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BEAK DOCTOR

By

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Thesis

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Creative Writing, Fiction

Beak Doctor

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Beak Doctor is an excerpt from a novel in progress concerning the life of Brennan Madigan as he grows up in northeastern Ireland and later works as a plague doctor in Venice during the Thirty Years War. The excerpt's primary themes are loss, madness, mythology, religion, and mortality.

Beak Doctor

The Mask

The first time Brennan put on the mask he was alone. A beaked mask of leather with two glass apertures for the eyes and nostrils at the end of the beak. His friend Dietmar had been given a few during his time in France. The beak, stuffed with juniper and lavender, rose and carnation petals, covered the rot and evil that pushed in on him, sealed it away. Inside the mask, under the wide brim of his hat, Brennan felt safe. The aromas tingled with memories of a warm hearth, smoked salmon, the people he'd left behind. But when he stepped into the street, that was gone, or rather he was gone. The people in the street looked at him and did not see him. They did not see his flaxen hair, his almond eyes, and the red in his stubble. There was no way a human could be behind the glass eyes. There was no life there. They only saw the raven amongst them. The most solemn and morbid reminder and the promise carried with it.

Part 1 – Ireland, 1608

Wolf-land

No watch had been posted, and rebels—fellow Irishmen—burned Derry and killed the governor. Shot him just steps away from his house. “I did not come for blood,” their leader had said. A few recognized him as the young lord of Inishowen and remembered his mistreatment at the hands of the Viceroy. But Brennan only remembered this lie while he and his parents walked out of the glow of their burning homes. A cold night despite the spring.

They had nothing, no time to grab more than their shoes, a blanket, and his father’s shepherd’s crook. His father—Bran—had tried to swing it at a rebel, but Brennan’s mother stopped him, saying they would kill him alongside the sheep. Now, he leaned on the crook, not much more than a walking cane—his charges indeed slaughtered. He looked tired, growing more so with each dew-drenched step. Black hair tied back, Bran still led them over hills green but for the dark.

The wolves howled in the night, their howls and yips a chorus of dread, chilling Brennan more than the cold ever could. At nearly twelve years old, Brennan had always known their howls, seemingly so distant from the warmth of his home. Even safe with his father in the fields and meadows, their menace was ever present, though diminished. But now he heard their hunger and recalled what the Englishmen said about wolves. *Armies of wolves in Ireland. Mayhaps we should call it Wolf-land.* He had heard the miller’s wife tell the stories of the cursed wolves of Ossory and the ravenous packs that attacked peddlers on the road to Coleraine, a town just north of Limavady, where Bran was leading them.

His mother’s name was Keavy, and she wrapped him in the salvaged blanket, little more than a scratchy rag needled with straw. “Stay close,” she said, taking his hand even as she

walked faster, dragging him along faster than his weary legs could carry him. Brennan knew she heard the wolves too.

Their howling was such a hollow sound, like language unknown and not seeking to be known, masked and ageless, the very music of terror, of teeth and snapping jaws. The whoops and maniacal laughter of the men who came in the night with torches, blades, and muskets answered the howling accordingly—the braying of wild men cursed to be more wolf than man.

The wind rose, shoving clouds from the moon's path, and the junipers shuffled with life. Bran doubted Limavady, such a small village, could hold so many people. Most of the now homeless Derry, tromped from the ashes of one village to the hearths of another. "Samaritans are everywhere," Keavy said.

They stopped in a meadow, deciding to wait for morning to go any further. Brennan and his parents huddled together by a gurgling brook, Brennan wrapped in the itchy blanket and wedged between them. He felt their hearts beating, the same rhythms, and their shivers, the cold wind laced with the damp and the wolfish howls. "Take the blanket if you want," Brennan said, but they said nothing back. Every snapping branch in the woods beyond the brook rang like funeral bells. The wolf howls so close they seemed to come from within himself, rattling the bones of his ribcage. Brennan could not shut his eyes for the fear of wolves, the sharp yellow eyes, long fangs, fur that was hardly fur at all, but rather frozen and sharp pine needles, their ears ragged, and ever murderous. All night he barely blinked, and in the corners of his eyes the beasts loped in the dark, barely visible, like ghosts. And yet, they were there.

Morning light arrived before the sun peeked over the beech trees, gray and misty like the veil that had hung from the old woodcutter's bald head at his wake not even a year ago. Brennan

watched the tree line. The howling had subsided, the moon giving way to morning in slow but steady increments. The sun rose, and Brennan let his eyes slide shut, tears slipping beneath the lids. He tried to catch every sob, lest his parents wake. He should have known there was no way to hold them all. Such dams never hold, and his father shook awake.

“What is it?” he said.

Brennan didn't have an answer for him, and a shame built within him, sinking in his gut, a fire lighting in his head. He wanted to go home, to their hut now made of charcoal resting on smoke-stained stone, the corpses of sheep resting all around, and the faceless men—why could he not remember their every look, the hooks of noses and club-shattered cheeks, the specific scars that tore their brows, how they were all there before and now gone—that chopped at them, carrying away the flesh and lambs, the ones small enough to carry.

He turned away from his father. He wanted to be brave for them. Soon he would be a man.

“Did you sleep?”

Brennan knew there was no point in lying. He shook his head and said, “The wolves.”

“Did I ever tell you of the only good Englishman I ever knew?” Brennan had never heard of such a thing.

“His name was something lordly. Lord Something-or-Other. But my folk just called him Hunter. Not to his face, mind you.” Bran gave Brennan a wink, pulling a faint smile from the boy. “Hunter didn't do much else but hunt. Lived in a big house outside the village. Made his fortune hunting wolves, or rather training wolfhounds.”

Brennan knew the hounds his father mentioned. Huge gray dogs with wiry fur. They were gentle and loyal to their masters, and the fastest dogs he'd ever seen.

“I’ve never known better hounds,” Bran said.

“And they kill wolves?” Brennan said.

“Not often, wolves are bigger and stronger. But a group of hounds can hold a single wolf long enough for men like Hunter to see to them.” A long look crossed Bran’s face. “I was just a boy like you, but when Hunter trained the hounds, he had me hold the spares. Even offered me money. I didn’t say so, but I would have done the job for free.”

Looking out past the brook into the meadow and trees beyond, Brennan thought he could hear the hounds barking, the gray light turning gold, and a rain-soaked mutt panting steam into the air. Out there were creatures so like wolves, and yet were not. Bran lifted his chin. “Just because the bastards burned us out doesn’t mean we’re done. Not yet,” he said. “Sleep while you can. We’ll be going soon.”

Brennan rested his head on his father’s shoulder, smelling the smoke nestled in the fabric of his coat. A memory of home crowded through his nostrils, not of the burning though, but something else trapped beyond his grasp, yet so close, a happy memory, and while he could not see it, could only smell the wood burning, the smell of something roasting, he knew his family was there with him as they were now, in the ghost of a home not quite gone. He closed his eyes and was there again.

Limavady

Just before midday, they crested a green hill overlooking Limavady, a small village near the banks of Lough Foyle. To the north and beyond the village, the Crag of Binevenagh rose like a high, granite table. Dark clouds loomed over the lough, rumbles of thunder and cold waves bouncing off the gray wall of stone.

