

# TOWER REVERSED

Milton, Autumn 2017

The setting sun painted the trees of the Blue Hills in orange and gold. Autumn in New England was not unlike the time the elder creature had spent in *Geimbreadh* wooing the very item in his hand from the nubile Bua. Golden leaves underfoot scented the air like her bower where they had lain many years past—before the dungeons faded her beauty and her king took her head.

Perhaps the reminder of that rather pleasant period in his long, long life granted him patience and restraint beyond what he would ordinarily show a lesser being.

“Is this really it?”

“You doubt my dedication to fulfilling my boons?”

“I doubt your dedication to anything, traitor,” the younger of the pair sneered.

The elder’s derisive laugh rang out in the darkness. “Should I keep it then? How will you explain that to your king?”

Tall and lean as a beanpole, the youth shifted from one foot to the other. The old traitor, to more *tuatha* than one, was unafraid. He was certain of the answer to his question.

“That will not be necessary.”

“Very well,” answered the elder. “Then all that remains is for you to take it.”

The unfortunate youth was silent for a time. There must be a trick to the offer, he thought. Still, he wrapped his hand around the hilt.

Images of blood and bone choked his mind. His eyes widened in horror. He quaked at the bloodlust that filled him to the brim.

“What- What is this? What have you done?”

“Only what I have promised.” And with those words, the elder turned away.

“Wait. Wait!” The youth screamed after him only once more before falling silent.

Lugh’s spear had him now, and there was no greedier blade. His body moved of its own accord. He ran, faster than he ever had before, to the grove where the curtain between worlds thinned. His fellows awaited him, expecting a friend but receiving an enemy.

Moonlight caught in his unseeing eyes, bleaching the whites like bone. Again and again, the bronze point tore through the night sky. Heedless of their pleas, he slashed through their belated attempts at self-defense. The blood of his kinsmen soaked the earth, wetting the soil to claret mud.

The youth returned to himself only after they lay dead. He swore vengeance on the elder creature. However, his actions that night had weakened him.

Part of him was shattered.

But the spear, as always, grew stronger.

\*\*\*

I came out of the vision to find myself still kneeling on dead leaves and damp grass in the grove. Flat stones circled me, baring a strange collection of loose change, rotten fruit, and animal bones. Towering oaks and pines caged me in. The forest filled my lungs.

Four bodies were littered across the earth like toy soldiers. They'd all been stabbed dead, which didn't bode well for me.

It was Tuesday, of course. Fuck Tuesdays.

The beginnings of a headache scraped along my skull.

That was the cost of my dubious gift.

Uncle Liam used to get headaches, too. Before he died. He was the only one like me I'd ever met, and he'd been pretty clear that I was still a freak compared to him. He'd never use those words, but he didn't have to.

I always knew we were different. He had a penlight to click on and off. I was under a blinding searchlight that flipped on whenever the fuck it wanted.

But, even for me, the vision was strange. Of course, this was the strangest crime scene I'd ever been to, so that was to be expected.

Why hadn't I seen the past through the killer's eyes as I always had before?

Instead, I floated above as disconnected as I felt in real life.

Blood red eyes, dappled with morning dew, stared back at me. They held no remorse even as greedy limbs stuffed human flesh into its mouthparts. The insect's twitching wings reflected the autumn sunlight as it wandered across the viscous surface of Mr. Mann's corneas. Its small body wedged into the space between his eyelids, crawling inside his skull. I watched for a moment longer as the fly's shadow cast a black spot on his sclera.

"What do you think, Reilly?" Murph stood over me, clear blue eyes shaded by a pair of gas station sunglasses.

Pretending not to notice Murph's offered hand, I pushed to stand. "It's all pretty fuckin' weird."

"Yeah, I got that part."

"All the necessary parts to get an ID are intact, at least. Hope he didn't pay too much for the punny license."

"Hey, it could be his real name," Murph said. "Maybe his parents are fuckin' comedians."

Hugh Mann, according to his license, stayed sprawled on the ground in front of us.

His head had been neatly separated from his body and now rested on his chest, cradled in his own arms. Dried blood stained the grass beneath him. Even more notable than the state of the body was the overwhelming scent of cedar, like my mother's hope chest. Dark oil soaked his button-down and once blond hair.

Even having seen the killer hack through the bodies myself, I still questioned what the fuck happened out here. My unreliable psychic abilities only went so far.

That thing would probably know—the creature in the people suit. The face of a man floated over a tangle of light and blood in my mind's eye. I'd never seen anything like it.

"It takes work to decapitate someone," Murph said. "You think it was personal, or our killer's just nuts?"

“I think neither.”

A blade, unlike anything I'd ever seen, stuck straight out of Mann's chest. Shaped like an oak leaf, the bronze tip was tinged with the seafoam green of ancient things. Even the handle was metal and hollow.

“Drugs then?” he suggested.

“Could be,” I said. “The weapon is weird, too. Looks like it came out of a museum.”

“It is a spearhead,” came a lilting voice from behind me, “of the Celtic fashion.”

