weep instead.

Her father is dead. Striguil felled the man himself in the decisive blow that won the battle – and here was his prize, the Curator’s cunning hands playing courier.

Once more, he reins back regret. Once more, he fixates upon the greater good. He takes a covert glance at Breena, who meets his eyes with her own mortified gaze. He tries to stir her from her pity with naught but silence. *Wipe that doubt off your face before anyone sees, colleen. For your own sake.*

These sorts of arranged marriages are customary, of course. He just felt it might be in poor taste to make such a decision without the say of the squabbling kingdoms. Had they even agreed to this after her father’s death, or had the Curator taken every passage of the Doctrine that spoke of seizing women as the Cathedral’s booty to heart?

“I’m sorry, lass,” Striguil says frankly, painting the phrase perfunctory. Something in Aoife’s eyes sees fit only to seethe in reply, something spun of spite. He shakes it away and turns to his mentor. “I accept this gift with pride, Curator.”

The Curator smiles. “So it shall be. Together, under my careful hand, we will lead Duiblinn into an age of enlightenment and reform... and beyond that, all of Ériu.”

Striguil inclines his head once more. “So it shall be, Curator.” He next regards the stained glass, meeting the eyes of his Father — eyes Striguil would never see, damned to so many planes beneath Him as he is. “And to you, Father, I shall be a worthy Disciple — this I swear. May the blaze you bestow upon my blade burn ever brighter.”

He traces the sign of the cross across his chest, beholding the betrayal on his childhood friend’s face. He wish he knew what exactly wounds her so — he’s bleeding from far too many of his own to see with any clarity.

Luckily for him, a dutiful soldier needs to spectate little more than the rise of the next sun.
“Amen.”

/// Aprilis 1171. An Ériuann camp eight kilometres from Duiblinn.

It had been such a mundane night when Hail had curled into sleep.

Mundane by the slanted standards of wartime, anyway. Every day was a deeper step into an ever-plummeting pit of shapeshifting priorities — march a few days more from the singular security of Connachta, find a good place to set up camp, harass the Saxanach bastards for a week or so, and, in exasperated last resort, intercept every supply wagon that even vaguely seems to be heading in the direction of Duiblinn. High King Ainmire Ua Conchobair, as is his state of address to most, plans to draw the foreigners out of their city through starvation.

It's the best they can do against those towering walls and the perched crossbowmen atop them. Occasionally, they'd lure the enemy out for a skirmish, keep them guessing, but they keep those excursions brief, for the Saxanacha are undoubtedly their superiors in numbers and armaments. The enemy's horses, for one, are armoured in a way Hail has never quite seen, built for combat of a different grain across the ocean — the light defense of the Ériuann horsemen is proving a dismal disadvantage in every regard outside of retreat.

Father, as Ainmire is known to *her*, may have been unconventional in the naming of his children, but he has a tactical mind Hail has never quite observed anywhere else. She had learned the lot of a soldier twice her station just watching Ainmire strategise, studying his ineffable ability to rally the troops and position them perfectly. He had somehow managed to recruit so many of the clans into the assault with little more than grave determination and grizzled charisma, an island of disorganized kingdoms *finally* converging on Duiblinn like the drop of a devastating warhammer.

Gods, even the Northmenn are chipping in with the unitary fervor you'd find in any other Ériuann, having long conjoined culturally with Ériu's children after the Viking wars a scant couple centuries ago. The Northmenn had built Duiblinn and a number of other bustling port towns here themselves, as a matter of fact, and now that the Saxanacha and their cajoled indigenous traitors are attempting to steal Ériu's rolling green hills from her children and her gods, siblinghood meant more than

a shared ancestry.

The work has been hard, the preparations have been immense, and the brunt her body has to bear is leaving bruises and sore muscles for her to massage out every night. Hail had always been an imaginative child, sneaking away from her tutors and foster parents to engage in vibrant, solitary re-enactments of her favorite folk tales. She'd always wanted to go on some sort of adventure like Fionn mac Cumhaill and his fianna of old, but the stakes of those stories carried a different weight.

The stakes of those stories were, despite the embedded tragedy, ultimately whimsical and optimistic, heroic and heartening. War, on the other hand, seems to be bereft of the cheer fencing a campfire in good company. The tingle of adventure had quickly absconded, replaced with the realization that things are very, *very* serious now, that the scars and bruises she's developing are a scant prelude of things to come... that, unlike the tales of old, death would not be a heroic end to a legend. It would be an end to legend as an abstract.

Needless to say, Hail carried a heavy heart with her to bed that night, but she also has faith in her people. Hope in their united strength, those fires that may smoulder but never burn out. Father even met with the Saxanach representative, Bás — a disgraced king who was, most audaciously, once one of their own. He had ruled Laighin with an iron fist, a grip that only slackened when he abducted the wife of Breifne's king. Hail's father had driven him off the island then, but it seemed he was back to drive the Saxanach plow, reclaiming his land at the cost of Ériu's sovereignty.

He is, altogether, a menacing man, clad in dark, downright alien armour he had never worn here. Indeed, she'd never seen anything like it — every gleam it cast seemed to spark straight off the surface of time. He wanted to keep all of the land he had taken for the Saxanacha, but Father was unwilling to let him hold onto anything but Duiblinn and a couple other Northerner towns. Hail could only presume he hadn't suggested this bargaining chip to his Northmenn followers ahead of time.

Bás stalked off unsatisfied, his black cloak billowing like that of a dullahan's, but Hail held hope that negotiations would continue. They must, after all — this land sought no more war, and even if Bás

had betrayed it, she hopes that there still remains some sentiment for the island in his buried heart.

When she thinks on all he's done, though, it's easy to see that her idealist naiveté is her shield for the slow foreboding hollowing out her heart. He is a vile man who hasn't seemed to change any in his years off the island, and her hope is desperate, unreined by logic.

That blind optimism leaves her quenched when she wakes in the dead of night, risen by a squall of screaming and thundering hooves.

Hail reacts like the humbled horses sprinting free of her army's stables, scrambling for her sword. Only then does she remember she left it with the company's collective arms — on the other side of the damn camp. She swears, sifting through the residential tent, her heart beating under her short tunic. Hail feels naked in it, but it's all she's got. She's shimmying her trousers up the stiff muscle of her frightened legs and reaching for her cloak in scant seconds. The tent's billowing flap splays sinewy strands of torchlight across the tent fabric, interspersed with equine shadows that belong not to her comrades. Hail spits strands of her white hair out of her mouth, the silver speckles within it a peculiarity of her very own since birth — the one that'd inspired her name.

The Saxanacha here? *Now*? She'd heard of the Northmenn's evening raids before, but they'd been humbled by the Ériuann brand of honour before her time. This is *low*. Lower than low. Dirtier than —

A torch flies through the flap of her tent, striking the cots ablaze as it rolls by. Hail yelps, scrambling out of her cot just as the flames swallow it up with ravenous enthusiasm, satiating Saxanach starvation. She breaches the billowing flap of her stolen shelter, legging it—

She's practically coughing up her lungs when she goosebumps in the cold air, smoke smothering the moon, men yanked from the ground by spear-wielding horsemen and thrown aside like cattle. Even if the local horses were outfitted like those of the foreigners, hardly any of the Ériuann had the chance to mount them anyway. The Saxanacha had come, right when they couldn't resist, the goddamned *cowards*—

Hail trips, plunging facefirst into the mud in a sea of stomps and screams. She spits grit from her lips and tugs her foot free of the lump that dropped her, the shattered skull of her brother-in-arms gazing skyward.

“I’m sorry, derbráthair,” Hail pants, cursing all the time she cannot afford him. Impelled by her instincts alone, she boxes away her sympathy and takes grip of his cold, split elbow, trying to lift his sodden weight off of his sword. Scattered mounds of sinking mud and the splintering skeleton of a wagon cover half his body, sucking him and the blade of his weapon up like quicksand. *Come on, come on...*

Her heart pounds, beats and bellows and bales and breathes and beats again, but she hangs on to each of those signs of life, remembers her training, remembers...

She has weathered war before. It was not war like this, so underhanded and unscrupulous, but she may as well have been prepared for it with the way her brain steers her on its own, guiding her fingers with no earthly attachment to the act. She eases the handle out from under his arm as her knees shift in the unsteady soil. The damned cross guard quite stubbornly fixes itself in the sloshing sediment, wasting precious moments. She is covered, from head to toe, in freezing mud. Her skin must be going blue. *You have no use for this, brother, please...*

The wicked whinnying of a Saxanach horse hastens her frantic efforts, its black mane gleaming in the light of the flaming camp. The blade of a spear glints in rapid approach. Soil splits beneath her as the cross guard finally bursts free. Tufts of dirt settle between her chapped lips. The blade must come next, and it must come fast—

The horse advances, a galloping storm upon her. She puts all her weight into her task, drawing fresh blood from the warrior’s corpse. *Come on, come on—*

The arming sword springs loose with a snap of her comrade’s arm and the splintering of his wooden wreath, dead skin tearing like cabbage as she relieves the slickened blade of its clinging cradle. Hail rolls into the mud, maintaining a tight grip on the handle of her new weapon even as she almost

takes her chancer head clean off.

The horse drives divots into the soil as it turns, meeting a prey on its back. Hooves thunder by each side of her head, setting her panicking heart alight. Promptly forgetting everything her father taught her, she thrusts the sword upwards, one hand keeping the strong of the weapon in its reckless place.

The act nearly takes her hand as she stays her course, screaming through gritted teeth as her own blade saws through skin and bone. Blood dribbles between her fingers as the horse keels to its own momentum. Its intestines tangle up with her, leashing her burning limbs amidst a scarlet shower.

It collapses onto its side, crushing her legs with a cataclysmic crunch. Its ruptured body exhales with relief. Hail's hand spasms and gushes as she growls through her grit teeth, hoping her fingers won't give out on her. She digs the nails of her healthy hand into the mud and tugs, keen to escape the clutches of the departed equine.

What are you doing, you eejit? Hail chides herself, her arms quivering as she slowly escapes the horse's unbearable weight, the circulation in her legs leaving her. Her limbs are so heavy that the simple act of standing seems insurmountable, much less taking her sword to the Saxanacha. *This is no time or place for a fucking chancer—*

Before she can thank every god she remembers for her illogical survival — Corchen, Lugh, Manannán, the Dagda, Brigid, Danu, and even the phantom queens better left unsaid — a gloved hand seizes her shoulder.

She gasps, the split animal's avenging angel dragging her off her aching feet. Even in the grip of these fleeting seconds, she finds time to pray.

Lady Corra, grant me strength. Lady of healing, lady of home, let me keep mine.

He pulls her to her prickling feet, his spear laying forgotten as its master strangles her with meaty hands, rubbing her bloody throat raw. She gasps for breath, fixing her thoughts on her chosen patron. Something tight and slimy tenses taut on her ankle, fixed like a rope.