Descending the hill into the village, Brennan understood his father's worry throughout the prior night. Limavady was small, smaller than Derry had been, and poorer. Most homes were a cobble of misshapen stone mortared and braced with water-warped beams of beech. Roofs thatched, yet seemingly no better at catching water than a net.

The village was seemingly empty. Nothing moved, no candles burning down in the windows, no dogs barking or being a menace. Yet on the wind came a wailing quite unlike the howling of wolves. Not at all hollow, but lyrical, as if traversing a language of memory and grief.

They followed the wailing through the empty village, and Brennan and the few other children followed close to their parents, whispering of the banshee and death foretold. And yet they followed.

The first raindrops fell, and they found the villagers of Limavady crowded in the churchyard, resting their hands on the weathered gravestones, their heads bowed.

Two men shoveled black dirt into a grave, while three women wailed behind them. The keening women—paid mourners—took turns in the wailing, screaming in throat-tearing despair, before letting their faces collapse into the cradle of their hands to shake and sob, the next keener taking up the wail in her own song of anguish. When it came to the third keener's turn, she stepped forward, peeling her dark veil from her face. She was older than Brennan's mother, the

gray driving out the red from her hair. And while the tears were plain on her face, she did not cry out. Looking out at the mourners, she sang with purpose, despite the tears and the cracking of her voice, she sang. “Why did you leave us, Ronan? Why did you leave? We are less without you, Ronan. Less without your laugh, without your smile, without. And yet we know of the golden fields of your home, and wish to be there with you, beyond such cold waters, such icy winds. We wish to see the golden fields too, not for us and not for the fields and not for any king’s gold, but for you. We cannot know them without you. Would never have known them without having known you. We are without. We are less. Why did you leave, dear one? Why did you leave?”

And as if they had strings tied around their hearts, guided by the gentlest of puppeteers, the grief poured from the villagers, sniffles to sobs, and the rain came down, the keening women easing into quieter tears, tears more their own. The village did the rest, forming a line towards the family of the deceased. Everyone—man, woman, and child—pressing their hands into the hands of the deceased’s family, saying, “I am sorry for your troubles.”

Brennan and his parents, along with the rest of the people who fled the ashes of Derry, joined the procession. As they shuffled slowly forward, Brennan noticed an old priest standing apart from the mourners, his frail hands clutched around his rosary and snowy brow furrowed, head bowed in prayer. Brennan found this separation odd, as if the priest had both removed and insulated himself from this communal grief, an act that seemed both pious and yet unholy. He thought of all the funerals he’d ever attended, the old woodcutter’s to this one, and always the priest had their stodgy words at the beginning, words that never had anything to do with those that had passed or those left behind, but rather God. In Derry, Bishop Montgomery had called the villagers his flock, and made clear to connect the idea that they were also God’s flock. But

Brennan's mother and father knew sheep, and said that if we too were sheep, perhaps we should try to be better sheep and not talk about God all the time and rather tend to our own.

When it was Brennan and his parents' turn, he was shocked to see the bereaved were a man and women younger than his parents, and that the grave was much smaller than expected. Brennan—though already tall for his age—would not have fit in so small a pit. The young mother and father could not look away from the fresh turned dirt. Did they even look at it at all, or rather through the veil, into another place, one so far removed from that rainy churchyard? They took the bereaved's hands and shook them as warmly as possible, cupping them between their own, and said the words. "We're sorry for your troubles. We're sorry for your troubles."

Bran said they needed to see the bailiff, that he would be the man to help them, and they found him in the crowded tavern. The bailiff's was a hunched man whose face never parted with its scowl. Sitting at a well-lit corner table, scribbling in his ledger, he met with every refugee from Derry, one by one, determining whether Limavady could afford them some space to build a new home, or whether the village could not.

After the initial downpour, a cold drizzle hung over the village, and those that could fit crammed into the tavern, bringing with them the sour reek of weary travel and rain-soaked clothes. While his family waited, Keavy haggled with the barkeep.

"Just a cup of soup for the boy," she said.

"We barely have enough for those that can pay," he said, wrinkling his nose.

Keavy tucked her tawny hair away from her face and under her kerchief. "Not even a crust of bread?" she said, not begging, her voice sharp with the edge she used to shame her father into chopping more wood or helping her hang their soiled clothes.

“I said we don’t have enough,” the barkeep said, walking away with a handful of grimy bowls. Keavy stared a death into his back, then caught the eye of a young barmaid, who without a word slid a thin slice of brown bread across the counter. Keavy tore a tiny corner from the bread and ate it. She gave the rest to Brennan. “Eat. Quick, before he comes back,” she said, slipping him a sly grin. Brennan stuffed most of the slice into his mouth and struggled to chew.

“Not that fast, little pig. You’ll choke.”

At the bailiff’s table, Bran took a seat and waved them over. The bailiff looked up from his scribbling. “Three of you, then,” he said, dipping his pen in the inkwell. “Your name, sir?”

“Bran Madigan,” his father said.

“And your trade?”

“We were shepherds.”

The bailiff clicked his tongue. “And did you manage to save any of your flock?”

“No,” his father said. “The brigands took the lambs and slaughtered the rest.”

“Pity you could not save a few.”

Keavy rested a calm hand on his father’s shoulder, and Brennan saw his father’s hand tighten around his crook, his knuckles going white. “What would you have done?” his father growled.

“Me?” the bailiff said. “That is of little import.” Brennan remembered the governor’s corpse, the red pool growing from the hole in his back. They knew this scribbler would have fared no better.

“Very little,” his father said. The bailiff placed his pen in the inkwell and met his father’s glare.

“You’re in luck, Mr. Madigan,” he said. “A Lord Phillips has recently purchased a flock and wishes it to be settled here. He needs men. I can allow your family a small plot by the fishermens’ huts. They are perhaps a league from the village center and dreadfully cold in winter, but you will find no place in the village itself.”

Bran looked back at Brennan and Keavy, the worry crinkling on his face. Keavy nodded solemnly. “Very well,” he said with a sigh. He signed his name on the bailiff’s ledger, and they stepped back out into the rain.

By the Shore

A harsh spray ripped off the lough, so cold it tore at their skin and soaked deep into their clothes. The fisherman's hut made the village shacks look spacious and warm. Perhaps it had crumbled under wind and water hundreds of times over hundreds of years only to be rebuilt in the same spot with the same crumbling rocks by the same gray, stony shore by a different person every time, over and over until the ghosts couldn't call it solely theirs anymore and wouldn't want to besides.

The boat, tied to a ramshackle pier, was likewise built and rebuilt with boards from different kinds of trees, the mismatching shades and patterns of the woodgrain making a floating patchwork.

Looking at this, Brennan thought surely the veil had been ripped back, and he was no longer quite in the world he was supposed to be in. Did he not hear among the waves and drizzle and roll of distant thunderclouds a laughter, neither vicious nor benevolent, neither adult nor child, not the sound a person makes, not any bird or animal, but surely the laughter of something beyond, something living with the fairies and other tricksters, the things people called cursed even though the word was wrong. Fairies didn't know such a word as cursed. And this is what scared Brennan most about such stories, that the spirits of the dead and the fairies could cross between worlds and they didn't have to reckon with the same rules everyone else did.