I rolled my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Still hungover from last night, or rather this morning, I was in no condition to deal with this walking bag of dicks. And on a fucking Tuesday no less.

“He rode out with me,” Murph said. “Figured weird was his thing. Unis have anything useful for you?”

“Unfortunately, no,” he replied.

Dr. Emrys Somerled was some creepy fuck who contracted with the BPD to do creepy fucking things like build rapport with serial rapists and crawl inside the minds of murderers. He was dressed normally, for him, which is to say not normally at all. At least it was appropriate for the autumn weather because he still wore three-piece wool suits in the middle of summer.

He surveyed the scene with reptilian detachment. “They were all stabbed, it seems.”

“Yeah, thanks for your insight. What would we do without you?”

“Come on, kid.” Murph scolded. “Would you just-”

Somerled turned to me with a smile. “It is quite alright, Captain. I appreciate Saoirse's dry humor.”

Acid roiled in my gut at his insistence on using my given name. I can only assume because he gets his kicks pissing off very specific people. It was one of many reasons I never felt bad about being a complete bitch to him.

“I can only surmise this was intended to be some sort of ritual. Or to appear as one,” Somerled said.

I huffed in annoyance. “Why? That's ridiculous.”

“Lay off, kid. No one knows the occult and fucked up assholes like the doc.”

“I believe the phrase ‘antisocial behavior’ is preferable these days, Captain.” Somerled gave him a gracious smile. “These offerings are traditional of Druidic rituals. As are the location and manner of death, for that matter.”

I let out a sigh to avoid rolling my eyes again. “And what is the ritual for?”

“Who can say? But most of their rites are related to healing and transformation.”

“And murder?”

“Not typically, in modern Druidry, but perhaps these practitioners are... fundamentalists.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “So these freaks-”

“Druids.”

“Can heal and transform people with magic, but they just kill people with a knife like anybody else? That's kind of a letdown.”

Somerled's expression shifted into the one that boiled my blood—the one that said he was better than me. “I expect the manner of death is predetermined.”

“By what?”

“The nature of the rite, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Perhaps you would care to stop by my office. I have many texts chronicling—”

I turned to face Murph. “I'm done here. See you back at the precinct.”

I'd never gone to Somerled's home office. And, God willing, I never would.

Somerled clasped his hands behind his back. “I should return, as well.”

Murph nodded. “I gotta do politics and shit with the Staties. Like they want to deal with this shitshow. Reilly, wanna give the Doc a ride back to the precinct?”

I tilted my head to the side as though considering my options. “No.”

Murph shook his head. “Alright, well, do it anyway.”

Somerled, looking rather pleased with the turn of events, wandered toward the parking lot. I watched him go, frustration already pounding splinters into my temple.

Fuck Tuesdays.

I followed him—like I had any other choice—and settled into the driver's seat. He waited patiently at the passenger side door. I considered driving off with the locks still engaged.

How pissed would Murph be if I played that game with the esteemed doctor to the criminals slash worried well of Beacon Hill?

So I let him in.

That was my first mistake of the day.

Somerled buckled up, sitting prim and proper like we were having a fucking tea party. He turned to me with a smile that I was sure only spread wider when I immediately looked away. The Jeep chimed in protest until I snapped the seat belt across my lap.

I pulled out of the Staties' lot, cursing the low speed limits and roadway hikers of the Blue Hills.

The sooner I got away from Somerled, the better.

Grateful for his silence, at least, I took in the scenery. We wound through dying trees and emerald evergreens. The light faded fast.

Ma used to take me out to the Blue Hills Reservation when I was a kid. It was a short drive from The Wolfhound. We'd close up the pub early on Sundays and hike the trails through marshes, meadows, and woodland. She said the place reminded her of my father.

That was years ago.

Our magic men weren't the first to die in these woods. But they might've been the first to die in some apparent ritual murder situation.

People have strange hobbies these days. My unwanted carpool buddy included. And now he was sitting right next to me.

Staring.

To call it unsettling would be an understatement.

“Captain Murphy tells me you have ascended the ranks quickly,” Somerled said.

I gave a noncommittal hum.

“He could not say enough about your work with the Night Drive Rapist.”

“Right.”

He lapsed into silence and I thought he might take the hint.

No such luck.

“Yes, he says you have a gift. That you are practically a mind reader.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Equally unsettling was how close he was to the truth.

“Perhaps you would be willing to discuss your process?” he asked.

That was never going to happen.

I kept my eyes on the strip of paint-lined asphalt winding through the trees.

Somerled angled his body toward the center console. “I am always intrigued to meet another with similar skills.”

I had nothing in common with this guy.

“We don’t have to talk,” I said.

“Merely attempting to fill the silence.”

I hit the stereo dial. Angst and rebellion blasted through the speakers. The music may have been a bit louder than I expected. But now I was committed. As usual, my insolence did nothing to dull Somerled’s good humor. I caught the quirk of his lips out of the corner of my eye.

“You remind me of someone,” he said.