Lady Corra, grant me tenacity, grant me will, so that I might fight for your children—

She gives her ankle a frightful tug, sparing a strangled scream as the bone spitefully snaps. She hadn't felt its injury in her numbness, and now she has just made the damn thing worse. The entrails affixed to her ankle spring like a coiled snake, and Hail realises the Saxanach bastard had used his beast's glistening viscera as a foothold in his single-minded pursuit.

The fool had forfeit his upper hand.

In the wake of her pain, he slips, the guts beneath his boots upending him. She uses the momentum of her own descent to crush his nose beneath her elbow. It gushes against her paling skin. His open helm offers him no protection, his face coated crimson as they land upon the belly of the beast.

He squanders any hope of rebuke, too dazed to pull himself free of his animal's open grave. Hail is quicker, as she always is. She snatches her sword's blade, ignoring the scream of her hands' frayed nerves and the jagged jitter of her feet. The cross-guard comes down like an executioner's axe, her enemy's head cracking like a pumpkin. She stomps her foot down unto his neck, directing his last deflation. Her sword sways her, doing its best to drag her pounding limbs back to earth.

"Go home, traitor," Hail snarls, spitting into the open cavity she's left in his skull.

Father. Find Father.

That is admittedly not an appealing thought — her legs waver from the ankles up with their every step, and the cratered mess of her dominant hand leave this ciotóg at a distinct disadvantage. She so desperately wants to collapse against a rock somewhere, just for five seconds, but she doesn't have the time for that. Not with what she's seeing, not with the travesties flitting through her fractured filter.

Hail leans upon her bequeathed blade, entrenching it in the mud. She allows herself two deep breaths to steady the soul. That'll have to be enough. She wrenches the sword from the soil, fancying herself Brenin Arthur in a flight of frivolous fantasy. The absurdity of her childhood dreams hardly escape her in light of this night, but they get her moving. Her palms trail crimson rivers down the grip of her weapon as she goes to war.

Hail creeps towards the chaos, keeping to the shadows. The moon solemnly spectates her trail

through tattered tents, split boxes of supplies her cover. Her first instinct is to leg it to the arming tents and find some armour, but such a convenient fantasy is of no practical use — like everything else, the Saxanacha have chosen to bury their enemy's arms in ash, lobbing torches at anything that's dared to survive this long. She grimaces as one of her kinsman emerges from a tent, lit up like a match, his hair standing on end as it burns to a crisp.

He crumples mere metres away, a Saxanach horseman narrowly swerving around his blazing corpse. His skin flakes into the air with such a stench that Hail nearly takes a moment to vomit. She quietly pleads his forgiveness as she passes him by, ducking behind a pile of her clan's corpses to evade several passing knights.

A dead woman's eyes meet her own. Not a single pair Hail's passed bear permission to perceive, laden with a lack of life, their cheeks cursed to never again crinkle in ecstasy. Hail has to dig her nails into her reddened palms to stop herself from screaming — not of fear, never of fear, but of immeasurable anger, a fire she calls *rage*.

She loses herself for who knows how long, curled up in the mud, squeezing her sword like an oath as its glistening edge tattoos a bruise into her shoulder. She knows not of how long she lays there, how long the battle rages on around her, but she forces herself to her feet. Hail will not be the lone warrior here to die a coward.

She draws closer to the centre of the clash, in search of her father and some greater objective than survival, vomit bubbling at the back of her throat. The Saxanacha pillage and terrorise without shame or regret, women in torn clothes tied to their horses, doomed to a fate too foul for the fair to formulate. They find freshly risen men and lop their heads off right on their cots, if they're lucky enough to earn so swift a severing.

The unlucky ones end up like the corpse Hail treads past in mournful fury, a boy with his every limb sloppily hewn off and strewn across the grass. His blood streaks across the hill, an askew X marking every cache of castigation.

She holds back her tears, digging fresh wounds into her palms.

Fucking monsters. Fucking monsters. You'll burn for this, you'll burn—

She cuts through a tent somehow spared of the torch, only to find the reason the instant she steps inside.

The musk is unbearable, mingled blood and piss and come. Six women lay battered and bruised, their faces sculpted with the horror that dug them their soiled graves, their clothes shredded rags at their sides. Even in death, the soldiers hadn't bothered to close the women's legs or conceal their violation, the fresh seed of whatever beasts had taken their turns still spilling out of their brutalised genitalia.

Hail finally does vomit, sobbing sickly into the soil as she relieves herself of her every half-digested meal. She isn't the first, with the way the dirt is stained. As she raises her pounding head, stumbling like a drunk, she comes face to face with the mangled mess that lies between one victim's legs, flies commiserating like carrion around the soldiers' most dreadful trespass.

Hail vomits up all of the nothing left in her stomach, perhaps spitting up samples of it, crawling through the tent on limbs like logs. The women's tainted bodies follow her, a malaria of the mind that imprints itself on the back of her eyelids.

Hail collapses under the night sky, careless of the chaos webbing her in, barely able to comprehend the cruel, vile, sick, depraved world spinning around her.

She tries to rise, but her limbs fail her, her tears a taunt. She tries to stand, but every inch of her body is a wailing weight. A new wave of nausea churns as she thinks of the slaughters, thinks of the raped women, thinks—

It's still happening. They're still burning, still looting, still killing, still raping.

That revelation brings her back to life, imploring her to save herself and anyone else she can manage before it's too late.

That's a silly thought, isn't it? How could it not be too late as soon as the first arrow fell? What

kind of victory could validate the violations she's seen tonight?

She digs the point of her blade into the mud, the rain lashing her like a whip, making clear its distaste for her dallying. She props her arms against the cross-guard, forcing herself onto one knee. The runt of the hill before her looks as high as the heavens from her humbled position, her father's tent in shambles. There, well above her current capacity, she finally sees him.

Ainmire Ua Conchobair, King of Connachta and High King of Ériu, wades without glory through a sea of broken men, still as stock at the base of the hill. His bulky body silhouettes like a blot of ink upon his blazing tent, his confident stature a spitting image of the raging fire framing him. He raises his head, beard smeared with blood and grime, his eyes burning with pernicious placidity.

She follows her father's gaze, his wrath set upon a particularly pristine group of the Saxanach monsters. Their leader dismounts his horse with all the same grace he may display at the end of a king's long table. She'd recognise the black knight anywhere. *Bás*.

"Stop this," Ainmire growls, his words wrought with anguish. "Stop this sickness. End it *now*!"

He stumbles as he roars, his longsword scraping the stars. He shows an uncharacteristic fatigue, and Hail can only wonder how many battles he's survived tonight, how many atrocities he's prevented, how many he was forced to pass over.

Hail only hopes he had proven more useful than she ever had, a hapless fool heading a herd of dead teaghlach.

Bás strides forward without a hint of remorse, raising his black helmet proud as the rain streams down his hulking body. He wears his impossible armour of black scale, the first full set of such a material she's ever seen in person. It conceals every inch of his body, his shoulders and knees protected by some plate out of time, his face replaced with a menacing mimicry of the human smile. Wherever his real mouth lay, it is outdone by this steel facsimile of a long-toothed grin — teeth like butcher knives, cheekbones cradled in the conniption they concoct.

His black cloak billows in the wind, his eyes invisible beneath his second face.

“For someone who lays claim to these luscious lands, High ‘King’, you have a foolhardy fixation on your sentiment!” Bás mocks, his words so bombastic you might almost forget the brutality beneath.

“It is a pathetic excuse of a leader who cares not for his own people,” Ainmire counters, limping forward. “Furthermore, I am no ‘King’. Not by your definition, Bás. I speak for these lands. I do not claim to own them. That was always what delineated us, wasn’t it?”

“And that is why your people will fall. Your failure to mitigate your morality and assert control has lead to these scattered pockets of resistance, our disorganized clans betraying each other and falling apart. Like sluggish limbs with minds of their own, you see. That’s why we’ll win.” Bás shrugs smugly, planting his serrated longsword’s point into the dirt. The weapon is another impossibility to match the armour, a mystery Hail bears no answers for. “Were we all fools for compassion.”

“Do you not fight for religion? Do you not fight in the name of reform and progress? Do you not claim to fight for your Father above? How can you separate your conquest from your moral character?” Ainmire’s proclamation is hardly directed at the opportunist across him, but the men following him — men that may bear a more permanent piety.

Bás tilts his head. “Mistake me not for the men I aid. I am not a man of religion, Ainmire. I am a man of opportunity.”

“Then take this one,” Ainmire snarls, eyes wide as a watching wolf. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? To get back at me? You can have it, in single combat. There has been enough of your revenge, so we shall settle this like men of honour. Whosoever wins the duel wins the night.”

Bás laughs, blanketed in arrogant mirth. “An easy declaration for a man in dire straits.”

“No, Commander Bás. It is an easy declaration for a man who has not yet forgotten himself.”

Bás seeks counsel, whispering into the ear of a horse-bound archer. His chosen servant nods slowly, murmurs back. Bás turns back to Ainmire, having made up his mind.

“Very well,” Bás decides, tugging his sword out of the mud. “One duel to the death for the sake of your people. How dramatic. I can appreciate the gravitas of such a desperate suggestion.”

“Then face me on solid ground, Commander,” Ainmire growls. “Face me like the warrior you claim to be.”

“This bloody island lacks any terrain of the sort,” Bás pedantically replies, “but it will have to do.” He eases forward as Ainmire straightens up, unsteady.

“Don’t,” Hail groans, unheard. “Athair...” She forces herself to stand, the careless clench of her teeth nearly taking her tongue, only to immediately collapse into the mud again. Damn her mortal weakness. Damn every last failing she can’t discard in these moments of need.

Bás makes the first move, swiping at Ainmire’s head. The high king lunges in attempted recompense, his offensive an ineffective cowl for his fatigue. He swings several times, feinting twice, but Bás somehow predicts every lunge. The black knight lazily dodges every attack, his footprints imbued with the elegance of a dancer. Her father’s, in stark contrast, spring sloppily in every direction, their directionless desperation dirtying his name.

And yet it is not a fool Bás so easily outweaves, but one of Ériu's greatest.

Father flings another feint, bringing his boot to meet Bás’ waist. The black knight slaps his foot aside, cracking something in his deterred leg and sending her father spinning. Bás is behind him before anyone can even see the knight move, kicking Ainmire in the spine with his heavy boot. Father groans as he stumbles across the soil, somehow managing to save his footing at the last moment. He locks his heels in the mud, shattered jaw set in defiance.

Bás tilts his head. “You’re not bad. Your enthusiasm has always been an inspiration, but I’ve gotten a lot better since last we met.”

“You’ve certainly emptied the pockets of your benefactors.” Ainmire meets his gaze, the king’s back to his Saxanach watchers. “You have yet to draw your sword, knight. What is keeping you?”

“Oh,” Bás sighs, “I was just moving you into position.”

Ainmire’s eyes widen. Thirty archers and crossbowmen fire into the dark, thirty missiles splintering his skin. The bloom of his bloodsoaked shirt spins strikingly a bed of calla lilies. The rasp of

his last breath hits the ground before his knees do, his eyes wavering in disbelief.

“Oh, you Ériuann fools,” Bás laments with a shake of his head. “If you yearn to win this war, I suggest you realise the values you hold so dear aren’t even an afterthought for the wide, hungry world around you.”