The laughter rose from the water, and Brennan thought of kelpies dancing under the surface, knowing the waves from underneath and how they carry the salmon when they are tired, knowing how they drown fishermen when they can no longer tread water.

Bran battered at the hut's door. "Be easy on the door," a voice called from within. The fisherman peeked his head out, and like his home, his face was water-beaten. Looking at Brennan and his parents, the fisherman said, "What do you sodden lot want?"

"A step out of the weather would be a welcome start," Bran said.

"Not inclined to let in strangers, no matter how wet."

"The bailiff sent us here. Said you'd help us. He loaned us a spot around here to settle."

"Ink-Nose says a bunch of shit, but fine, I suppose. Come in."

Inside the hut, Brennan smelled burning juniper and smoking salmon. Two makeshift beds rested head to head on the dirt floor, and a lantern hung from a hook mounted in the wall. A young, dark-haired girl slept in the smaller of the beds. The fisherman bent over a pot cooking in the tiny fireplace. "It's not ready and not much besides, but you folk can have some shortly. And mind your voices, will you?" he said, nodding towards the sleeping girl.

They shucked their drenched coats and laid them in front of the fire to dry. "How old is your little one?" Keavy said.

The fisherman's face softened. "My Ailbe's twelve. And you, boy? How many winters have you?" he asked with a crooked grin.

"I'll be twelve around the first snow," Brennan said.

"Father be with us," the fisherman said and looked to his parents, "I bet you blinked and he sprouted."

Keavy smiled, "Something like that. Please sir, what is your name?"

"Always answered to Murtagh. Suits me, and I've certainly been called worse."

"We thank you for your charity," she said.

Murtagh shrugged. “Not much to do today but let the rain fall. Tomorrow though I’ll help you folk settle in. It will be a nice change to have neighbors.” He leaned back over the pot, lowering his face into the smoke. He fetched a bowl and ladle. “You will have to share this,” he said, handing a full bowl to Keavy. They took turns warming their hands on the bowl and sipping from the rim. Salmon, leeks, and turnips in a thin broth, not much, but enough. Bran leaned his head back onto the stone wall and soon started snoring. Keavy hummed a low song, one with no words he could recall but seemingly always knew. The tune was not jaunty and not broken-hearted, but longing, as if remembering perhaps someone or someplace not gone, but rather lost, and the feeling that at any moment the singer would turn a bend in the road and would be home and see that lost loved one again. The remembrance changed then, and Brennan thought that goodbye was always a curse that a person sets on themselves.

Ailbe and Ronan

Brennan knew that he didn't have to believe the half-dreams that came to him in the mornings when sleep loosened its grip, but he thought they were as good a thing to believe as any. That morning with the only light peeking under Murtagh's door or glowing orange in the fireplace, the dream started with just the smell of rotting seagrass, faint amongst the juniper coals smoldering and the scabbed, burnt stew left in the pot, but the smell grew until it had a voice, little more than a whisper. In a girl's voice, the seagrass said, "I can hear you. I'm here. No more tears, no more tears." The sound of waves grew loud, so loud Brennan thought perhaps the lough rose during the night while they slept, and Murtagh's hut was no longer on the shore but submerged beneath the surface. The light under the door rippled as it slide through the current, through the seagrass itself. "No more tears. The sun is coming soon."

Brennan didn't know the voice. Neither his parents nor Murtagh or his daughter stirred, and yet the voice continued pleading, "Do not cry, do not cry. I'm here. I never left." And as the light from under the door turned the dirt gold, losing its waves and currents, the seagrass' voice faded, never saying goodbye, refusing such a word. Outside, a raven cawed and the waves receded, returning to their banks, their steady patterns matching Brennan's own breath, in and out, slowing until Brennan fell back to sleep.

Murtagh showed them to the plot the bailiff had allotted them, a place where a clear and rocky stream broke from the lough, moss and algae clinging to everything. A smell not unlike the seagrass perfumed the air. Not rotting though, but sweet.

"I would use rocks," Murtagh said, gesturing to the shore. "It will take longer to build, but your stone house won't bend and rot with the damp like a wooden one."

Bran stepped over the stream, looking all around at the uneven ground, the open nothing, the work required then. “We will need mortar, the rocks, and more,” he said, pacing around the spot, pointing to where the door should be. Most of the fear that had plagued them in their journey was gone, replaced now with resignation and the slightest hope. They had a place to rebuild, even if it was remote and cold. Perhaps, this place would be enough.

Murtagh kicked a stone into the stream. “I will be back in the evening,” he said. “If I don’t fish, my daughter and I won’t eat. And neither will you. I’ll bring you what I can.” Bran opened his mouth to say something, gratitude perhaps, but Murtagh waved away the coming thanks and said, “Get to building.”

Bran set to rolling large stones from the shore to a small patch of grass by the stream while his mother gathered clay for mortar. Brennan followed the stream to a nearby wood. He’d told his parents he would gather sticks for a fire.

In the wood, the sounds of the distant lough and near stream echoed amongst the trees not as if the water owned the wood, but spoke to the wood, laughing with and within them. And yet Brennan couldn’t find a dry stick of kindling. No fallen branch lay without the touch of dew or rain. But Brennan picked them, knowing they would dry given time, and when he would bend to pick a branch, he could smell the ground and see the green of the grass, and how the ground was just like the fallen trees people called dead, and yet the moss grew above and the mushrooms below.

He followed the stream deeper into the wood, listening to the birds singing, watching hares dart skittish from their hollows to clumps of tall grass. Brennan found it difficult to ignore the old stories of the Good Folk in forests. It seemed that not only the birds and beasts watched

him, but the fairies and changelings, the good and ill—Seelie and Unseelie—peeking out from behind the hawthorns, whispering in their own languages, ever amused at the fates of people.

As Brennan thought this, he heard sobbing from deeper in the wood, and Brennan worried that a spirit had read his mind and now tried to lead him astray. But what kind of person would he be to not help? How would he look a man like Murtagh in the eye if he didn't try to help those in need? He followed the sobs.

The wood grew dark under a thick canopy. Only thin ropes of light pierced through the leaves, swaying with the breeze. As he neared the source of the crying, Brennan heard that there were words between the tears. "Are you there?" the voice said, over and over. Brennan peeked around a tree and saw Murtagh's daughter, Ailbe sitting at the center of a ring of mushrooms. Brennan had heard such rings called fairy rings, the mushrooms sprouting from the ground where the Good Folk danced. Many thought such rings were dangerous, those straying too near were said to fall victim to trickery. Children stolen and changelings left in their place. Travelers were said to lose their sense of direction and were left wandering lost in the woods. Some said if a person were to enter a fairy ring, the fairies would make the person dance until succumbing to either exhaustion or madness. And yet others said the rings brought good luck, should the fairies wish it.

Ailbe turned, hearing Brennan rustle a branch to look around the tree. "Ronan?" she said, before catching sight of Brennan. She pushed her black hair out of her face and wiped the tears from her freckled cheeks. "You aren't one of them are you?" she said.

"Who?" Brennan said, stepping from behind the tree.

"You can't be," she said, exhaling relief. "You aren't clever enough to be one of the Good Folk."

“I heard you crying,” Brennan said. “Who is Ronan?”