Hackles raised, I took a slow breath and fixed my eyes on the road.

“She had your coloring and your... tongue. Though hers was, perhaps, not quite so sharp as yours.”

I cast a glance at him as his voice went soft. That uncomfortable fondness in his eyes took on heat.

Suddenly furious, I snarled at him. “Well, I’m not her. So don’t fucking look at me like that.”

“Does it bother you, Saoirse? The weight of my gaze?”

I gave serious thought to shoving him out of the moving vehicle. Then I saw a flash of black. I turned back to the road, which was where I should’ve been looking the whole time.

Something was there.

Adrenaline ripped through me. I slammed on the brakes.

The tires thunked as I ran over it, and my voice dropped to a hiss. “Fuck.”

Pulling the Jeep off to the shoulder, I twisted to check behind me.

There was nothing there.

I checked the mirrors.

Nothing.

I turned to Somerled, my heart still racing. “Did you see something?”

“I did.” He studied me like I was a suspect. “And did you see something, as well?”

“Of course I did. That’s why I stopped!”

“Yes, of course, you did,” he said with a smile.

Rolling my eyes, I threw off the seat belt and jumped out of the Jeep. Asphalt jarred my knees when I landed. My legs were still shaky from the rush.

Then, just like that, I saw it again.

A young man lay in the roadway, naked as the day he was born. His skin glowed in the moonlight, and tangles of long, black hair obscured his face.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

He did not answer, so I walked closer, wondering when night had fallen.

“Sir? Are you alright?” I knelt next to him.

I meant to bring my hand to his arm. But his hair looked so beautiful, so soft.

I had to touch it.

My hand moved so slowly like I was swimming against the current.

Right before my fingertips grazed those inky strands, a tweed-coated arm shackled my waist. I fought against the firm hold without thinking.

“Saoirse,” Somerled murmured into my ear. “Stop.”

The man struggled to his feet and turned to us. He brushed his hair back.

Something was wrong with his face.

His skin was mottled with lesions, weeping amber ringed with red. Lips peeled back, and chiclet teeth jutted out at odd angles. White bled from his sclera over irises that were once beautiful sapphire. Blood-speckled eyes found mine, and he stepped toward me.

Somerled pushed me behind him, becoming my shield. “*Is liomsa é.*”

The man lurched forward. Somerled threw up a hand. A flash of light stung my eyes, and I squeezed them shut.

I opened them to the sight of an ebony stallion bolting for the treeline.

Where the hell had a horse come from?

The clunk of its hooves echoed on the pavement. The creature stopped to gaze back at us for only a moment. Scabs extended the length of its body, pus leaking down its chest and legs. Then it vanished into the woods.

“Do be cautious, Saoirse. They are partial to virgins.”

I wrenched out of his grasp. “What the fuck? What the fuck was that? And where did that guy go?”

“A *each-uisce*, I believe. The much more vicious cousin to the kelpie,” Somerled said. “Have you never seen one?”

“Of course I haven’t! What is it?”

He clicked his tongue. “I see. Perhaps we will speak of it later. We should return to the precinct.”

“Fuck that. I’m going to find that guy.”

“The *each-uisce*,” he enunciated. “I would advise against that. They are murderous on a good day, but that one appeared diseased.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

“Of course not,” he said in a long-suffering tone.

“I need to call it in.”

Somerled followed me back to the Jeep with a scoff. “And what do you plan to tell them?”

“That we saw a suspicious man in the woods. Obviously.”

“As I have already said, Saoirse, it is not a man. Regardless, your fellows will not be able to assist you here.”

The door was still hanging open, and not too happy about it if the persistent beeping was any indication. Adrenaline bled out of my body in an instant like filthy water down a storm drain. I collapsed into the driver’s seat, trying not to think about how Somerled knew shit about my sex life.

Lucky guess?

Fuck, I was tired.

And, on top of everything else, something was digging into my ass. Lifting my hips from the seat, I pulled it from underneath me.

It was the spearhead.

That couldn’t be good.

Unsure what to do with the thing, I wrapped the thing in some paper napkins from the glove box before tossing it inside.

Hopefully, Louis wouldn’t be too pissed about the broken chain of custody when I returned the murder weapon to his forensics lab. I could worry about how exactly the chain had broken after handling the rabid horse situation, and the rabid man situation, and the ritual murder situation, and the Somerled situation, and whatever else fucking came up.

I reached for the radio with no clue what I was about to say. Maybe something like ‘Hey, Marge. Think you could put out a BOLO on some freak and his fucking horse?’

“This is Reilly of India eight-four-oh.”

Silence.

“Reilly of India eight-four-oh. Come in Central.”

Saying it louder might help.

Screeching pierced my eardrums. I threw the radio away from me.

“Ah, fuck.” I rubbed my aching ears.

“Having trouble?” Somerled asked, looking entirely too perky.

At least someone was having a good time.

“What the fuck?” I jammed the key into the ignition and started the Jeep.

At least I tried to.