Bás gives Ainmire a condescending pat on the cheek before the High King falls, a punctured corpse before he even meets the ground.

And when their High King drops, the survivors he rallied behind him roar in vociferous vengeance, charging forth with their weapons high and their loyalty undiminished. Bás gesticulates with an impatient sigh, having clearly embedded the opposition so deep beneath his boot he had forgotten they were ever there at all. “Oh, right. Kill them all.”

At the beckon of their belated command, hundreds of projectiles sail through the air, felling her brothers and sisters like slaughtered pigs. The horsemen spring forward, spears and swords in hand, running circles around the kinsmen they dismember with all the same effort one might expend to swat a fly.

“No!” Hail cries, the shame of her inaction greater than the sum of her injuries. She pulls some burning muscle in a way it doesn’t like on her way up, but she doesn’t care. The sword she drags behind her paints her pain in pantomime. A horse barrels past her, dragging a howling man through the dirt like a rag doll, the flesh of his face a bloody streak down the grass. Hail nearly falls, tears tainting her eyes as she approaches Bás.

She follows the man who killed her father and her company without regret, the animal so fucking *gleeful* to rape a culture in the name of an objective she might never know.

“Bás!” Hail howls, her sword wobbling with her own rain-blasted body, blindly treading a swarm of stampeding horses without a single scratch to show for it. If only she could say the same of the rest of the night.

He turns to her, deterred from his departure despite the bemused boredom he so patronisingly

practices. His serrated longsword gleams with a grin in the moonlight. “Ah. Hail, is it? I’ve heard much about you.”

She limps forth, her crimson cowl a contortion of her clarity, ignorant of her diminishing future. “I’ll ensure they never even hear of your *grave*!”

“Gravitas certainly runs in the family,” he says, raising his sword. “Come, then. Show me the fruits of your father’s faith.”

Hail wastes no breath to reply, putting every ounce of her remaining strength into the savage swing of her sword.

The crevices of his serrated blade channel yellow electricity like a conductor, spittling like the sun. Hail has no time to correct her reckless advance before he responds in kind, his longsword slashing *through* her own, leaving behind it two sizzling pieces. Again it comes collecting, rendering her sword’s strong a jagged weakness. The weapon crumbles into a smoking, triplicate heap, its master impotent.

Hail hesitates in disbelief, something more than man towering above her. He cracks her nose with his shoulder, sending her spinning, and his sparking blade sweeps through the small of her back. She screams as her flesh fumes, her backbone grounded like grout. Her waist and legs spasm out of control, robbed of all feeling. She hits the ground, her lower half completely unresponsive, not a single desperate command coaxing it into function.

“Ah, I appear to have severed your spinal column,” Bás observes. “Were you fond of it?”

“You *pig*,” Hail spits into the dirt, blood swirled with the saliva. Her world is a seasick wench, a sun spinning marathons. “You loathsome, *spineless*—”

“I think we just established who’s spineless here.” Bás crouches down beside her, taking a tone so parental she could almost believe he truly means to educate. “Hail, you naïve little thing... your anger is a virtue, but only under strict control. I have no doubt in your potential, nor the things you could’ve accomplished had you not just thrown yourself at me without a care in the world.”

“What is there left to care for? You’ve taken it all from me... from *us*. My people.” The words

are a dying defiance, the bodies of the only family she's known littering the battlefield around them.

She'll find their hands in Annwn, linked long in a limitless line of lamentation.

Bás ponders this for a moment, then shrugs. "You raise a good point. I'll let you die, young one. But you'll suffer first."

She glares at him, eyes ringed in blood. "*Why?* Is this not enough for you?"

Bás stands, amusement tinging his tone. "Why not?" He pulls his hood over his helm, shrouding all but his toothed grin. "Do what you want with her, but make it fast," he says to his men, disappearing into the denizens. "Unless, I suppose, you quite enjoy playing with corpses. I don't judge."

She's a solitary sacrifice in a sea of slobbering soldiers, her broken back numb with an encroaching tide of dying skin, the upper half of her body gift-wrapped in immobilising agony.

She can't accept this. She just can't accept this, that this is *real*, that people like this are real, that greed could bleed the heart of a nation's humanity like this—

Hail begins to fade away, sampling tantalising tastes of an Otherworld, and she just won't accept this.

The vultures huddle around her and tear at her clothes. The icy rain valiantly fails to assuage her bare skin, and she just can't accept this.

She only formulates her fate by the way her unfeeling hips jostle her creaking chest, and she is grateful she can't feel this last pillaging.

And I just won't accept this. It's not real. This isn't real. They're still here. They still live. Father, Mother, you—

And her body is no longer hers, and they hold her down and twist her limbs in spite of a struggle that isn't there. Her blood spoils the terrestrial tapestry she's let loose from her hands.

Her fingers twitch as they grind her into the grass, trying to snag onto strands of life. Hail closes her eyes, an observer her to own obliteration.

Please, Corchen. Hear me while I survive.

They embed an impression of her in the soil, the rain sloshing mud between her lips, the Saxanacha spitting on her corpse-to-be.

Please, Corchen. Save me while there's anyone left to save.

She wastes the last of her strength to form a bleeding fist in the dirt, tearing up clumps of grass.

Help me, Corchen... Save your children.

More of the monsters disrobe, their garments garnishing the ground. She preemptively seals tight her lips as the sweat and stench smother her sense of smell.

Help me... please... I'm scared...

And the goddess heeds.

Something freezes within the cavity of her cracked chest, something so cold it warms again, her body a paling passage. Her silver-streaked hair, smeared in blood and expel, dangles wet against her face, her anatomical anomaly reminding her of her name.

Before she can remark on the irony and shed the thin film of denial she's hid herself behind, the legs she can't feel split wide open, showering her assaulters in gore.

And then another splintering comes, and another, and another, sprouting forth from her arms, her chest, her splintered spine, her pangs promising punishment. Jagged spikes of ice jut free from her skin, reflected moonlight tearing tatters of her violators, their chainmail no consideration to Corchen's contempt.

The man who had intended to use her mouth quickly regrets his base desires. Another blade burrows up her throat, scattering her jettisoned teeth as her mouth explodes in a geyser of ice and blood. The spike splits her tongue to mangle his manhood, and his screams almost resuscitate her, life returning to her grave of a body.

Somehow, her heart still beats, pierced as it is by the spite her goddess has sent her. It is then that she remembers Corra is also the goddess of rebirth, and she finds it within herself to laugh.

She rises free of the mass, the rightful recompense of their depravity immortalised. Hail greets

the ones who had been late to join in with a truly horrific smile, the satisfied smirk of a spirit with all of eternity to ebb.

In spite of the ice tunneling a frostbitten valley through her throat, in spite of the spike she cradles in the maw of her mouth, she manages to speak in punctured hiss. “You *fools*... Ériu never *really* belonged to us. She belonged to the Tuatha.”

Several men raise their blades, met with her next wave of icy spikes. She spites mortality to stand, hobbling forth on legs that remember she’s dead. The rest of her doesn’t. Her gruesome protrusions punch through her eyes, her broken spine doing little to halt her trembling approach. “Oh...” she growls, her voice a vessel. “How you’ve angered them.”

In a flash, the black knight darts out of the crowd, slicing through her throat with that sparking blade of his. If she could feel at her throat without stabbing herself, she would. As it is, she meets his eyes with the gloat of her own as she falls, her protrusions caught in the mud.

“I’ll return, you know,” she promises, her lips caressing the spike that saved her.

“I’d quite like to see that,” Bás responds, and it almost sounds like he believes her.

With a battered blink of her eyes, Hail dies, her protrusions holding aloft her body like glittering pillars. She dies like a hero of yore, the birds pecking at her remains as she defies defiance.

And yet, her last thoughts are not as pitiful as the plight that played prelude to her passing. They are not of hope, either, but of certainty.

She *will* return. Her gods command it.

And so, she laughs as she dies, the sun rising in the rain.

Cycle Two

This Vagrant Monster

/// We all forget to breathe. How many of us remember?

Her body jostles with every bump of the road, but she doesn't feel it.

The wind flutters the flaps of the cart keeping her, but she doesn't feel it.

The trembling captives around her whimper and wane, but she doesn't feel a thing.

Hail is nothing more than a paralysed pariah, a corpse in a collection. Her misty eyes lay lifeless and languid, transfixed by the pale puncture in her wrist.

She can see diverted bones digging new routes, dead skin half-torn with the sag of a cloak.

The thought of a twisted ending brings to mind the fate of her father, but even her inconsolable grief sparks no haste in her heart.

She doesn't feel any of it. She is dead, as far as she's concerned, dead and gone. She stopped

breathing hours ago. Why is she aware of this fact? Why can she wonder?

Has Crom Cruach forgotten to claim her soul? Is administration of the afterlife as bureaucratic and belated as what comes before? Have the dullahan failed to plot a trail to Hail's yearning shade?

Or is she something in between, not alive and not yet dead, some late artifact of winter's wrath?

Naught more than ice flows through her veins, the parting gift of Crom's lady, and she has yet to see an accompanying benefit — but there must be one. There must. Lady Corra has never steered her people wrong in the evening afterglow of total despair, and Hail sees no reason for her to start now.

The cart comes to a stuttering stop. Hail's tears glitter like sleet across the splintered wood. The deluge outside is more effective a denouement than any declaration, robbing the Ériuann captives of any clear glimpse at their final destination. Hail has no doubt such a thing lies next, anyways — she's the only woman they'd thrown in the back of this rancid transport, as they had plenty of use for all the others. They would have had plenty for her, mind, if she hadn't put the fear of the Tuatha in them.

May she get the chance to do it again.

One of the Saxanach bastards rips open the flap of the cart, rain pelting his chainmail in some impotent imitation of retribution. "Come on, then!" he announces, his voice a whisper in the storm. "Out you go!"

A prisoner brushes Hail aside in his unexpected charge forward, his bound hands a poor deterrent. She doesn't feel that either, even as he crushes her elbow beneath his foot. He slams headfirst into the Saxanach, the two of them tumbling into the groping mud. The man headbutts his captor repeatedly, roaring through his teeth as he cracks his own skull against his enemy's helm, but a second Saxanach darts into the scene and runs him through with his spear. The captive slumps skewered, blood cascading down the spiderweb cracks that tattoo his forehead. The attack hadn't killed him, and Hail is confident the mangled mercy wasn't a mistake.

"You foreign fucking *whores!*" the Ériuann snarls, slinging spit at the man who stabbed him. "You will never win this war, you hear me? We will never stop fighting! *Never!*"

“Then I eagerly await the coin I receive with your every misguided corpse, barbarian,” the Saxanach snarls in return, slamming the spear through the Ériuann’s eye. The prisoner’s life ebbs placidly out of his intact iris, and the Saxanach pulls his weapon loose, leaving the corpse to satiate the mud’s hunger.

He turns to the rest of the captives, the rain cleansing the spear of its blood. By their reckoning, that enabling storm must be the grace of God. “Anyone else feel particularly foolhardy? No? Hurry the fuck up then, I don’t got all night!”