“She was my friend,” she said, her eyes falling. *Was*. Brennan remembers the keening women and the grave so small when they had stumbled wet into the churchyard. *Why did you leave us, Ronan? Why did you leave? We are less without you, Ronan*, the woman had cried. Ailbe had tried to speak with her friend.

“Did you hear her?” he asked. “Did she visit you?”

“No, just you,” Ailbe said. “I just wanted to say goodbye, but Da said we shouldn’t go to wake or burial.” She sobbed in the ring. “I wanted to say sorry.”

Brennan came closer, but remained wary of the ring, careful not to step inside or to disturb any of the mushrooms. “But why?” he said.

Ailbe looked up at him, and the sorrow plain in her blue eyes convinced him that she wasn’t a trickster. Such honesty could never be a trick. But as she opened her mouth to speak, they heard Keavy call from the edge of the wood. He forgot the sticks they needed.

“I have to go,” he said, but when he turned back, Ailbe was gone. The ring empty save for the flattened grass.

Stones, Smoke, and Old Stories

Over the next few days, Brennan and his parents built their home, a short ring of stones mortared together, growing taller by the hour. Every evening, Murtagh brought them what fish he could from his day's catch, and they ate together, cooking the salmon over a fire. Brennan was both shocked and relieved when Ailbe joined them that first evening with her father. She had not been taken into the Otherworld. But also, the sorrow in her look had not vanished either.

Brennan had mentioned it to his father. "She looks so sad," he had said. Bran had sighed and said, "Yes. Her friend drowned. Ailbe and Ronan took the boat out without her father. The boat rolled in a swell." Bran cleared his throat. "Murtagh said they found Ailbe clinging to the boat. Ronan didn't wash to shore for three days. Ronan's family could not bear to have them at the funeral." Brennan knew then how blame was a salve, a recompense, an atonement all at once, and yet never enough for anyone.

"She didn't get to say goodbye," Brennan had said, but Bran turned away to set another stone in place. Brennan trudged off to help his mother gather clay, thinking of Ailbe's grief unsettled.

The day came that they could not stack stones any higher, and so Bran went back into the village and found the thatcher. He made a deal, promising one butchered lamb in return for the thatcher's services. They angled the beams into place, fixing them into the stone, while the dense bundles of straw, rushes, and heather were carted over. The thatching took most of the day, but by nightfall with the clouds rolling in, the roof was completed. They didn't know it, but Bran also bargained for some eggs while in Limavady. When Murtagh and Ailbe came that evening with half a smoked salmon, Keavy had already cooked the eggs in a borrowed skillet.

While they ate, the new hut filled with the smell of fried eggs and smoked salmon. Brennan even saw Ailbe crack a smile. And while he would never forget the burning of his first home, the acrid smoke of its burning seemed to not hang as heavy in the air, another smoke overtaking it.

When Brennan woke the next morning, he heard the rain falling outside and yet they were dry in their hut. The thatcher's work held true. They had slept on the soft, dying grass that made the floor of their new home, all crowded under the one blanket saved from Derry. Keavy moved around the hut, mortaring sections of wall she thought could be stronger, her hair beaded with raindrops and fingers sodden and goopy.

"Look who is up," she said when Brennan climbed from under the blanket. He peeked out the doorway, the rain falling steady and gray. Keavy washed her hands in a bucket and while looking out the door said, "Should the rain stop, you will help me pick berries." Brennan nodded. "The fairies have been playing in your hair," she said, reaching out and taking hold of a tangled knot on his head. Brennan wanted to untie the knot, but Keavy knew better. "No, no," she said. "They left the locks for a reason. Untying them would upset the Good Folk."

"Do you think they hear us," Brennan asked.

"Well, why would they not? You haven't asked them for anything have you?" Her eyebrow bent crooked.

"No, no, not me," Brennan stammered.

"The Good Folk are not to be trifled with," she said, shaking her finger at him. "I once knew a young man that fell into a bit of trouble and decided he would ask the Good Folk for help. We all told him to be wary, but he didn't listen. No one knows what deal he made with the

fairies, but it wasn't long before he was found struck dead in the forest. Not a mark on him, just dead, his face twisted in fear."

Hearing this and imagining such a face, Brennan wondered if Ailbe woke with fairy-locks in her hair. He wondered if they would find her while picking bilberries, either dead under a tree or dancing madly amid the mushrooms. Brennan knew something must be done.

Trickery

Ailbe started collecting hazelnuts. Brennan saw them filling the basket she carried when they played in the woods and by the stream. He knew she left a handful in the ring every night, an offering to the Good Folk. Always, the offerings were taken, the ring empty the following day, and yet Ailbe heard nothing from them or Ronan.

But every morning in his half-dreams, Brennan heard singing in the lough and whispers in the stream. And the singing no longer remained in his dreams, but lingered into the day, like the fog that had overtaken the countryside. As Brennan and Keavy moved through Limavady, the villagers themselves looked like ghosts, appearing suddenly through the gray blanket in the air.

Brennan and Keavy had heard the peat wagons were in the village, having returned from the bogs with bricks of the dried and shredded moss, and had ventured from their shoreline home to purchase a brick or two. They heard the clamor before they saw the wagon, the shouts of villagers calling for bricks.

“Three for us.”

“I’ll need ten for the tavern.”

“A half-brick is all I can manage.” But a murmur bustled beneath the calls, a dreadful whisper of wonder and fear. Out of the fog, the wagon came into view, the peat gatherers throwing bricks to villagers while others gathered their money. But another line caught Brennan’s eye, one stretching away from the bricks of moss, a line of villagers peeking over one another’s shoulders, and another gatherer standing by a coffin calling out to them.

“We found him in the bog,” the crier said. “A man from the old times. For two pence, come and see what the bog has chosen to remind us.”

“Mother, could we—” Brennan started to ask, but Keavy disappeared into the throng around the peat wagon. He could hear her calling for two bricks, but his eyes drifted to the coffin. Sneaking behind the crier, he peered over the edge of the coffin, his fingers touching the rough, freshly cut wood. They could not have dug it from the bog too, but had built it for the corpse. The bog man’s skin was tanned, brittle and blackened, yet the contours of his placid face had not changed over the ages since his death and sinking. He was tall and thin and young like many of the peat gatherers themselves, and cherry blond hair stuck from under a rotting cap pulled over his head. His eyes were closed as if he’d merely fallen asleep in the bog. In his hands, he cradled an apple, also blackened, but soggy, a foul smell wafting off it.

“We reckon he was an offering to the Good Folk, the folk of the stone rings,” the crier said. “Walked willingly to join them in the Otherworld. The apple he takes with him so he may be welcomed into their world, for apples are favored by the Good Folk, as we know. We covered the wounds with his cap that was found nearby. His skull was battered in, but notice the calm of his face. Hey, boy!”

Brennan looked up at the crier’s angry face. “You have two pennies for me?” he said. “No, then get gone. Have to pay like everyone else” Brennan nearly tripped over the coffin as he scurried off to find Keavy, who likewise was none too pleased with his wandering.

“Take a brick,” she said, handing him the peat. “What were you thinking? Wandering off to see a corpse. Have you no thought? If that man is base enough to sell a glimpse of a body, there is no telling how base he truly could be. You think on that.”