There was a telltale click, click, click as I turned the key. I dropped my head to the steering wheel with a heavy sigh. Out of pure wishful thinking, I tried one more time.

The click of my failing alternator sounded again.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked no one in particular and released the hood latch.

Hopping out, I went around front with Somerled at my heels. The scent of burnt mechanical shit filled my nostrils as soon as I lifted the hood.

“Alternator’s shot.”

“Most unfortunate,” Somerled said.

“Yeah, I can tell you’re real torn up about it.” I slammed down the hood with a metallic thunk. “You know you’re stuck out here with me, right?”

I left him by the useless engine and circled to the trunk.

“Are you certain this is the most appropriate course of action?”

“Freaky murder, freaky man. There’s no way this is a coincidence,” I said. “I have to go after him. He might know something.”

“I am unsure why, or more fittingly, how you do not believe in the otherworldly but this is not the time to cling stubbornly to old schema. Unnatural things are afoot and you are in no proper state to address them.”

“Don’t worry, Doc. I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this.” I gestured vaguely at our surroundings.

This would probably turn out like some episode of Scooby-Doo—pyrotechnics and rubber masks. Somerled and I would talk about this later and just laugh and laugh.

Who was I kidding?

No, we wouldn’t.

But I would laugh at myself for thinking for one second that something supernatural was at work.

Sure, I could do super things. I’d been doing it all my life. But, since Uncle Liam died, I had never found someone else like me. He used to tell me stories about monsters. He’d warn me about things with human faces that would use me for some nefarious bullshit.

It couldn’t be real.

Uncle Liam always liked joking around. He’d told me Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy were real, too.

If magic was real, I would have found it by now.

I was a freak and I was all alone.

Opening the back hatch, I pulled out my ballistic vest. I hated wearing the thing. It was like wrapping a sandbag around my torso. But apprehending a rabid man with a pet rabid horse seemed like an appropriate time to use it. Somerled strolled up behind me, examining the Kevlar with the amusement of a parent receiving their child’s first drawing.

“I’ll give you the keys,” I said to him. “You wait here.”

“That is a dreadful idea. I will accompany you.”

“You can’t -”

“What is the better use of your time and energy... Allowing me to come with you now or arguing back and forth until you inevitably acquiesce?”

My teeth ground together as I considered murder. “Fine.”

“Wonderful,” he said.

“Lean down here.”

Somerled looked confused for the first time in memory. “Why?”

I held up the vest.

He laughed. “That will not be necessary.”

“That’s the deal.”

“Is it?” His bright, bright eyes and bared teeth were suddenly a hair’s breadth from me. “Very well, Saoirse.”



I cursed myself for the unspoken offer of assistance as he slipped off his jacket. Draping the vest over his chest brought me way too close for comfort. I touched him as gingerly as possible while I tightened the velcro straps around his stomach.

He smelled like lightning.

I never saw anything when I touched Somerled, and today was no different. That was probably the other reason I had a hard time trusting him. Although, ‘trust’ might not be the right word. It was easy to take people at their word when a touch showed you their memories, secrets, and lies.

But he was just quiet and empty, like a rippleless pond or a black hole.

“Saoirse? Have you had a change of heart?”

“No, let’s go.”

\*\*\*

Pines and oaks towered over us. Damp foliage spiced the air. The light from my cellphone barely illuminated our makeshift path. I waded through the forest as though in a trance.

Somerled might know the occult, but I knew where we were going. That familiar feeling dragged at my breastbone. It had never steered me wrong. In the same way that I rummaged around in the minds of others, I scouted the path to our quarry.

He trailed behind me without complaint. It was suspicious.

His whole everything was fucking suspicious.

I considered his claim that ‘unnatural things were afoot.’ Whatever the fuck that meant.

But I knew what it meant, didn’t I?

Somerled’s interest in the occult was no secret around the precinct. Occasionally, it was even helpful. It made sense that he was superstitious. But just because he thought some evil horse monster was in these woods didn’t make it true.

Though that did leave one thing unresolved.

“How did you know what to say to that guy?” I asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s why I asked.”

Somerled moved to my side to walk in step with me. “How do you know which way to go?”

I didn’t answer.

What was I supposed to say? Well, I’m a sideshow freak with psychic powers and an uncanny sense of direction.

Pass.

“And so you understand my dilemma,” he said.

Maybe he was in league with the Scooby-Doo villain. After taking us on a wild goose chase through the forest, he’s whip off a rubber mask and gloat.

Despite my adamant refusal to accept that I was anything other than what I’d always been—alone—I was tempted. I was so sick of being alone.

Maybe he just knew things.

Like Uncle Liam did.

Like I did.

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "Are you... like me?"

"Perhaps. What does that entail?"

"If you were, you'd already know."

He laughed. "Yes."

It wasn't an answer at all. Even without reading his mind I knew what I'd have to do to get more out of him. I would have to offer him more in return.

But I was a fucking coward.

The trees grew denser, ominous. Quiet anxiety built in my chest. Some survival instinct handed down from the cavemen slowed my pace.