The other Saxanach resentfully rises, a sway in his step. He seizes the first prisoner to exit the cart, heeding their hesitance. He slams Hail’s kinsman against the side of the cart, cracking their cheek on wood with a frustrated snarl. “Fucking *savages!*” he growls, rubbing blood off his nose. “Get out here already!”

The prisoners file out one by one, trodding over Hail’s dead, naked body. She doesn’t feel a single sentenced foot, not one cracked, curling toe. One of them spits on the bloody Saxanach as he hops out, taking an armoured fist to the jaw in return. He splays in the mud, and the Saxanach stomps on his knee until there’s nothing left to shatter. The wind takes her comrade’s howls with it as the bone powders, the oppressor’s comrade ushering several protesting prisoners into the rain.

She attempts to act as her people pace into the pale, plead passion into her pallid chest. She fails. She wants to wiggle her shattered fingers, sort out working bones in this lump of ashen flesh. She fails. She tries to roll over, will her eyes to move, *anything*.

She fails, and a Saxanach shuts up a troublemaker with a sword down the gullet.

Hail can’t even close her eyes in denial or steer her static sight away from the loss of life, the families broken by blood.

The last prisoner disappears into the storm, and she is alone with her island’s howling tears. The Saxanacha lug the two bodies off. Grisly slams and ghoulish creaks waft upon the wind. It’s the sound of bodies falling.

Hail can't breathe. She can't swallow. She can't even clench a fist. She can only sit and listen as every last thing she treasures dies in despair.

Somehow, beneath it all, she implores herself to have faith in her gods, even as they sit back and allow the Saxanacha to rape their land.

Is faith divvied to the dauntless devoted or the desperate delusional?

"What's this one, then?" one of the Saxanach pigs asks, pulling back the flap.

"What one?"

"There's a woman in here. Already dead, by the looks. I thought we didn't deal with rotters?"

The other Saxanach peers over his shoulder, assuming a hushed tone. "Quiet, fool."

"Quiet? She's *dead*."

"Not according to the captain. He says she got up and started sprouting blades of ice from her body. Look, see? Look at all the holes in her skin. See the colour of her blood? It's all unnatural."

"Those aren't stab wounds?"

"No, the captain swears it up and down. Look at them, anyway — our swords aren't that wide. He says they needed Commander Bás to put her down, and even then she supposedly said she'd get right back up again. She spoke of the wrath of her pagan gods."

"Those gods pale in comparison to the Father." His words are coated with a blasphemous coat of hesitance.

"If you'd like, but He's not here right now, and *we* pale in comparison to vengeful revenants, so I'd prefer if we dealt with her quickly."

The one with the bloody nose shrugs. "Suit yourself. Looks plenty dead to me. I'm not even sure one of the Disciples could get up with wounds like that, if the Father may forgive my blasphemy."

"Better safe than sorry. I prefer my head on my shoulders and my cock intact." The bloody-nosed Saxanach gives his pragmatic opposite a look, and the man quickly says, "You don't want to hear the rest of that story, trust me."

How Hail would love to reenact that castration. In this moment, her thirst for reprisal has taken stage in place of the traumatic response she must surely be developing. She strains and strains, directing her immutable will into deviant desire, but her fist does not clench. Her fingers do not move.

“Very well,” the bloodied Saxanach concedes, clomping into the cart. He takes reluctant grip under her armpits, face twisted in disgust both spiritual and secular. With his companion’s help, the two Saxanacha lug her naked body into the rain. She can see their breath condense in the cold, but her corpse remains uncompelled.

She commands her fist to curl, cerebrum castigating. Still, her body declines.

They bitch and moan as they carry her through the raging storm, their only illumination the occasional streak of lightning. Thunder claps as they bring her to a cliffside, her dead eyes fixed on the prisoners lined beside it. The long beach below is out of sight, though Hail knows it’s there — studying maps had been one of her favourite pastimes during the long journey from Connachta.

The prisoners, however, seem quite disgusted by whatever state the shore’s found itself in. They kneel helplessly above the end, guarded by at least three or four other armed Saxanacha. Occasionally, one foreigner will give a prisoner a spiteful boot to the back, the pommel of a blade to the head. Hail fears the possibility they make it to Connachta. She recognises that some of these Saxanacha are Ériuann traitors, but that knowledge is easier to surmount when the faces didn’t grow up beside you.

The most devoted Ériuann, bravest before the end, refuse to weep or even shake, facing the cliff that will swallow them without regret.

“Put her down for a minute, just right here,” her carrier grunts, and they toss Hail into the slop, mud longingly clasping her cheek. She can’t even worm the grit out from between her teeth, her bloodied knuckles a pedestrian scar beside her eviscerated forearm and open crater palms.

Move. Move. Come on. Come on!

The rain films her empty eyes, so slack they couldn’t bottle a blink. Down the line, a Saxanach guard approaches his first prisoner, knocking him to the ground with his pommel. He ignores the

protests of his former kinsmen with a barbaric banality, seizing his chosen sacrifice's arm with both hands and giving it a sickening twist. It snaps like a twig, and the man's resultant throes ripple his skin like the sea. Through it all, he refuses to give the enemy the satisfaction of a good scream.

The Saxanach persists, diverted not by duplicity, his task a mundane one he's likely carried out a hundred times over. He takes the wriggling prisoner's other arm and snaps it as well, his gauntlets grinding the bones to pieces. The remaining Saxanacha fend off the other Ériuann as they throw themselves at him, batting them aside with their pommels like fleas. The prisoner's legs are the next to break, his torturer bringing his boot down against the back of their knees.

Crack, crack, crack, the clouds crescendo, the man's howls meeting the moon with the lilt of a lacerated luchthonn. *Crack, crack, crack*, swoons the sky in somber symphony, her kinsman's captor relieving him of ambulation. The torment must be unbearable, and all for naught, a worthless fate to arbitrarily suffer before the foreigners send him back to his gods.

To what end did all this brutality strive, if not pure, perverse pleasure? This man would hardly climb back up the cliff if they spared him his skeleton.

She'd like to think she might, but she still can't find the flint to spur forth her scorn.

Lady Corra, grant me strength.

Even as they haul the man to his purpling knees, abusing any who dare rise up against them, she cannot find in herself the mark of movement. Even as they haul him to the edge of the cliff, splaying the peeling skin of his knees across the stone, she cannot reach to resist. Even as they make dead men of good men, good soldiers, good *family*, she cannot wake a wrathful revenant of ice and storm to its fearsome feet.

Lord Crom, grant them safe passage.

The Saxanacha ask the broken man something. A taunt, maybe, to extract from him some violent rebuke for later deployment. He slams his forehead into his captor's waist, one last act of dismal defiance, and the Saxanacha cut off his head, throwing him off the cliff. The body tumbles like a bundle

of straw, punting off craggy claws, his body further broken on every stone and spire. His bag of bones land on the beach beneath them, his last moments told to Hail only in abominable audio. She can't turn her bloody head.

Lord and Lady of Winter Wrath, make me your vessel.

Her body teases her with a tremble, but it's a start.

Birth of me your vengeance, birth of me your death incarnate.

Her veins snow over in silver spite, her irises imbued with ice.

I sacrifice my Otherworld with open arms.

"Next," the Saxonach captain calls, his crimes all of a pittance on his bored lips.

The two playing custodian with her body debate even as their captain snaps another of her kinsmans' limbs. "Should we do her like the others, then?"

"What?"

The one with the bloody nose sighs. "If we're afraid she'll rise from the dead, wouldn't it be wisest to break her limbs like the others? It'll slow her down, I'd think."

"Yes, I think that wise. Come, then, let's make it fast — I don't fancy her awakening."

Oh, I'm awake.

They start by snapping what little is left of Hail's arms. She hears them crack, notes her muscles spasming in postmortem parting, but she doesn't feel a thing, no pain pervading her even as her bloody knuckles rest delicately against the smooth sprawl of her forearm. She is lucky.

And believe me, I'll remember this.

They crack her legs next, crushing them under foot. Their abuse of her lower half, already ravaged beyond recognition, fails to inspire anything more than a placid plot out of the Tuatha's tenebrae.

I'll come for you. All of you.

They lug her up from the mud even as it seeks to swallow her, the earth elongating their exhaustion as they drag her to the cliffside.

“You barbaric *bastards!*” shouts her kinsman adjacent. “You couldn’t even spare her after death, could you? Is there no limit to your cruelty?”

The uninjured Saxanach merely slaps him aside, splaying him over the dirt. “Do *not* wake the wraith,” he hisses, in a tone she almost perceives as pious.

And when I’m done with all of you here, I’ll take a boat to Saxain and put King Godric’s head on a pike myself.

The promise paints penitence in her passing.

Without ceremony, without rite or recognition, they cut off her head and throw her ramshackle pastiche of a cadaver off the cliff.

She falls a failure, bound to a punishing perception, her torn doll of a body jostling painlessly in contact with every crag on the way. At one point, Hail’s head slams against an outcrop, crumpling in the side of her skull as her clenching teeth bite her tongue clean off.

Hail doesn’t feel any of it, happily. She just lands with a pedestrian plop, joining the rest of her people at the bottom.

She realises it’s over, and while she can’t survey the scenery or tilt her bloody head any way in particular, it is plain to tell that the corpses go on for miles. They blot out the beach, hundreds rotted, hundreds more halfway there. Colonies of flies seek shelter amongst the slain, swaddling their eggs in everted eye sockets, ignorant of the festering maggots laying claim to the territory. The fresher corpses are hardly spared the boundless black tide of bugs, the carrion casting fresh blood into the sea with every grope of the tide.

Hail is glad she can’t throw up.

The moon bisects the clouds, shining a spotlight on her pathetic corpse. The minutes crawl by like dead winter.

Every so often, another body joins the pile. If her heart could yet beat, it'd ache with every fallen clansman, but none of the losses resuscitate her. She begs to the stars, so far away from this wretched world, placated in peace.

What a strange feeling it is, to long for home when you're already there.

But Hail can't forget where she's from, and to misplace it here is an erasure without equal, a jilted judgment void of meaning. She wants to fight, no matter her rotting joints. She wants to fight, even as the last corpse hits the heap and the cart's creaking axles abscond into the night.

She heeds her headless body amongst the abandoned, worms and maggots tunneling through a mountain of conjoined corpses. She can't even feel the blood trickling down her ruptured neck, dishonouring whoever she was unlucky enough to land on. She mentally apologises, for all the good it'll do.

Something writhes within the rotting hill, and there she sees something larger than the corpse-feeders — a snake.

If her decapitated head didn't demur, she'd blink, but all she can do is rue the reptile as it wriggles its way out of the pile, its green scales glossy with blood. There are no snakes here in Ériu, she knows, and the one in front of her is something like a legend you hear in storybook. Hail's serpent patron came to the island with the Northmenn, but the goddess hadn't brought any of her children with her.

Unless... unless Corchen hadn't abandoned her.