And Brennan did think, heard the singing in his ears. *Apples are favored by the Good Folk.*

While they played in the forest that afternoon, the fog lifting and Ailbe carrying her basket of hazelnuts, Brennan asked, “Have you thought of leaving an apple? The fairies favor apples.”

“But apples aren’t in season,” she said. “Where would I get one? Do you have the money for an apple?” she jabbed.

“I know of one,” he said, and told Ailbe of the body the peat gatherers had found in the bog and the apple he still carried. The Good Folk had accepted the apple before, Brennan thought. Why would they not this time? “They will be camped outside the village tonight.”

“Or face-down in the tavern,” Ailbe said, a wicked grin slashing across her face.

As they schemed, an uneasiness hung in the air between them. Brennan remembered what his mother said about the man selling a glimpse of a corpse. *There is no telling how base he truly could be.* He guessed he felt no guilt in stealing from such a man, but the body from the bog was another matter. Who was he to steal an apple from the dead, from the man who—as the crier said—had walked willingly into the other world carrying only an apple? What would the Good Folk think of the slight?

But scheming, Brennan saw Ailbe anew, not veiled in mourning, but rather in hope. And that was enough.

Brennan and Ailbe met at the edge of the forest after both their families had fallen asleep. As planned, Ailbe brought her father’s lantern for the return trip and a heavy bolt of leather to darken it as they approached. They wore the darkest clothes they could find in their huts, Brennan taking his father’s coat even though it swamped him. Ailbe stifled a laugh seeing him in

the overlarge garment. “Take this,” she said, handing him a dark kerchief. She tied her own scrap of blackened rag to mask her face.

The fog that had blanketed the countryside had turned into a film of spectral mist when the sun went down, and creeping through the mist towards the peat gatherers camp, Brennan felt like a thief, and yet he was comforted by their invisibility. Ailbe disappeared before his eyes even though she crept only a few feet ahead of him. The crunching of the grass beneath her feet, the towers of thistle swishing and swaying, and the howls of wolves hunting in the shadow of the Craggs composed a music dark and haunted.

Just beyond the peat gatherer’s ring of tents, Brennan and Ailbe listened for movement and heard nothing save for the snoring sliding from beneath blankets and the occasional crackle of their dying fire. Brennan spotted the coffin, the foot of it sticking out from the back of the peat wagon. They crept into the camp, careful with every step, like a whisper. While Ailbe kept watch, Brennan climbed into the wagon and slid aside the coffin lid. He nearly let out a gasp when he saw that the corpse’s eyes were no longer peacefully shut, but open, and the shriveled orbs like raisins could only be looking at him. Someone must have cut open the eyelids, if only to get another few pennies from gullible and frightened onlookers. His eyes never leaving the face of the bog body, Brennan took hold of the apple, felt the skin and flesh squish beneath his own, and took it.

“Do you have it?” Ailbe whispered, but Brennan still stared at the bog man. Dread pooled in his gut, he waited for the bog man to cry out or strike him, to curse him in a language long forgotten. But the bog man on stared back with those dead and shriveled eyes. The wind turned, sounding like a sigh through the tree branches.

“Who’s there?” a dreary voice called out, and Brennan saw a blurry face peek out from a tent. “You there, thief!” it called, and they bolted into the dark. They ran for the forest with the peat gatherers in pursuit. Brennan, the slower of the two, knew he couldn’t keep pace with Ailbe and split off from her path and hid in a field of tall grass. The peat gatherers had lost sight of them, but searched through the dark.

All around Brennan they brushed aside tall stands of grass and thistle, sweeping canes in wide arcs around them. “We’ll find you. We’ll have you in the stocks,” they said. Brennan worried they would hear the pounding of his heart. They moved closer and closer, and then he heard a distant laughter. A playful giggle echoed across the field, and the peat gatherers all looked for the source. An orb of light appeared in the mist, bobbing up and down and side to side.

“What’s that there?” one of the searchers called out. As they moved towards the light, the orb drifted towards the lough, getting farther away with each step they took towards it. “No, no. Don’t follow it,” another said. “It’ll lead you to the lough and drown you. My gran always said so.”

“Or into the very mouth of Hell itself,” another said.

While they argued, Brennan crept slowly through the grass and into the forest, taking the apple with him, and from the tree line he watched as their pursuers turned back towards their camp. Brennan followed the stream deeper into the woods towards the fairy ring. All around, the night animals sang, the bush-crickets sawing on their legs, and always the wolves in the distance.

When he arrived, Ailbe was not at the fairy ring, so Brennan waited, sitting beneath a tree. She would have to put the apple in the ring if she wanted to say goodbye to the Ronan. It wasn’t long before he heard footsteps echoing amid the trees. He turned to once again see the

ghostly light that had frightened the peat gatherers, though now that it was closer, he saw that it was Ailbe holding her father's lamp.

"You are so slow," she said with a laugh, and Brennan knew that she must wake up every morning with locks tied in her hair.

"I thought you were a will-o'-the-wisp," Brennan said.

"So did they."

Brennan handed her the apple, and Ailbe looked at its withering flesh and wrinkled her nose. "Favored by the fairies, you say?"

She stepped into the fairy ring holding the apple. She set the ancient fruit at her feet, and into the dark she said, "Ronan, I'm sorry I made you take the boat with me. You begged me to not to, and I didn't listen. But you were a good friend, and would not let me go alone. I should have been wiser." Brennan imagined the scene in his head, Ailbe casting off from the dock and Ronan looking back at the stone shore. A cold shift in the wind, and the gray lough grew unruly. A heavy swell rolled in, and maybe one of them lost their balance, a happening of chance, and then the cold water, an undertow, and only one pair of shivering hands clinging to the capsized boat. How one poor decision and cruel chance can slash a heart. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Goodbye." She wiped her eyes and stepped out of the ring. They followed the stream to the edge of the forest, saying nothing.

But as they approached an old rutted road passing near the stream, the lantern went out. A cold gust of wind brought the trees to life. Brennan heard the creaking of wagon wheels moving their way. "Quick, hide," he hissed.

Behind a tree, they watched as a black wagon passed by, a pall of tattered white cloth clinging to its rails. The spokes of its wheels were bones, and candles burned from inside skulls

to light its way. But for all the horror of the wagon, its driver was worse in Brennan's eyes. The driver clad all in black was tall and clutching a whip to drive his gaunt horses, and above his tall collar was nothing but air, his head rather cradled under his other arm, a great smile wrapped around it, and the eyes flicking back and forth.

Brennan could only think of the bog man's decaying eyes, the eyes that had seen him, and a terror gripped him. He felt the air driven from his lungs, a tightness around his throat. He gasped, and Ailbe tried to hush him, her hand over his eyes, anything to calm him. The wagon slowed, the driver standing from his seat, and those eyes looking, searching. But he returned to his seat, and with the crack of the whip, drove the wagon on and out of sight. Brennan caught his breath, but could still hear the rattling of bones in the distance.