Should we turn back?

Then the stench hit me, like rotting wounds bathed in the silty, garbage-infested water of the Charles River. A stream cut through the woods and fed into a sickly pool. On the shore was a familiar sight, the unfortunate beast from before. What was once a glossy, ebony mane fell from his head in clumps. His body shuddered with each breath.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He is a water spirit. His source is corrupted. Therefore, he, too, is corrupted."

I decided to ignore the 'water spirit' comment for now. I'd make a mental note of all the wacky shit Somerled said tonight and, with any luck, I could get him fired.

"Can we fix it?"

"I might conduct a purifying rite." His pace slowed to a stop, and he wasn't happy about it. "It would involve suspending you over the pool and draining your entire body of blood. Shall we attempt it?"

That was a few steps past wacky.

"Are you serious?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "How ridiculous. He is incapable of answering your questions now. We should put him out of his misery."

"I wasn't planning on questioning it. It's a fucking horse."

"A bullet to the head should suffice."

I looked at the horse. Foam gathered at his lips. I looked back at Somerled.

"What?"

He raised his brows in question. "You want to help him, do you not?"

"But can't we-"

"That is not a price I am prepared to pay, Saoirse. End this."

As I approached, the animal tried to stand. His flanks trembled with the effort, and his knees gave out. I picked my way along the riverbank. Cloudy, red-rimmed eyes tracked my progress.

I drew my service weapon, a reliable Glock 27, and aimed for his head. Staring into his eyes, I hesitated. They were the same chocolate brown as a lab puppy's.

Surely, a vet could-

I jerked backward as my gun discharged. The pop-crack echoed in my ears. Somerled pressed against my back, his hands over mine on the grip.

Blood trickled from a hole in the animal's skull. He was dead.

Heart racing, I spun to face Somerled. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Why did you—"

"Because we are wasting time while you dither. Look there." He pointed behind me.

It was the oldest trick in the book, but I looked anyway. Off in the distance stood a cobblestone tower, illuminated despite the darkness shrouding the forest.

"What is that?" I asked. "Did you see that before?"

"Perhaps. Shall we investigate?"

I shook my head. "I'll investigate. You stay here."

"Saoirse, we have already discussed this."

"No. No way. I don't need you getting trigger-happy with a suspect." I holstered my weapon. "And how did you sneak up on me like that anyway?"

"As you wish. I will wait here."

He was suspiciously agreeable all of a sudden. And he'd flat out ignored my question. But Great-Grandma Fitzpatrick always said never to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Fine. I'll be right back," I said. "If I see anything, we'll head out to the street and try the radio again."

"A brilliant plan."

"Fuck you."

My second mistake of the day was not checking behind me.

The tower wasn't far. I only stopped once for a stress-induced vomiting session. I didn't have to search long for the occupants. Three shady-looking blonds loitered around the perimeter. They were not happy. One, in particular, took the brunt.

A man with a cape—an actual cape—was shouting and pointing at him. And the whipping boy did exactly what you'd expect. He stood there and took it. I crept closer to make out their words.

Then pain burst through my head, and everything went dark.

\*\*\*

I woke to icy hands sliding under my shirt. My neck was sore, and my wrists were bound. I slumped against unforgiving wood.

Everything hurt.

What the fuck happened?

The first thing I saw was Somerled leaning forward as far as he could in his chair. Blond strands broke free of the gel to fall across his forehead. Towering over me, his image blurred like I was underwater.

His eyes were a bit frantic—even human. That was when I realized he was chained there.

Had I'd ever seen him like that? Trapped and afraid?

It made me sick to my stomach.

“Is it true what they say about half-breeds?” asked the man straddling my thighs. “That they cannot get enough?”

“This is not the specimen with which to experiment, Imeall.”

“You do not frighten me like this, traitor.”

“I will,” Somerled promised.

He only laughed, turning his attention to me. “Awake at last? Good. I want you to see me.”

As the fog of sleep cleared from my eyes, I recognized him. It was the man from my vision.

I can only assume my head injury is what convinced me to share that information with him.

“It’s you,” I said. “I was... above you.”

“That is not how this works.”

“No, I saw you kill them.”

Imeall moved so fast that my head cracked against the executive desk behind me before I realized he’d hit me. My temple stung from the strike. His ring had cut me, sending a trickle of blood down my cheek.

Right. That was what happened.

Some motherfucker noticed me sniffing around their secret base and blindsided me.

“She does not know what she is saying. Do not ruin her for the sake of this petty retribution,” Somerled said.

My brain finally caught up at those words.

He was on top of me.

He was touching me.

“How does it feel to see me handle your woman? It will only get worse.” His hands ghosted over my rib cage and nausea followed in their wake. “And perhaps then you will understand some fraction of the pain you have caused me.”

“She is not my woman,” Somerled replied. “She is merely a woman.”

“That is not what you told the *each-uisce*.”

Somerled gave him that fucking look that I hated. “You use a diseased beast as a primary source of intelligence? No wonder it was so easy to dispose of your kinsmen.”