A shimmer sparks with vitality, a movement muddies the monochrome mire, a cloak forest green flaps amongst the fell. Hail watches in wonder, unable to fully follow the figure. The woman beside her frequently flickers in and out of solidity, like she barely belongs to this plane.

The stranger's features come into focus, a consistent shape of her crouching silhouette solidifying in the shade. The darkness impedes, but it fails to obscure the dangling, raven black locks of hair above Hail's decapitated head. Two serpentine eyes shine a light in the darkness — the right a

sparkling emerald sea, the left a piercing icy blue.

“Oh, my child,” the serpent goddess whispers, emerald snakes curled around her mournful arms. “How I wish I could have arrived earlier.”

It's okay, my Lady, Hail thinks. I did my best.

Lady Corra grimaces at the smell of the bodies as she elevates Hail's head, resting it delicately against her chest. Despite the hazy nature of the goddess' dreamlike arrival, despite the unsteady certainty that her world is colliding with something beyond her comprehension, the goddess' chest is solid, as real as anything she's ever felt.

“It is not okay,” Lady Corra whispers, and she sounds as if she's housing an exploding star within. “None of this is okay. Those greedy *monsters*... playing genocide to expand their own coffers...”

You can help, I hope, my Lady? Hail knows not of how the woman picks up her thoughts, but she doesn't look a gift serpent in the eye. *I mean not to assume...*

Lady Corra frowns, a dark shadow falling over her beautiful face. “I am doing the best I can, my child — and take that not as an excuse. Take it as a promise. I have seen the atrocities that have befallen you and our people... I fight to rid the Saxanacha of their own god, but it is slow progress.”

And down here?

“Down here,” she says bitterly, “I am not permitted trespass. If I were, I would've slaughtered every Saxanach that dared step foot on our beloved island.”

They always said you were kind. You are, I mean no disrespect, but... I did not anticipate you would be the type to engage in war.

“If I must abandon niceties to protect my people, war it shall be.”

But you can't help?

“Not directly.” A devilish smirk graces the serpent goddess' lips. “But I can cheat.”

Hail would recoil if she could. *You would abandon honour? We have built our society on it,*

my Lady.

“The Northmenn told me much the same thing. But I was born in dishonour, and I am not afraid to dirty myself once more if it means the rest of you have the privilege to exercise such principles in freedom and prosperity.”

You sacrifice so much for a people that are not your own.

“Kin don’t always behold your birth, nor are they the blood pumping through your veins. Kin are those who earn the security of your sword.”

And if you can’t intervene yourself, my Lady, what is it you plan to do?

The goddess smiles grimly. “Lord and Lady of Winter Wrath, make me your vessel.”

If Hail had a working heart, it’d have just failed to. *You heard.*

“Every word. I came as soon as I could. I apologise if this is painful, young one.”

I am willing.

“Young warrior...” Lady Corra tilts up Hail’s head and meets her gaze, homely hearths blazing behind each of her serpentine eyes. “I do not seek to bind you by some divine curse, some eternal torment. No loopholes. There will be a limit to this well of vengeance. When you are done, when you have helped save your home... you will have a warm place by my fire, just like all your brothers and sisters before you, and just like all those after. You have my word.”

Thank you, Lady Corra. What will you do?

The serpent nervously licks her lips. “I shall do something that even Crom frowns down upon. I shall raise you from the dead, and I shall ensure nothing puts you down again, not until you decide it is your time.”

You’d give me... magic?

“Worse,” Lady Corra says, unable to disguise a long-repressed smirk. “Forbidden magic.”

And Lord Crom does not approve?

“They would not. They are a sentimental person, too sentimental. They want all of you to have

proper rest.”

But we need not rest. We need to fight.

Lady Corra smiles sadly, the rain upon her cheeks playing the part of tears. “This I know.”

This I know as well.

“And so I picked you. You remind me greatly of myself, you know. Very few do.”

Thank you. This won't cause any problems with you and Lord Crom, will it? I wish not to disrupt your marriage.

Lady Corra raises an eyebrow. “Marriage? Is that what you mortals think? Fascinating... No, we aren't married. Even if we were, I'd still do it.”

Why?

“If I cannot sacrifice my own happiness for the sake of my people, how can I begin to ask the same of you?”

That... makes sense.

“Fret not, faithful one,” Lady Corra whispers, pressing her lips to Hail's forehead. “When this is all over, when the gods wage wars in the Otherworlds no longer, when your people are free from the centre to the sea... I will be waiting for you, with the warmest bonfire ever kindled. You have my word, after all your needless suffering. All this... pointless pain your people have endured. How mortals can sicken and stun in equal measure...”

With those words, she is a wisp, and Hail is alone with the corpses once more, a relic of this darkest age.

No, no, no, Lady Corra, please don't leave! Please, don't...

The snake in the sea of sacrifice remains, approaching her headless corpse.

Hail watches curiously. The snake gives her a knowing glance, meeting her eyes with a wisdom belying its chosen vessel. Then, quite suddenly, it plunges into the stump of her neck.

She can only sit in silent horror as her body twitches with internal movement, its serpentine coils

burrowing beneath her rib cage. With all the holes in her body, she can occasionally catch glints of its scales, flitting past burnt blood and bent bone.

And then, despite the indisputable fact of her fate, she feels something resembling life return to her — no breath, no heartbeat, but that intuitive instinct of *control* again, that simple font of freedom that arrives with a baby's first step. She stares, stunned witless, wondering if she'd really be able to live again.

In deference to desire, her headless corpse rolls onto its hands and knees, finding purchase in the bastion of bodies.

Hail's jaw drops as her body steers itself as smoothly as in life, bones snapping back into socket with sickening snaps, stab wounds and splintered fissures sealing up with enviable ease. She — it? — delicately cradles her snapped wrist, gently guiding her knuckles away from her forearm to snap the cracked bone back into place. It was torn right in half, but she can feel it fusing back to normality in seconds.

She doesn't feel any pain, even now, but she's claiming control, and that's all she's ever needed.

Her body rises a beacon, the storm soaking a headless body shaped in spite, a revenant rendered of Ériuann tears. It lurches forward like a ghoul, her skin still pale and grey even in reconstruction. Its hands find her head.

It is a dizzying sensation, to watch your own body lift your severed head into the air, awake and unblinking; it is without any logical basis that she attempts to fix her head back upon her shoulders, but the stupor her Lady left her in seems to operate on primal instinct over rational thought.

She places her head upon her shoulders and the skin reaches out to reconnect, her bones mending in the middle, sinews and nerves sewn together with ease. Her tongue crawls back out of her throat, fixing itself where it rightly belongs.

She stumbles, a being of one whole again, necrotic as it is. The tide cuffs her ankles, and she still doesn't feel a thing.

Nothing physical, anyway, nothing known in nerves, but she *does* feel again, recovering her remnant rage. The need for vengeance vitalises her veins, haunted hatred boiling her brain.

A second chance Hail has been granted, an afterlife she'd use to drive the Saxanacha away from her home forever. This she swore.

"Thank you, Lady Corra," she mumbles, stumbling towards the ocean. She remembers all the stories a childhood friend of the North had told her — that the Lady had been sent of the sea, washed upon the beach and taken into the Tuatha. Because that was how it was here, really, and how it had always been — your family is not defined by where you come from, but where you think you're going.

Tonight, Hail knows exactly where she's going.

Something tumbles into the sand, a raspy gasp piquing Hail's attention.

Hail submerges her surprise as her eyes reveal a woman on the beach — unlike her, however, this one breathes, chest pulsing beneath her peculiar attire. The stranger is buried beneath a baggy overcoat, trailing like a dog at her ankles. Gloves hide away her hands and boots her feet, every piece of the outfit twice her size. A number of anomalies further emphasise her eccentricity, however, like the wide-brimmed hat atop her head and the dark cloak blanketing the whole arrangement.

The crowning peculiarity is the mask the stranger wears, a beaked rendering of a crow, stained with the faintest flecks of dry blood. Not an inch of skin is exposed to the elements, and Hail briefly wonders if the stranger is even human.

"If you're a banshee," Hail calls, "I apologise for coming back to life before you could keen. I imagine that is somewhat unconventional."

No response. Her fallen bag lays slack in the sand, tangled jars leaping headfirst into the tide.

Hail blinks. "Human? I mean you no harm. I'm just... a little disoriented. I just came back from the dead, you see."

She takes a step forward. The stranger takes one back.

"Not a typical greeting, is it?" Hail reflects. Her vision begins to blue, freezing over like ice, the

crackling coalescence of frost cooling her veins. “Oh, no.”

Two glinting blades of ice painlessly pierce her wrists in the shape of swords, reflecting the moonlight. She stumbles, her footing uneasy in the mound of massacres. No fresh blood slackens the blades, a reminder that she is, when it comes down to it, a dead woman.

The stranger, her thoughts inscrutable, keeps her silence even in the presence of such rapid impossibilities. She just takes a step back, betraying not even a shake. Hail lurches forward, the blades throwing off her balance.

“I swear,” Hail tries, her voice trembling, “this doesn’t happen to me all that often.”

And with that, she falls, landing facefirst in the crumpled cavities of the concluded. The world blisters black.

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Stew boils over the fire with the life Aoife desires in bed, the dish a greater comfort than an Ériuann turncoat like her deserves. She feels rather like the leeks, cabbage and carrot that encircle her meal’s mutton; a boiling, beaten bastion for the wolf within her clothing. Perhaps, at this point, there are too many layers of false skin; that would explain the weight in her eyelids more adequately than the mere guilt of her eyes.

The first rays of the morning sun thread the curtains of these endless windows, an entire storey of Duiblinn’s newborn fort dedicated to her and Striguil alone. She was told they’d have even more when it was finished, but assembling this stony monolith and the surrounding castle would apparently take years, so for now they got the bottom storey.

Later, they might convert it into a dining room, a banquet hall for guests and Saxanach callers. Maybe one day their guests would flock from all around the world with the same pomp and popularity of Ériu’s browbeating caretaker. Striguil could head the table, crowned in his conquest, stirring a goblet of wine that will only ever appear as blood in the paranoia obfuscating her objectivity. She’ll sit beside him, a trophy wife for a celibate, the sole showpiece of a people he bent beneath his boot. She’ll smile

at all the men that wish to satisfy themselves with her and reflect on how lucky she is that her husband is one of the few to stay true to his oaths. What better future for the highlight of the hoard, the last daughter of Ériu?

Yet it is still far more than she deserves, marrying the man who had killed her parents and fractured her worldview besides. She had seen him, little did he know, caught him in the act as she withered within a wardrobe, insipid in her own impotence. What a little coward she had been. What a pathetic excuse for an Ériuann she had been, no matter her mother's orders.

Any Ériuann she was raised with would've come out of that closet, blade in their hands, battle cry their departing will. She knows this better than anything. It's the one certainty she can claim when everyone she loves is dead, slaughtered in the siege of Duiblinn so many months ago.

No, she had not fought. She had chosen to take her place as a temptress in a traitor clan.