The next morning, Limavady was abuzz with stories from the peat gatherers of hobgoblins playing tricks on them and wisps trying to lead them to their doom. By the shore, Brennan and Ailbe's families went about their daily toils. Word had arrived that the flock Brennan's father was to tend would be arriving in the next few days, and Murtagh was always on the lough with his boat and nets. Brennan helped Ailbe mend old and broken nets. She told him that she heard Ronan in her dreams, singing happily with bells in the distance. She was happy, so Brennan did not bring up the dreadful coachman, rather keeping his head down and hands moving. There was no need to go into the woods to see if the Good Folk had accepted her offering. Ailbe had heard from Ronan after all. But Brennan could not ignore the dreams that now drifted into his waking life. There was no singing, no bells. He dreamed of reaching again for the apple in the bog man's hands, his dead eyes, and the bony, brittle hand that reached up and closed around his wrist.

Interlude – Banshee

Every morning, before the sun broke over the Venetian lagoon, Brennan woke to the sound of a scream. The wail was so loud that it seemed to come from within his tiny room, and yet he was always alone. Quickly he dressed himself in his robes of waxed canvas, strapped the beaked mask across his face, donned the wide-brimmed hat and gloves, and stepped out into the hallway. He counted his footsteps to the front doors of the leprosarium, thirty-six echoing steps. Outside, the boatwoman had brought more patients and more bodies, Dietmar—in his own mask and black garb—overseeing the housing of the sick and the burial of the dead. Brennan trudged to the dock and counted the bodies. Some of the corpses' noses had blackened, or their hands from fingers to wrist, but all had the buboes on their necks, in their armpits, scattered across their legs. Many of their faces were settled as if in their last moments they found rest, their eyes closed and mouths drawn in serene lines. But some of the mouths were agape, showing teeth rotten or clean, the eyelids drawn back in horror. Looking down at them through the glass apertures of the mask, Brennan knew they had screamed until their body went slack and their life slipped away.

Part 2 – Ireland, 1613

Samhain

The day neared its end, and the young folk in and around Limavady prepared for Mischief Night. Hurrying through their labor, they thought of the offerings to be collected, the guises they would wear, and the bonfire to be built as night fell. Likewise, Brennan waited in the fields for Gavin, another shepherd employed by Sir Phillips. His coat pulled tight around him, Brennan sat on a large rock carving a face into an oversized turnip with a knife, cutting the narrow slits for eyes, a triangular nose, and a sneering mouth. He cored out the turnip so it could hold a candle, leaving the discarded flesh by the rock. Brennan knew they would need the jack o' lantern tonight when the Good Folk and the spirits walked the earth.

He thought winter would arrive soon. Light snows had already blanketed the fields, and the streets in Limavady grew muddier by the day. Most of the ewes hunkered down with their fat lambs, the flock not wanting to move much. The collies lounged around their flanks, but Brennan noticed the dogs keeping the herd clear of the woods to the south, their noses up and heads always turning towards the forest. Brennan wrapped the jack o' lantern in a rag and dropped it into the satchel with the remains of his lunch. Leaning on his walking stick, he watched the woods for any movement. He hoped the collies only smelled wandering deer.

Gavin appeared over the crest of a hill, giving a wave. He was a stout Scot that had worked for Lord Phillips for decades. His bushy, dark beard was streaked gray, and his hair had long since turned white. "A cold wind today," he said, a cough adding more gravel his already rough voice.

Brennan nodded. "Aye. It's kept the herd slow today."

“All the better,” Gavin said. “Don’t want them wandering in a storm. Have the dogs been good?”

“They’ve been keeping an eye on the woods there,” Brennan said. “Maybe some deer are bedding down.”

“No howls?”

“Not today,” Brennan said, but knew that didn’t mean much. Rumors spread in Limavady of a wolf hunt several leagues south of the village that yielded over forty wolf pelts. Though when Brennan had asked Gavin about the rumors, he had said they were nonsense. “Utter shit,” he had said. “Forty wolves in one hunt. Did they have a trained bear to help them? A regiment of cavalry, perhaps?” Brennan trusted his word over anyone concerning wolves. When Gavin had arrived in the village with Lord Phillips and the herd, Brennan and his father had been told that Gavin would continue to oversee the lord’s five wolfhounds as well. Brennan knew now that Gavin’s pay from Lord Phillips was a pittance compared to the money he made from the bounties the Crown paid for wolf pelts.

“I’ll keep the herd clear of the forest, just in case,” Gavin said. He took Brennan’s seat on the rock. “You should get some food. I know what mischief you young ruffians get up to.”

Brennan gave a wry smile. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Aye, just like I didn’t when I was your age,” Gavin said. “You get moving now. That devil girl of yours will be waiting.”

Brennan knew Ailbe would be docking the boat soon with the day’s catch. She had taken over the bulk of the fishing duties after Murtagh was kicked by a horse in the village a few years back. The broken bones in his leg never set right, and even walking was sometimes a challenge,

much less riding the choppy roll of the lough. So while Ailbe fished on the lough, Murtagh sat outside their hut mending the nets and haggling with villagers about the price of salmon and eel.

Gavin reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a handful of hazelnuts. “Take these for the bonfire,” he said. Brennan took them and gave Gavin a wave before making his way towards the village.

When he arrived at his family’s hut by the stream, the last sunlight faded to a rusty orange behind a scrim of cloud. Ailbe waited for him, plunking pebbles into the brook. She was already in her guise, having braided her dark hair and tied the top half of the wolf skull they found in the forest atop her head. Mud darkened her face, and hawk’s feathers hung from the sleeves of her blouse. Despite the mud of her guise, something stirred in Brennan at the sight of her. He called out to her, “What’s this phantom doing here?”

“Staving off boredom is what,” she said. “Seems like the flock led you clear to London.”

“Not quite so far,” Brennan said. “There was a bit of water in the way.”

“The devil himself could be after you, and you wouldn’t even know to hurry.”

Brennan shrugged and dug through the satchel he carried when he watched the flock. “Won’t be many devils chasing me while I have this,” he said and pulled out the jack o’ lantern, its grotesque face leering out at the world.

Ailbe cringed at the carved turnip. “That is the ugliest vegetable I’ve ever seen,” she said laughing. Brennan was inclined to agree. While he put on his guise, the tattered and hooded robe stitched with raven feathers he’d collected over the previous weeks, Ailbe found a candle and dropped it into the jack o’ lantern. A light glowed hellish from the leering eyes and vile grin as they walked to Limavady.

All about the village, young folk crept through the streets dressed as fairies and the dead, knocking on doors asking for offerings of hazelnuts and apples in return for good fortune in the year to come. Some sang songs or recited verse, and to the north, beneath the Crag, a bonfire was lit, the growing flames slowly replacing the day's dying light.

Also going door to door, Brennan carried the basket with offerings—Gavin's hazelnuts included—while Ailbe sang. He loved to hear the watery lilt of her voice, like the roll of the lough, and often while in the fields and meadows with the flock, he could swear he heard her voice carried on the wind, and in those moments, he didn't feel the chill in the wind and rain, but rather imagined himself idle with her, perhaps in the fishing boat on a summer day and not having any worries.

And yet, Ailbe's voice was never the only voice carried on the wind. Whispers drifted in the air while he tended the flock in the meadows, calling from the woods, streams, and stones, and Brennan felt watched, but when he looked, there was nothing but the rustling of branches laughing in the wind.

They continued through the village, and the last shack on the way out of town was the home of a chicken farmer named Fallon. Seeing the shack, Ailbe froze. Fallon held a long-standing grudge against Murtagh. Brennan had heard him drunk in the tavern, calling Ailbe's father a cheat for charging too much for the worst fish and keeping the best for himself, saying that Murtagh deserved the horse-kick that shattered his leg. When Ailbe heard, it took Brennan days to convince her not to drown Fallon.