The acid his expression usually inspired didn’t flood my body. Instead, dread was creeping through my gut and up my throat.

Imeall yanked my hips forward until I lay flat on the floor.

“Not helping, Doc.” I meant to sound casual but the words trembled out of me.

“You are rather brazen, are you not?” He slapped his hand over my mouth, nails digging into my cheeks. “Not for much longer.”

I believed him.

Still, I bit the thin webbing between his thumb and pointer as hard as I could. Iron glazed my teeth.

“*Damnú!*” He hit me again, on the other side this time. “Bite me again, and I will cut out your tongue.”

“Dentist always tells me the same thing,” I gasped out.

Despite my bluster, my body was shaking—fearing what was to come on a primal level.

This was happening.

How would I come back from it?

People did.

People must.

Imeall's pupils swallowed his startling blue eyes. His lips peeled back from his teeth, tongue poking through.

"Saoirse, look at me."

I turned my head toward Somerled, the stone floor cool against my injured cheek. Above me, Imeall wrestled with my clothing as though unfamiliar with the fasteners. He panted his impatience into the crook of my neck.

Did Somerled really think this would help?

His eyes were unusually warm, like the flickering light of Ma's brass oil lamp. She kept it on her nightstand. I would watch the flame as she read to me from *Grimms' Fairy Tales* right before bed.

Maybe it did help a little.

I floated away on the golden flames in his eyes.

They burned away the sensation of Imeall's hands pawing at me, of his hips pressing me down. His breath curling around my neck faded to a pleasant breeze.

Then I felt something beneath me. My fingers wrapped around rough, cold metal.

What was it?

My fingers slid over it. I hissed as the blade sliced through the pad of my thumb. Then, as Imeall's hands found their way inside my jeans, that peculiar spearhead gnawed into the ropes binding me.

His clumsy fingers skated over my underwear. "There..."

A miserable cry slipped out before I could stop myself.

And then my hands were free. I slammed my forehead against his. We both reeled from the blow, but the weapon in my hand recovered first. My body became its vessel.

I stuck the blade in his right side. It glided between the ribs effortlessly.

Blood splattered against stone when I ripped the blade free.

Imeall fell backward, and I followed. Pinning his arms under my knees, I stabbed into his neck. With both hands around the hollow socket, I wrenched the blade through his carotid.

His eyes went wide. And then he made this wet gargle.

He died as fast as the horse did.

There was no time to feel my own emotions. Imeall's blood coated my hands, and I was gone. His memories fractured my awareness. *Mamaí* is angry again. She hits me. She hates me. Visions of his life wove with my present—cold air on my exposed skin, wet heat stippled across my face, and the sound of Somerled's voice.

"The key is around his neck... The chain... Yes, just there."

He spoke in soothing coos and whispers as I fumbled in the bloody mess of Imeall's neck. My blood-soaked fingers wrapped around a small key. Slick palms skimming over the glossy surface of the desk, I struggled to stand.

“Saoirse, come to me, and I will make it stop.”

I stumbled to my feet, trying to reach him, with the key in my hand and the dead man in my head.

*Mamai* is angry again. She hits me. She hates me.

I hate her back.

I tore her open and left her to bleed. It was like gutting a deer.

All women are my prey. They prance like does. They scream and squeal for me—bleed when I stick them.

After drowning in Imaell for a lifetime, I collapsed at Somerled’s side. He curled toward me. The brush of his cheek to my scalp brought clarity.

Silence.

“Release me.” His voice echoed through my skull, rinsing away the red, red blood of Iméall’s past.

Hands still shaking, I fumbled with the tiny key and the tiny lock. Eventually, the strange cuffs clacked open. Angry red skin ringed each of his wrists. He stood as soon as I freed him. Still kneeling at his feet, I thought I saw stars gather in his eyes for an instant.

“You okay?” My voice grated out of my dry throat.

Somerled studied me in silence, hazel eyes darting over my face. “I am going to touch you.”

His hands were on me before the words left his lips. Something like sunlight left his palms and cascaded through my body. Aches and pains I hadn’t realized existed faded away.

I missed the physical embodiment of my misery. Without it, I was left with only the misery itself. Tears fell instead of blood. Once I started, I couldn’t stop.

An oil slick coated my skin and seeped inside. Something dark and ugly bloomed in my chest, filling the hole Imaell ripped into me.

It was nothing. He hardly even touched me.

I failed to convince myself. The mantra only added to my grief.

Palms on my face and thumbs wiping away the salt, Somerled brought my eyes to his. “You feel no fear. You feel no pain. This shame is not yours to bear.”

My tears dried up instantly. So did the well of emotion. I was quiet and numb.

Somerled stood over me, cradling my head in his hands. I knelt before him as though in supplication.

Why did his words affect me so?

They always did. Obviously, he could do things. Things that others couldn’t.

Even things that I couldn’t.

“What did you do to him?” I asked. “I think you owe me that much.”