In reality, she was worse than a temptress. Her self-lacerating thoughts could hardly bridge the enormity of all she did not know, the cosmic insecurities that had begun to infect her with a second sight. A temple she's turned, some sort of sanctuary for an abomination they admire as an angel, a scone for the sin they call servitude. They would varnish her into a vessel for the villains they venerated, and the great gifts it granted her would never spare Aoife of her personal condemnations. Nothing rightfully would.

She notes the last ebulliating explosions over the weeping waves, her initial inclination almost academic — a product of her second sight. No, she decides. She *cannot* bear to avert her eyes from the atrocities she allows any longer. Aoife wrenches open the concealing curtains, spilling sunlight into her eyes. She almost feels rejuvenated, like a crop come into season. What a despicable bloom it is, in light of what she sees.

Longboats line the ports of Duiblinn in flames, taking the harbour with them. Northmenn and Ériuann alike throw themselves into the ocean, their feeble efforts to escape divine judgment a mark of their humanity. A line of Saxanach soldiers, as unified as the limbs on a single body, put down any who

make it to the docks, severing their heads from their shoulders. The Ériuann had tried to take Duiblinn back by sea, and Aoife reckons it'll be the first of countless futile attempts. If there was any shared trait that had extended the Viking wars in Ériu for centuries, it was both participants's remarkable obstinacy.

These days, it was hope that wandered stargazing in search of harbour, but you could never take from an Ériuann their drive to survive. She knew they'd keep coming until one side of the bloodbath was all but extinct. And if it were them? They'd consider it an honour to die for Danu.

Sadly, Aoife knows which side will die enslaved, and that is not a day she eagerly awaits. To say 'if' is a last disrespect in the guise of equity, for she knows her own people don't stand a chance.

Her delicate palm sheds spittles of blood, and she realises she's been digging feeble furrows into the skin. Her hands lack the wear of a warrior's, and she's beginning to think she's the only Ériuann that would never mark them in battle. She'll never leave this fort, not without *him*, and she'll watch as her people die around her, spiting her for the throne she chose over them — a decision decorated with lethal consequence.

Only the good die young, they say, and she is living proof of that.

She waits out the battle, if you can even call it that, occasionally padding back to the kitchen to stir and spice the stew — cainnenn, of course, the king's favourite. She can't help but ponder another pang of guilt as her eyes linger on the luxuries her people can no longer afford, another prized piece of culture cultivated for the Saxanacha's cravings. They wouldn't even die with a good meal in their bellies, will they?

What is worse than want is to know that which you once had has not only been robbed from the securest stores of your home, but is now being dangled over your head as a generous gift from those that seek lesser land like yours — generously sold at a marked-up price, of course, to accommodate your new masters. They rob you blind and they expect to be thanked for it.

Privileged or not, Striguil's meal will be ready by the time he arrives, and he will likely need nigh every last drop to regain the energy he's spent. She doesn't mind. She doesn't eat much these days.

Even to the eyes of his harmless trophy, a dragon banner heralds her assigned Disciple on horseback. The imposition of his intimacy is clearly no exemptor to the prurient circumstances that bound them, and she's learned not to question a man's need to exalt himself. He is her second gift from the Father Himself, the humble beast craving her gilded fingertips. Had she known she'd regret such boons as a child, she'd probably have laughed her captivity of the crown off in disbelief. How times change.

It is everything she had ever wanted, but it isn't. It is perverted, it is deceitful, and it is something of a reminder that all bountiful harvests call upon locusts in horde.

Her locust clops up to the window, his horse indistinguishable from a limb of his own, Selkie's wonderful white mane riven with ashes and blood. Striguil frees his feet from the stirrups and hops to the ground, his crimson cross coaxing free her every complicit conceit.

"Dinner smells good," he says.

Aoife smiles, injecting some personality into her fallow voice. "And so it will taste."

"I hope you worried not for me. It was an easy battle, and the Father's flame carried me."

His niceties are no illusion, and beyond that, they ring truer than those of any other. It is just another paradox in a man who stitches himself together with them, a pillaging crusader who earnestly believes himself an honourable knight. If nothing else, he is impeccable in manner — so long as his sword may stay sheathed.

"I didn't worry in the slightest," Aoife says, speaking the tactless truth.

He nods, ignorant of her insolence. "Have you worked with the Father on your gift today, Aoife?"

She frowns. "Are you wounded?"

"The faintest." He bashfully shrugs, like the battle was a child's furtive fancy.

"Then I suppose we'll find out. Come inside."

He nods, padding off to the door. She stills her shaking hand beneath the windowsill, her fingers

curled in a vice grip around the handle of a knife.

She must wait for a better moment, a more opportune time, one that will leave her freedom to fly. Only then will she abandon the healing her hands herald and embrace this new veneer of violence her kin have had to adapt.

Only then will she mimic the morals she's made without.

Cycle Three

Serve the Servants

/// Crossing the killing fields, sweet under the summer sun.

Selkie titters in trepidation as she tarries to a trot, carrying Striguil Ó Murchadha over a contemptuous crowd.

The sun sharpens the shine of his hallowed helm, hundreds of his kinsmen bent beneath his regal rigidity. How they've taken to their foreign customs too, he reflects, this latest hanging Saxain's cruelest cultural import. The people flock to them like spectators in an honourable arena, every one of them an executioner in their vicarious eyes. More than anything else, they ripple like a wave, storm set upon his path.

The victim dangles naked, the swelter soliciting sunburns from his scabbed skin, but his temperature should be the least of his worries. Bound to a hurdle, he dangles above a frothing fire, scraps of rotten food tumbling victim whenever they fail to pelt their latest wicker man. Striguil pulls up

to the head of the crowd, dear faithful Selkie steering him through the tumult without trampling anyone underfoot.

It's a barbaric fate for a man Striguil once fought alongside, to be sure, but it nonetheless remains an essential one. He bows his head in mangled mourning as he urges Selkie towards the prison, not all too eager to play participant in any grotesquery beyond his duties. For all the joy the cackling crowd seems to find in these executions, Striguil would sooner not join them in sporting a smile while he does his dirtiest deeds.

The man thrashes in his bindings, spitting upon his audience, surely earning himself a prolonged persecution. Striguil winces as the Saxanach executioners try to whip him into whimpers, abuse him into apology, but Striguil would be the first to elaborate on the futility of the gesture. You do not simply whip an Ériuann into betraying their people.

No, for Striguil and many faithful beside him, it had been a lifelong change, a deliberate diversion taken slowly over time. And still, in the face of this feast, he regrets it, absolution abandoning—

He bites his tongue before his thoughts can ambulate away. Allowing himself relief only when the iron tinge of blood trickles between his teeth, he whispers under his breath, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned." His tongue stings with the admission, grooved by the puppet teeth of his God.

I am not here to question, only to act.

"Striguil Ó Murchadha!" the sufferer shouts from his shameful stake, spit distributed from his dirtied teeth. "I don't suppose you're trying to sneak past me with that dragon banner of yours, are you?"

The executioner draws his knife, preparing the initial allotted penance, but Striguil raises his gloved hand. Selkie bears him to the centre of the square, meeting the prisoner's challenge. It's useless to argue with these people, he knows, but it's easier to keep that wisdom in mind when you didn't grow up alongside the face of your heckler. The right pair of eyes makes a hatred all too personal.

The prisoner spits on him. Striguil's authority, ironically, is the only thing saving the Ériuann from

immediate emasculation after that show of disparagement. “Traitor!” the prisoner roars, rippling with rage. “Filthy fucking *traitor*! Your mother and father died in the Viking wars to preserve your pathetic life, didn’t they? This how you repay them, lad? Prostrating yourself for those who pillage our lands? If you had any decency, you’d fall upon your own blade!”

The crowd roars and jeers, shoes and festering foodstuff thrown the crusader’s direction. Striguil holds true even as several of the projectiles garnish his garb with a smell that Aoife will be rueful to remove. There’s a lot of things he wants to say, but few of them are witty and even fewer advance his argument. None of his kinsmen would understand his holy exile — no one understood St. Patrick’s until centuries later. What would his Curator do? It’s a question he’s long asked, ever since Striguil’s second father plucked him from his adolescent anguish and made a man of the mewlings.

“You got yourself here, friend,” Striguil says, after some deliberation. “You brought terror in the name of your olden ways. They’re just that, brother — old. Archaic. The Father? He brings peace. Love to all.” His gaze hardens under his helmet. “Do not blame me when you throw such mercy away.”

“Do *not* call me brother,” the prisoner snarls. “You are no derbráthair of mine.”

“As you wish.”

“And what fucking *madman* spreads compassion and love with public executions, Striguil? Have you lost your mind? Do you think through the venom you spew?”

Striguil’s tone is as placid as an undisturbed pond. “No. I feel saner than I ever have.”

“And that’s how you know, isn’t it? When it’s not even a question anymore. Just following orders, are you, lad? Oh, my mistake. My fucking mistake, isn’t it? I can’t imagine the weight you endure, I really can’t!”

“You’re right. You can’t.”

The Ériuann’s eyes narrow in disgust. “You think all this will pave the road to His kingdom, don’t you? It won’t, you naive fool. It will lead you straight to your Seven Hells.”

“I do not disagree. It will. My soul is damned. But it is an honourable man that sacrifices himself

for the sake of a better world. A better *family*, united under our Father.” Before he’s finished speaking, Striguil realises how admiring his tone has become — how alien his adoration must sound to those untouched.

“Anyone can unite a people if you simply *kill* everyone who disagrees with you!”

“Disagree without your blades, and you’ll find more favourable reception.” He nods to the executioner. “As you were.”

The Disciple flicks the reins, clopping away from the hurdle with his head hung low.

“I hope those Daughters Damned find your soul, Striguil!” the prisoner screams, thrashing so fiercely that the executioner plainly struggles to prepare the drop of his axe. “I hope you burn down there for a damned *eternity*! It’s what you deserve, deoraí!”

Striguil winces, seconds before the man bays like a banshee, declaring his own death. The crusader resists the urge to retreat and steadfastly spectates the end, the executioner’s blade carving through the man’s genitals with a slipshod laziness that could never be considered merciful. He shudders in revulsion as the prisoner’s manhood crowns the cobble as a clump of crimson, Striguil’s lunch squirming in his stomach.

Now Striguil retreats, closing his eyes in belated respect as he spurs Selkie to the pens. The man’s last cries clearly denote the evisceration of his internal organs, extricating a scream that could humble the heavens themselves.

Striguil could pray for the man’s soul, but he knows the recipient harbours no desire for the Gates Above. It is the last kindness he can grant his desecrated kinsman, he supposes, to neglect his final prayer, even as he lets his traitor kin brutalise the man behind him.

Striguil dismounts in a daze, the world a splintered sea around him, the pounding sun intermittently leaking life into the fog of his mind. The prison guards open their doors for him without a word, depositing the key to a cell in his hand as he enters. The sun smothers him in sepia, the pens for those on death’s timetable all but empty.