They looked over Fallon's shack and chicken coop. A strong breeze could blow them away. Ailbe eyed the chickens and said, "The filthy birds are no better than pigeons. A wolf could eat the lot and still starve."

Brennan linked his arm under hers. “Come on. We’ll skip him and go straight to the bonfire.”

Ailbe jerked her arm away, her eyes narrowed. A snarl crossed her face as if her spectral guise had taken hold of her. She said, “Beware of trickery.” He followed her around the shack. “Keep an eye out,” she said. As quietly as possible, Ailbe unlatched the coop’s door and shooed the chickens out into the street.

As they crept away from Fallon’s shack, a voice called out to them. “Is this your doing?” They turned to see the young priest, Father Reid scowling at them. He was gaunt despite his youth. Surely from his hours looming about the chapel and churchyard, Brennan thought, having never seen a smile cross his pale face. The priest delivered his sermons with a scowl, his voice hollow and brittle with a cough he never could shake, eyes watching over the congregation with scorn. “What mischief is this?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Ailbe said. “Perhaps the Good Folk were unhappy. This is their night, is it not?” She smiled and looked back to Brennan with a shrug.

“And perhaps the Almighty will remember the lies you tell,” Father Reid said.

“But isn’t that why you’re here?” Brennan said. “To remind us all of our sins and collect our confessions and tithes? Perhaps poor Fallon didn’t pay his tithe to the fairies.”

Father Reid shook his head. “I suspect it was not a fairy grudge that freed Fallon’s bird, and I’ll hear no more of these Good Folk. Stories and false idols. This is the Almighty’s place, despite this present wickedness, and you will account for your misdeeds. The Almighty knows your works, as do we all.” The priest strode towards Fallon’s door, but Brennan and Ailbe didn’t wait for him to knock before dashing off into the night, laughing at Father Reid’s demands for them to stay and atone for their sins.

Most of Limavady and the surrounding homes attended the bonfire. Musicians played, the high din of whistle and fiddle, rolling thump of the bohdrán, and rattle and clack of bones tucked between fingers. Villagers sang and danced, and the offerings collected by the guisers were placed around the bonfire in baskets. The tavern had even been paid to cart out a few barrels for the thirsty revelers. Brennan watched his father spinning his mother in circles amidst the other dancers and heard Murtagh's drunken laughter as he told stories to the small children of the fairies and their tricks and schemes. From a distance, Brennan and Ailbe listened as well.

"You remember when we stole the bog man's apple?" Brennan asked, and Ailbe laughed.

"How could I forget?" she said. "I had to come back to get you. Those folk would have hanged you by your thumbs if they caught you."

"Good thing the wisps scared them off," he said, but his smile dissipated when he remembered the dreadful coachman with his severed head and creeping eyes. "And do you remember after you scared them?"

"We went to the woods, yes."

"And the wagon?"

Ailbe's own smile faded and she glanced at Brennan. "I remember the wagon too."

"You don't think that we got away with something we shouldn't? I remember my gran telling me of the dullahan," Brennan said. "The dead coachman that brings doom."

"Brennan," Ailbe said. "It was just some wanderer in the night. A peddler maybe." She took a sip from her cup.

"But you saw it. I've never known a peddler to carry their smiling head under their arm?"

“It was dark. We couldn’t see. And children, our minds running with old stories. You should not speak of such things anymore,” she said and stood up.

“Why not?” Brennan said.

Her head cocked to the side. “You know why,” she said. “You see how all the rest look at you. How they whisper.”

“Let them talk,” Brennan said, but could not help looking over his shoulder. He knew they all thought him mad. Most children lost such reverence for the Good Folk with every passing year, the stories losing their potency as the summers in the fields and woods seemed to grow less green, and the winters froze colder, and those that still carried hazelnuts in their pockets and left bowls of milk on the windowsills into adulthood were mocked behind their backs.

But they had not seen the dullahan. Only Ailbe had been there with him. “I don’t care what they think. I care what you think?” he said. A smile crossed his face, “Am I mad?”

She levelled her eyes at him. “Quite,” she said before offering her hand and leading him out into the dancers.

And yet the words had always rang in his ears. *Let’s not of this*. Let’s not talk about how we used to wake every morning with locks tied into our hair, or how Ailbe heard Ronan singing after she placed the bog man’s apple in the fairy ring, or how Brennan still dreamed of the bog man’s dead eyes watching him, and the dead hand reaching for him. All the things he couldn’t say, how they continued to ring between his ears like the howling of wolves.

They danced amongst all the rest, and he pretended not to hear the laughter in the flames, to feel the eyes on them, the other dancers watching, dressed just like them, like the dead and the Good Folk.

The night spun dizzy, sparks from the fire floating upward, disappearing into pale moonlight. Brennan tilted a near empty barrel and poured himself a beer. He stumbled to the bonfire and found Murtagh sitting nearby, roasting two hazelnuts and whistling, the pitch drifting in and out of tune and tempo. The old fisherman roasted two hazelnuts. Brennan sat beside him, sloshing beer into his own lap.

“Wasteful,” Murtagh laughed, clapping Brennan’s shoulder. “Here,” he said, wrapping the hazelnuts in a cotton rag. “One for you and one for my Ailbe.”

Brennan took the gift, feeling the warmth through the cloth, and dropped them in his pocket. Murtagh smiled. “Eat one of those and you might become wise like me,” he laughed. “Now help me home. I seem to have misplaced my crutch.”

Brennan drained the last of his beer and clambered to his feet, and with Murtagh’s arm draped over his shoulder, they stumbled towards the lough. “I saw you dancing with my daughter,” Murtagh said.

“She is far better than me,” Brennan said.

“Aye,” Murtagh laughed. “You dance like me on a cold and achy day, but I won’t judge you for that. Some say there is something off about you. Shit on what they say!”

Brennan laughed with him, but could not resist asking. “What do they say?”

Murtagh waved a hand in dismissal. “Folks say they feel a sense of the weird on you. Others that you are mad.”

Bile built in his gut, boiling and angry. But shame, too. Would everyone remind him? And had he not wondered himself, echoed Ailbe’s words in his head? *Our minds running with old stories*. Sometimes he thought those stories had overtaken his mind, and that no fairies were

to blame for his dreams, the things he heard drifting through the world, seemingly from the other, or the snatches of movement he only saw from the corners of his eyes.

“Drunk gossip,” Murtagh said. “Worth less than mud in a pig pen. You are a good man. You care for your family and for Ailbe. Even me! I see that. Your parents too. The match is a fine one.”

Brennan felt a flush in his cheeks not from the beer, an itching in his skull. “What are you saying?” he said.

“I have spoken to your father,” Murtagh said. “Our families have been close. You know that. We see no reason why you and Ailbe should not—” Murtagh belched and staggered, nearly bringing them both to the ground.

Steadying them, Brennan stopped. “Should not what?”

Murtagh laughed, “Oh, come on. Be married of course. We all see the way you two look at each other.”

There was no hiding anything, that there was no such thing as a good liar. People could not hide the fires burning within them. No matter how hard they try to stifle the flames, smoke always billows to be seen.