Somerled lifted his hand, coasting it through the air around my curls. “Why should I owe you this?”

It might have been irrational but I wanted to be furious with him—tear into him, cry, and scream. But he wouldn’t even let me do that, taking away my ability to feel anything.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Bitterness colored my voice.

His lips tightened on a wry smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I provided Imeall with an item of his master's choosing. He was unprepared. In the way of the weak, he holds me responsible for the suffering wrought by his mistake. That is all."

"Who's his master?"

"An old friend."

"Sure."

He drew circles under my eyes with my tears. "You think me a liar?"

"Yeah."

"I am many deplorable things, Saoirse, but I make this oath. I will never lie to you." He relinquished his hold, rubbing his damaged skin until it went a pale gold again. "You have done well. I find myself mildly impressed with you."

I wanted to ask him what he was again, but I didn't. He wouldn't tell me anyway.

"Thanks. That warms my heart."

"And so, you are restored. Perhaps we should leave this place?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah..."

He held out a hand to help me to my feet. "I believe your sidearm is in the desk."

It was. The only partner that had never let me down, thrown carelessly in the top drawer.

"You ever shot a gun before today?" I asked.

"I am afraid not."

"It's easy. It'll be just like earlier when you were sneaking up on me like a creepy fuck except you'll be the one aiming it." I stepped close enough to fold his fingers over the grip. "It's a safe action. Point and shoot. Don't point it at yourself. Or me."

"I accept these terms for the evening."

"Great. Ready to get outta here?" I gingerly retrieved the blade with my sleeve-wrapped hand.

\*\*\*

We didn't even reach the treeline before Imeall's buddies caught up to us. Three cookie-cutter blonds wrapped in silks of green and cream.

Well, one of them did have a fucking cape.

"His Highness will know of your treachery," said Cape.

"And what will he know?" Somerled asked. "To be careful of what he wishes?"

"Insolence befitting one of your station." Sunlight surged through his palms.

I reeled backward.

And then it stopped.

Somerled held one hand in front of himself. A bubble had formed around the three men. It devoured the air in their lungs if their responses were anything to go by. They fell to their knees, clutching at their throats.

"What are you doing? What are you doing to them?" My voice rose higher with panic on every syllable.

“Calm yourself,” he said. “And allow me to repay my debt.”

“What?”

“Trust me, Saoirse. You trust me, do you not?”

I definitely didn’t, but I nodded anyway.

That was my last mistake of the day.

“Stay.” He tapped my forehead with a shit-eating grin.

I couldn’t move.

“Oh, Caradoc... You thought to bind me. Me?” Somerled strolled toward them, arms outstretched like the Messiah. “Imeall’s death will be a mercy killing compared to your suffering.”

The shimmering orb that trapped them filled with flame. Silk and hair caught first. Terror burgeoned in their eyes. Their skin stretched taut, limbs curling in like a dead beetle’s. Their flesh split as easy as plastic wrap around ground beef. Yellow fat spilled from the seams.

Bile soured my throat and I choked it back.

I closed my eyes until the screaming stopped.

It might have been even worse that way. Excruciating screams and an awful scent like charcoal and leather consumed me.

It lasted forever.

When I finally opened my eyes, Somerled stood over the scorch marks. Broad back to me, he tilted his head to the side like a mantis regarding its meal. My fingers trembled as I fought against the invisible force surrounding me. A ragged gasp parted my lips, and he turned to face me.

He was a monster.

His eyes overflowed with pale light as though someone had hung the moon in place of his irises. His body flickered like a hologram modeled after a good doctor cast over whatever he truly was. Yet he stood so still, stiller than any living thing had a right to.

Then the wind whipped away that overlaid image, shredding it into wisps of color in the air. Somerled, or whoever he was, stretched taller and thinner. All color bled from him. His skin was alabaster, and his hair was a length of silk.

When he strolled toward me, lips spread in a mockery of a smile, that pretty picture was ruined. Rows upon rows of barbed teeth crowded his mouth.

I’d never seen something so terrifying and so beautiful at the same time. It was like waiting to be drowned by a tidal wave.

Animal instinct urged me to run, but I only managed to sway in place. My limbs, weak like a fresh fawn’s, wouldn’t cooperate. I stumbled back and fell to the rocky earth. Stride lengthened, it wasn’t long until he reached me. The creature knelt before me, trailing a single finger down my cheek.

I was crying.

Moonfire faded from his eyes, and he opened his thorny mouth to speak. “Forgive me, Saoirse. This was not how I intended to reveal myself.”

“Who- Who are you? What did you do with Somerled?”

He clicked his tongue. “I could tell you, but you will not remember.”

“Tell me anyway.”



“Now, where would be the fun in that?”

The creature smiled, and all those teeth were much more frightening up close. I flinched away from his touch, scrabbling in the sand and grit.

Strong hands gripped my shoulders and pulled me closer. “Only a little while longer.”

“Don’t touch me!” Amid my random flailing, I managed an elbow to his stomach.

“I see you have recovered your spirit.”