It is a tad dizzying, to see a dedicated prison of this scale, to wander aimlessly through it in search of a man. Given the lack of existing facilities of such a size, the Saxanacha had resorted to transforming pillaged stables into cells, installing burly bars and a litany of locks. Back in the day, the Ériuann code of law had relied less on execution and imprisonment, partial instead to the allotment of cattle to grieving families and spited debtholders, to detecting lies with the help of scalding cauldrons. The Saxanach method, he thinks, is a lot more efficient, if a little less merciful.

The guards had cleared through a lot of prisoners today, he observes, but not the one he seeks. He had made sure to arrive in time. For this man, he always would — no matter his blasphemies, nor the accumulation of his crimes.

The closing doors dapple the Disciple in darkness, his crimson cross gleaming in the shafts of light piercing the rafters. His old friend raises his head with a cocked eyebrow, his bloody knuckles draped over his knees. He stiffens upon the pile of straw he's molded into a makeshift bed, buckets of shit and piss lining the bars of his pen like parapets. Striguil grimaces at the stench. No more prisoners could even dream of rescue now, all dead.

He hears another scream outside. Or dying, he reminds himself.

The death-row prisoner begins to laugh, the mirth of a man who's seen too much and died too young. Sure, in body he still lives, but it is clear from his paranoid posture, his slumped shoulders and his cynical eyes that the soul in him has long passed on. Striguil crouches beside the bars, tearing up at the sight of a man he hasn't spoken to in many years. And in such a state as this? It's unbearable.

"Crimthann," Striguil whispers. "How long it has been."

"And, if your Father had any mercy, how much longer it *would* be." The sardonic tone Crimthann deploys is one he's specialised in for decades. If there were áes dána that wove wit as their art, Crimthann would be chief among them. "How's your celestial father's cock taste on that traitorous mouth of yours, boyo?"

Striguil blanches, sweating dead in the heat. His headache is unrelenting. He somehow finds

himself surprised by Crimthann's castigating tone, as if he hadn't warned himself such a greeting was inevitable. "Let us both pretend such blasphemies did not grace your tongue, brother."

"Oh, they did," Crimthann chuckles. "I sleep with devils. I sacrifice good Father-fearing maidens in the woods. I'm Wrath's bottom bitch." His wolfish eyes glint in the dark, his teeth bared like he's trying to scare the wits out of his childhood companion. "Oh, but at least I admit it. How sweet it is to be a slave to sin, when I know what lies within *your* sanctuary."

Striguil's mental Curator can't find an aphorism to absolve this acrimony, so his words come out stumbling. "You're trying to get a rise out of me."

"Why not? I'm going to die anyways, and you sold your soul to a deity that plays it like a pawn." Crimthann quite suddenly slumps to his side, splaying out on the hay like an ailing animal. The sadness of his situation seems to hit him all at once.

Striguil bristles under his armour, his clenched teeth funneling furious breaths. "Crimthann, I am here—"

"Not even a *real* knight, mind you. A pawn. A bloody fucking pawn. The first one they sacrifice when they need a scapegoat. Mark my words, Striguil — your day is coming."

"*Brother!* I come to *aid* you."

"My experience with your religion has led me to believe that it holds a very different interpretation of the word 'aid' than us pagan folk do."

Striguil sighs. "Crimthann... I know not of what nonsense you got yourself in this time, nor do I care—"

"I can tell you," Crimthann chirps, arsonist sparks in his eyes. "Quite eager to, in fact. It's alarming."

"I do not care. I am here to help you."

"How's that, dashing knight? Plan to fetch me from my tower?" Crimthann snaps. In a flurry, he's clinging to the bars, lips frothing in an intentional show of horror. Finally beyond the gloom, he's as

easy on the eyes as he's always been — a messy mop of dirty blonde hair weaving matted tapestries over his eyes, skin well-shaven, a body slender as a woman's, shoulders slim to match. His collarbone is as evident as Striguil's bulk, and the crusader is terrified to imagine how little he's eaten of late.

"In a manner of speaking," Striguil concedes, playing along in this perversion of their childhood tales.

"Ah," Crimthann murmurs, dropping the act with a solemn slump of his shoulders. "I see what this is — no, trust me, I really do. You're going to come save this harmless little cú to pay reparations for all your sins, is that it? Leverage your authority to rescue a poor heathen? Plan on converting me while you're at it?"

Striguil tilts his head. "I care not whether you remain godless. That is not my aim."

"Oh, you deluded... I am not godless, Striguil. I just reject the tyrant you worship. Do you know why I'm here?"

"I told you I do not care."

"And if you want to hold onto your friends, daring knight, you'd do best to listen in on their misdeeds. You were so good at it when you were just a little altar boy, after all. Or were you lending the Curator more than *just* an ear with all the time you two spent together?"

Striguil unlocks the cell and stomps inside in one ferocious flurry, snatching Crimthann by the throat. He slams the boy against the stone wall, his nostalgia engendering no further sympathy. A bone pops in exertion under the crusader's grip, Crimthann's wicked eyes blinking bleary in the sunlight.

"Ah," Crimthann moans in pain, opening one eye. "Now *that's* more like it. If you weren't already betrothed to that balding lamb in the cathedral, I might even think you've a fancy for me."

Striguil throws Crimthann across the cell with a growl of defeat, drawing his sword. Crimthann's smirk remains omnipresent even as he scrabbles over a pile of hay. "What's the matter, big guy? Can't handle a little—"

Striguil's sword strikes like a match, his Father's flame fuming off of the steel to swaddle

Crimthann in smoke. The blade accommodates it without damage or demarcation, the room sweltering as Striguil's eyes burn beneath his helm. "Do *not* test my patience much longer, old friend, for I truly came here to save you. If you want to die, I shall leave you here to do so. If you want to *live*, however... you know not of what I sacrificed to convince the Curator this was necessary, Crimthann. The things I've done to convince the *Father* this was necessary. Do not act as if I do not care, or as if I never cared. You have always been... something of a stabilising stone to me."

"You know," Crimthann pants, sweating under the blazing blade, "I was joking before, but this is beginning to sound revoltingly romantic."

Striguil glares.

Crimthann raises his hands in mock surrender. "Do you know why they have me locked up here, stóirín? Really? I found documents, lots of them. They all bore the seal of the Church Below the One, no less."

Striguil raises an unseen eyebrow. "And how did you find them, pray tell?"

Crimthann emphasises his winning smirk. "Well, I borrowed them permanently in the dead of night. Without permission."

"You stole them."

"No need to be so pedantic. Let me get to the point here. The Church Below... they *wanted* this war, Striguil. They encouraged that madman Godric over in Saxain to bring the fight to us in the first place."

"They wouldn't do that," Striguil growls.

"Of *course* they would, you daft cunt. Listen — they were making no progress here before, right? The Church Below, it unified its institutions worldwide through these new policies, yes? The Great Reform, they called it. A new series of regulations, so they say, but from where I've been sitting, it looks a lot like homogeny to me."

"What are you getting at?"

Crimthann sighs. “By Balor’s gaping eye, you have grown stupid. Do you not see? Do you not remember how the Church Below functioned before the Saxanacha drew their swords — the one here in Ériu, that is? Privileges like traditional Ériuann marriages, the Tuatha worshipped as saints — Striguil, it was only the Church Below in *name*. They didn’t like that, so they pulled all the strings they had access to, and believe me, those are some *tight* fucking strings.”

“You’re suggesting that the Church Below sparked a *war* for the sake of reforming the clergy here in Ériu?” Striguil scoffs. “Crimthann, that’s *mad*.”

“Is it? Striguil, how many members of the Cathedral Contritus’s clergy have been replaced since the Curator’s friends came overseas? How many have gone missing in the night? How many?”

Striguil’s eye twitches. “Many. By coincidence and happenstance, that is. This conspiracy you’re going on about—”

Crimthann laughs, a full-throated amusement fanning Striguil’s flames. “Please! A *conspiracy*? Do you even *know* what Contritus means?! It’s no such thing, Striguil. They just know their followers are too fucking *dumb* to even notice. How many of you actually read Latin? Do *you*? They haven’t even tried to hide it! Your illiterate fanaticism is enabling this, all of it!”

Striguil cradles the combustion with the sheath of his sword, no matter the bonfire within. “Had you not saved me from my parents’ fates, Crimthann... I would kill you where you stand.”

“From where I beg erotically for mercy on my knees, but I appreciate the gesture.”

“This is not a game, Crimthann!” Striguil shouts, losing a tenuous tumble with his temper.

“Crimthann, I... we were brothers-in-arms, for so many years. I wish to be so again.”

Crimthann snorts. “Did you sleep through my speech? I’m not joining those Saxanach scum. Not ever. I’d betray my own kin to save your hide, as I’ve demonstrated, but I won’t help you betray *yours* for a corrupt cult of dirty old men.”

“I’m not asking you to join them. I’m asking you to join *me*.”

Crimthann raises an eyebrow. “That seems incredibly illegal.”

“It’s not. The only authority of mine is the Curator and the Father. I will not force you into the Saxanach army. Instead, I ask you be my squire.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking joking.” Crimthann chuckles, shaking his head in shock.

Striguil gives him the slightest inclination of his head. Deciding he’s said his piece, he turns to leave.

Crimthann’s face falls instantly. “By the Tuatha, you’re dead serious.”

Striguil hesitates at the doorjamb of the cell, glancing back to his old friend. “Take up arms as my squire, and you will be cleared of your misdeeds. I have arranged it. Otherwise, I cannot save you from your sentence.” He closes the door behind him, locking it once more. “I can only pray you make the right decision.”

“You know, this sounds like extortion to me!” Crimthann calls, kicking up straw as he jumps to his feet. “What am I, your little morality pet? Haven’t got a sweetheart yet, altar boy?”

Striguil leaves the makeshift prison, putting his last tie to Ériu behind him.

Under cover of darkness comes the best of man’s ideas, and from those ideas bloom the blasphemies the greatest men abide.

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“Father forgive me and my every sinful breath.”

The shade swaddling Hail sloshes and swirls, her aching eyes too obstinate to open.

“Forgive me for the poison I bottle beneath these robes, Father... forgive me for the sin that festers beneath my skin. I wanted it not.”

Hail voyeurs the voice in prayer. Soft, the words stilted and stumbling, as if the woman is rarely caught in conversation. She may be Lowlived, but it’s a clumsy permutation of Hail’s mother tongue the girl speaks, not Latin. This is its own saving grace, as offensive as such simpering words are in Hail’s prized Ériuann — the revenant’s Latin is clumsy at best.

“Forgive me, once more, for the purity I’ve propagated with pestilence... I sacrifice my soul in

cry of rescue from this miasma, and I accept my penance with pleasure.”

Hail opens her eyes, her blasphemous body laid across one of the pews. She takes it as its own miracle that she hasn’t set aflame upon setting foot in this place, but perhaps the church is imminently invested in its self-preservation. Her body is as stiff and cold as a corpse, a feeling (or lack thereof) she is already finding familiar. It takes her a moment to recognise the rags that make her modest, her given garb invisible to her dead touch. The praying woman stands cloaked in the church, crimson moonlight bathing the bird in blood.

“Amen,” the crow-faced woman says, sweeping her hand over her chest in the outline of a cross.

Hail realized the woman’s religious allegiances as immediately as she had awoken (if the dead could even sleep), but the belated revulsion to the revelation only wracks her now. She springs with a start, wondering why those icy blades won’t burst loose of her wrists now.

The bird gracelessly spins, regarding Hail with some surprise. “Oh. You’ve awoken.”

Hail seizes the woman by the throat in response, pinning her to the altar she paid in prostration. The stranger squeals her submission, kicking her lanky legs into the air, but it is clear she has never once faced a fight like this. Hail’s nails, cracked like glass, scrape over the surface of the woman’s mask, meaning to tear it off.

“No!” the stranger screams, a request that bears within it all the terror a solitary human can contain. “Don’t! D-don’t! You’ll release it! The miasma! Don’t, please!”

Hail raises a hesitant eyebrow despite herself. “The miasma?”

“I’m sick. It’ll make you sick. Please don’t. *Please.*”

“Not fucking likely,” Hail murmurs, but the inscrutable chill calcifying her lifeless spine is enough to loosen her fingers. She doesn’t trust this woman, but she trusts her gut, and she doesn’t like how genuine the stranger’s fear is. She has met soldiers on the battlefield less rattled than this.

The woman’s shoulders slump in relief, and she whimpers like a mewling mutt. “Thank you...”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Hail huffs. “Where have you taken me, turncoat?”

The woman tilts her head in confusion, ineffectually squeezing Hail’s rigid wrist. “W-what? I’m not Saxanach, I’m not with them! Unhand me, please, this is blasphemous—”

“Bás wasn’t, either, and he still threw in his lot with them. As have countless others, so I’ll need you to elaborate more deeply on why I should trust you. Who are you? What did you bring me here for?”

“I’m not Saxanach!” the bird sputters. “Please, I promise, just — let go of me, I’ll explain, I can’t even fight back, I’m too weak, I don’t even know how! I promise...”

Hail thinks it over, deeming the woman’s strength beyond substandard with a moment’s musings. Satisfied that the bird can offer no meaningful resistance, she drops the stranger, stalking off into the shadowed pews.

The woman springs to her feet, absently attending to the altar. She urgently re-arranges all manner of sacred items into their proper places with a disturbing dedication, lacking in musculature or not. “Forgive me, my Father, I did not intend this sacrilege,” the bird murmurs, tracing the cross over her chest again.

“Talk!” Hail snaps, silver eyes shining in the shadows.

The stranger flinches as she faces the silver glint in the dark, raising her hands in some mannequin mimicry of good intent. “I’m not... I’m not Saxanach. Really, I’m not. I hate them.”

“You follow their Father.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m with them,” the woman defensively replies. “The Father had His followers in Ériu centuries before this war, and He will have His followers after. I’ve worshipped Him since I was a child, before they came. I don’t support them. I don’t approve of this war. It’s... frankly, it’s foul.”

Hail cautiously considers the crow, pacing the pews. “Your Father is a tyrant.”

“And your gods use mortals as toys,” the woman counters. “All those stories of men whisked away into the Otherworlds to serve as playthings? What’s the difference?”

Hail frowns. “A reductionist thing to say of the beings who found this land.”

“And your claim is a reactionary outlook on the only family I’ve ever known.”

Hail decides not to get diverted by doctrinal debate. “Why am I here, then? If you’re not one of them, why am I here?”

The stranger hesitates, eyes on the ground. “I found you. I saw you...” She waves her hand in place of speech, clearly wanting for the words required to describe Hail’s resurrection. “Do whatever it is you did. It’s a miracle, honestly. You were *dead*. Dead beyond dead, and you just...”

“It was no miracle. It was a gift from the gods.”

“That sounds like a miracle to me, no matter the benefactor. I just wanted to help you. I saw you were... not quite alive, but something adjacent, so I carried you back. It wasn’t easy.”

“Are you calling me heavy?”

“No, no!” the woman says quickly. “But you’ve got... you’re a very strong woman.”

“And why, do tell, were you skulking around an execution ground?”

“Bodies. I needed bodies.”

Roiling rage directs Hail’s approaching feet, her fist curling. “*Bodies*? The bodies of *my* kin?”

“*Our* kin!” the woman yelps amidst retreat, the altar between her and Hail, as if it is capable of constructing a hasty defence. “I’m Ériuann too, all right? Born and raised! Look, it’s not what you think. I’m a doctor.”

Hail hesitates. “A *doctor*?”

“Yes! I’m a doctor.”

“Rather strangely dressed for a doctor. Or anyone, really.”

“I’m a special kind of doctor. I’m studying a plague.”

Hail crosses her arms, already exasperated. “What plague?”

“It hasn’t spread yet, not outside Duiblinn. I’m trying to stop it before it *can*. I call it the Black

Death.”

Hail presses her hands to the sides of her head, robbed even of the ability to sigh in passive aggression. “Grand. First an invasion, now a lethal plague. Things couldn’t get any fucking worse, could they?”

“They might.”

Hail glares. “What’s your name, strange doctor?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Everyone has one.”

“I do not,” the doctor staunchly insists.

“Everyone does. For instance, I’m—”

“No!” the stranger snaps, hands fixed tight over her ears. “Do not tell me! Do *not*! I don’t want to know, I can’t know!”

“What? Calm down, just—”

“Identity, it’s the key to everything,” the woman spits in rapid ramble, abandoning her coherency. “Identity, it’s another way the miasma spreads, and even I can’t lock *that* up. Names... they have power, you know this. You worship the Fair Folk, yes? Names, names... the miasma will spread, it will spread to *you*, so don’t tell me. No name, no identity, nothing to spread *to*.”

Hail stares at her, baffled. “Okay. Okay, look, no names. No names.”

The doctor warily eyes the revenant, visibly shaking. “Don’t tell me. Don’t tell me.”

“I won’t. I really won’t.”

The doctor lets out a haunted huff of breath, staring her corpse-posed companion dead in the eyes. “Don’t tell me your name. Promise.”

Hail nods. “I promise.” She raises her hands in the air, as if that will help.

The doctor lets out another anxious breath and wrings her lowered hands, pacing the pews.

“I’m sorry, I just — I can’t let this spread. I can’t.”

“I’m dead already.”

“And that is unprecedented, so I have no idea how the miasma would affect you. Best not to find out. At any rate, you can still carry the disease and spread it, whether or not it does any harm to *you*.”

“All right,” Hail concedes, finding no clarity in this conversation. “Can I at least call you something else? Like, a role?”

“So long as it’s not a name.”

“All right. I’ll just call you the plague doctor, okay?”

“That’s not an actual kind of doctor,” the masked woman bashfully admits.

“Well, it is now,” Hail reassuringly replies. “You’re the one and only plague doctor.”

The plague doctor nods. “Okay. Okay. I’m sorry to frighten you.”

“It’s okay, I’m not frightened.”

“Well, you probably should be, really. I can only imagine what you’ve been through. These are the right things to say, right? I don’t talk to people. My throat hurts.”

Hail frowns. “I think so. I’m... I can’t feel my heart beating.”

“Yes. You’re dead.” The plague doctor pauses. “You *are* dead, right? You weren’t born... ghastly?”

“I’m dead, yes,” Hail snaps, a tad irritably. “I know, it’s just... it’s just catching up. There’s a plague, you say?”

“Contained.” There’s another pause that Hail is coming to associate with unwelcome elaboration. “Thus far.”

“Gods.” Hail slumps against a wall. “So we were doomed anyways.”

“It’s contained. What are you talking about?”

“For now,” Hail croaks, burying her face in her hands. Of everything she could possibly feel in this deceased flesh, only the slime of her stolen skin and the stench of their come and desire seem to leap to action — the titter-tap of covetous fingertips up her shoulders, her only memory of touch a thick, revolting reminder of the sex she longed to shed. “I thought we might’ve had a chance, maybe — up until the night I died, anyway. I had *hope*. Real, honest hope. Do you know what that feels like, plague doctor?”

The doctor hesitates. “No, not particularly.”

“Well, I had it. I was holding onto it, even as they killed my brothers and sisters and burnt my lands to the ground. My father rallied the kingdoms, I thought — I thought we could take it back. I thought we were brave, we were strong... But now... even if we hadn’t been invaded, or even if we drove them off, we’d be dying soon anyways, wouldn’t we?”

“I don’t follow.”

“The plague, this— this *fucking* plague!” Hail shouts, losing control of her voice. “You can’t just — you can’t bury that forever, they always get out, they always spread, and... So if all this hadn’t happened, we probably would’ve died anyways, one by one, but together... Have the gods abandoned us?”

“Well... maybe not all—”

Hail glares up at her, digging her nails into her skin, trying to spool off the stain those men tattooed into her. “My father is *dead*, doctor. My entire family is dead — everyone I loved or cared about, dead, dead and raped or carried away for gods know what!” Hail puts a fist in the wall, splintering wood. Something breaks, but it doesn’t hurt. Nothing hurts. It fans the flames. “They’re all *fucking dead*! Everything’s gone, doctor, *everything*! You speak of your Father with such pride, but he’s the reason they’re all gone, isn’t he? These fucking foreigners, they came in his name, and they took everything we had!”

“They’re following His Word incorrectly—” the doctor protests, helpless to handle this

escalation.

“Fuck your word!” Hail spits, seizing the plague doctor’s trenchcoat. “Everything I love is dead! Do you understand that? Do you *really* realise what it feels like to be lost? To be truly, completely alone? I didn’t — it’s just catching up to me now, it’s crushing me, and I can’t... I couldn’t breathe before, but somehow this isn’t the same, somehow I’m just...”

The plague doctor winces within Hail’s grip, speaking soft. “Yes. I truly understand what it means to be alone. I’m sorry I’m not the only one.”

Hail stares into the bird’s beguiling mask, wondering where her tears have tarried. Has her death robbed her of the ability to cry too? Would it stop at nothing, leave her no contemptuous consolation? “I’m sorry. I’m so... I don’t know. I don’t want to know, do I?”

“You do not,” the plague doctor confirms, her voice enigmatically empty.

Hail closes her legs as the memories of the night screech back to the forefront, the links of her spine painlessly grinding against the stone wall. She sits there and curses herself for her own weakness, blames herself for her inability to feel. She’ll never know if she’s gotten the taint out. “I’ll never be clean again,” she whimpers, squeezing her legs to her chest.

The plague doctor winces in a way that feels all too familiar. “I’m... sorry.”

“I’ll never be clean again,” Hail mutters, slowly tilting onto her side. “Never be clean again. Never... never get it off... can’t be rid of it if I can’t even feel it... just the last of my family, aren’t I? We’re dying. We’re going. We’re never coming back.”

The plague doctor’s shoulders slump, silently sharing Hail’s soliloquy. For all the ways they cannot resemble each other, there is something kindred kindled, something comfortable in the way the plague doctor sits beside her with unquestioning patience.

“I’ll never be clean again,” Hail repeats, silently spurring the foul embrace of tarnished memory that squeezes her shoulders.

The plague doctor waits for her all night long, hardly wont to allow winter’s wraith a lonely

wane.