“Fuck you. What’re you-”

“Saoirse.” His fingers curled into my chin, lifting my eyes to his. “Stop.”

Words crumbled on my tongue. All I could do was stare back at him, silent and unmoving in his arms.

“You have no defenses at all, do you?” His grip loosened, and he tapped a finger against my cheek. “Do you really not know who I am?”

A breath fluttered out of me, but I couldn’t respond.

“You may answer.”

Hot rage forced my voice out as a snarl. “Why would I ask you if I-”

He placed a finger over my mouth, muzzling me again. “Yes, a fair question. Then I wonder what am I to do with you now?”

His thumb traced over my lips before slipping between them. A muffled whimper escaped as salt flavored my tongue. Impassive eyes drifted down my neck and over my chest. It reminded me of being trapped under Imeall.

Then his hand left my face. Bringing his thumb to his lips, he sucked my saliva from his skin.

My relief was short-lived.

He hauled me to my feet and angled his face toward mine, looking quite pleased with himself. “Perhaps we should play a game? It has been so long.”

Air rushed into my lungs when I broke his hold.

I could move.

I could run.

The creature smiled like he read my mind. Pushing off my heel, I bolted for the woods. He made no effort to stop me.

Adrenaline made me sloppy. I fell hard as soon as I hit the treeline. Untangling myself from a fallen log, I threw a glance behind me.

He was gone.

Ignoring the pain in my legs, I ran. My heart battered my ribs like it wanted out. Shallow breaths barely sustained me.

Where the fuck was I?

Where was I even running to?

Nothing looked familiar. It was just green—so much green lit up in the sunshine like we’d spent the rest of fall and all of winter in that dismal tower.

I lost all sense of time in my panicked flight.

Seconds felt like minutes. Minutes felt like hours.

I stumbled into a clearing, bracing my palms on my thighs as I fought for air. Spinning a clumsy circle, I stared back the way I came.

Where was he?

Maybe he gave up.

Maybe he left.

Quiet as possible, I gasped in lungfuls of forest-scented air. At first, the scent was pine. And then ozone.

Pain split my skull.

A frantic animal noise burst out of me.

Bark cut into my back. I clawed at the fingers around my throat.

“Caught you.”

All I could see was his face. He blocked out the sun.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Forgotten all about those fools now, have you not?”

It was true.

“Times of crisis burn away those vexing human emotions of yours,” he said. “You are welcome.”

My world shrank to that hand around my neck.

He’d pinned me to a tree, lazily lifting me higher. My feet struggled to find purchase. Squeals like a dying rabbit’s tumbled from my mouth as I thrashed against him. Tears pricked my eyes.

“In return, be mine again. See only me. Hate only me.”

His eyes burned with excitement, pupils overtaking his colorless irises. He wrapped his other hand around my throat and squeezed.

I couldn’t breathe.

My vision dimmed.

\*\*\*

“Saoirse?”

I jolted awake to a firm hand on my shoulder. Bits and pieces of some harrowing nightmare returned to me.

It was Somerled, of course—fucking Somerled gazing at me with tender curiosity and still touching me.

How long had he been watching me?

I shook off his hand, scanning our surroundings. We were at the C-9 district house. I was sitting at my desk.

Or, more accurately, I’d been sleeping at my desk.

Familiar fluorescents hummed in my ears, and that awful perfume of grease, coffee, and cigarettes filled my lungs. The window next to me let in the waning light of the sunset.

I didn’t remember driving back.

I didn't remember sitting down.

I didn't remember anything after getting in the car with Somerled.

My chest trembled around a shallow breath.

How had I lost so much time?

"Saoirse, are you well?"

I was not.

It wasn't the first time I'd blacked out.

I drank this morning before going out to the scene. But I didn't have that much, did I?

Somerled studied me so carefully. Those hazel eyes challenged me to remember. His immaculate nails scratched along the inside of my skull.

I choked out a gasp, glancing away. "Sure, what... What is it?"

"Someone has come to confess to the murders in the Blue Hills. Captain Murphy would like you to join him for the interview."

"What? He just showed up?"

"So it would seem. Congratulations on resolving the case so quickly."

"I don't-"

"Hey, kid! Let's go," Murph called on his way to interview room three.

"Make haste," Somerled said with a smile that mocked me.

I stood, rubbing my face. "Are you coming?"

"I am afraid I have a prior engagement." He nodded to the window.

I followed the motion. A woman loitered on the sidewalk. I got a good enough look at her to see that she was beautiful. Full curls spilled over one olive shoulder. She wore a red dress and heels tall enough that I would've broken my neck if I tried them on.

I brought my eyes back to his, suddenly feeling very awkward. "Oh. Have fun. I guess."

"I expect that I will. Enjoy your evening, Saoirse."

I think I wanted to say something else to him. I could ask what he remembered about the drive back. Or why he always gave me that sly fucking look. But I didn't get the chance.

"Reilly, get in here," Murph said in a tone that left no room for opposition.

I spared Somerled one last glance and entered the interview room.