Murtagh looked Brennan in the eyes. “Should you and Ailbe want that, you may marry.”

The fisherman’s hut appeared on the shoreline, the orange glow of the fire shining from beneath the door that then opened, Ailbe appearing in the frame and waving to them. She was singing.

Dreams

That night, Brennan's dreams were feverish. He saw flashes of lightning smashing into choppy waters, dark feathers falling amid cracking branches, and a stream that ran red. The smell of rotting seagrass hung in his nose, and the howls of wolves in his ears. And always the bogman's hand reached for him, the shriveled eyes always watching. When he woke, bones rattled in the dark, and Brennan could not tell if they were the bones of the dullahan's wagon or the memory of the bones played between fingers the night before.

Bran was awake and sipping tea while trying to reignite the coals in the fireplace. "You were talking in your sleep," his father said. "Vicious dreams?"

"Not the best," Brennan said, and his father returned to stoking the fire. *Folks say they feel a sense of the weird on you. Others that you are mad.* Brennan wondered if his father thought the same.

"Murtagh said something interesting last night," Brennan said.

"Drunk, no doubt."

"Of course," Brennan said. He watched his father sip his tea.

"Well, what did the fool say?"

"I thought you might know."

Bran set down his cup, letting out a small chuckle. "Ah," he said.

"Ah, indeed." A smile crept across his face.

"I see that you are not entirely appalled by the idea," Bran said, and poured his son a cup. Brennan joined him by the fire.

"Not entirely."

“I am happy for you,” Bran said. “She is good, as are you. Have you thought about how you will ask her?”

“I reckoned just asking. Just say, ‘Will you marry me?’” Brennan said.

Bran laughed. “Well then, if it’s that easy, you might want to catch her before she’s out on the water all day.”

Brennan had never put his boots on so quickly.

He found Ailbe in the boat, readying the nets before casting off. The sun was finally cracking yellow over the hills in the east. “Isn’t it a bit early for you?” she asked, catching sight of him. “My father didn’t even stir when I left.”

“He drank enough that he might not wake for a few days,” Brennan said.

“Thank you for helping him home.”

Brennan shrugged. “Any chance of finding the crutch.”

She grinned. “Not until he finds a bit of humility.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Perhaps he should learn to hop. Or crawl, I’m not picky.” Her face scrunched. “You still haven’t told me why you’re here.”

Brennan looked at his shuffling feet. “Yes, well, ah...” he said, watching a smirk form on her face. “Um, well, I spoke to your father last night.”

“When he was slopping drunk.”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.”

“He had a good idea.”

“A drunk idea.”

“Well...”

Ailbe sighed and stepped to the boat’s railing, her hands on her hips. “Lord Almighty, Brennan. Would you just ask me so I can fish?” Brennan stood dumbfounded on the ramshackle pier. “What? You think might father wouldn’t have said anything to me about this? You’re a fool, Brennan Madigan.”

“I, um...would...”

“Christ,” she said, and stepped onto the pier with Brennan. Grabbing him by the collar, she pulled him close and kissed him. She held him there for a long moment, and when she let him go, their faces still so near, all she whispered was, “Yes,” and shoved him away. Ailbe climbed back into the boat, untying the line from the pier and pushing off.

Brennan’s mind swam, wondering if any of it happened, but of course it had. The flush in his face could not lie, nor her smile, her sitting in the boat, drifting further out onto the lough. She smiled and said, “Now was that so scary?” And yes, it was, but then all Brennan could do was laugh at his foolishness and his fortune.

The day passed quickly, Brennan bustling around their hut and helping Keavy with chores. She watched him with a knowing smile, and Brennan could feel her eyes on his back, but he didn’t mind, not in the least. Instead he thought of the days to surely come: a wedding that would stir even Father Reid’s spirit, seeing his parents and Murtagh happy, seeing Ailbe smile again, starting a family in this place, his home. He would continue to tend Lord Phillips’ flock, and he had no doubt Ailbe would not give up her boat.

And yet as the sun faded, Bran and Gavin returned from the fields. They had a grim look smeared across their faces. “Brennan,” his father said. “Pack your satchel and grab your walking stick.”

“Why?” Brennan asked.

“Two lambs were taken,” Gavin said. “Lord Phillips wants us to kill the wolves responsible.”

“We leave in the morning,” Bran added.

Brennan wanted to protest, a sense of dread churning in his gut, but knew there was no point. Lord Phillips had ordered his shepherds to kill the wolves, and so they must go. Gavin is the finest wolf-hunter in the county, he thought. Surely they wouldn’t be gone long, and then he would be back, back to Ailbe.

But that night the dreams only grew worse. He saw the dullahan pulling his wagon on a desolate path, the gaunt horses with their fiery eyes, and heard the crack of the coachman’s whip. He dreamt the dullahan crested the rise over Limavady, looking down at the rainy, little village, the wagon briefly stopped, before the bone-spoked wheels creaked back to life, and the dullahan descended the hill.

The Crag

They set out the following morning with two of Lord Phillips' wolfhounds. The weather had turned foul during the night, a mix of rain and ice falling before turning into a light but steady snow. Hooded and in the cold, they marched towards the Crag of Binevenagh. The flock had been in the area when the lambs were taken, and Gavin had said he had killed wolves in the forests in the shadows of the Crag. He had no doubts that is where the wolves lived lurking amongst the trees and rocks. As they drew closer, the stone towers loomed like giants with frosty hair, and as they entered the woods below, Brennan turned his head, hearing the call of a raven and watching the black bird glide through the falling snow and out of sight.

They walked in a row through the underbrush, Gavin following the wolfhounds with their noses probing through the snow, then Bran behind him, and Brennan bringing up the rear. They each carried a hatchet used for chopping wood on their belts and leaned against the wind with the help of their walking sticks. Throughout the day, they followed the wolfhounds, not saying a word, straining their ears to hear any sign of the pack. Their breath crackled and froze before their eyes.

In the evening, the snow stopped falling, and the wolfhounds found tracks. Gavin stared over them. "Not fresh, by any means," he said. "But certainly not old. Perhaps tomorrow we will catch them. But we must reach the foot of the Crag by nightfall first."

Night falling, Brennan felt the eyes of the Good Folk on him again, heard the whispers drifting between the trees. Brennan felt that it was impossible not to feel like he'd stepped back into the old times, the times when bog man sacrificed himself for the sake of his gods or the Good Folk. The time when only the wolves and the fairies ruled the forests.

They found a cave that burrowed into the Craggs and decided to camp there for the night. They gathered wood and started a fire, laying out blankets in a surrounding circle to sleep on. While they ate a sparse meal of bread and cheese, the wolfhounds rummaged through the cave, until one returned to the fireside chewing a deer's rib.

"Hell," Bran said. "We're in some beast's lair." They snatched up their hatchets and flaming sticks as torches and followed the cave deeper. The cave descended into a room littered with bones old and new, chewed and cracked open.

"This is their home," Gavin said, kicking aside the leg bone of a cow.

Brennan lifted his torch higher and let out a gasp. "It always has been," he said. All across the walls of the cave were carvings flecked with an ancient blue paint, images of ancient men and wolves and things in between, men with wings and others with horns, great swirls creeping up to the cavern roof, trees giving rest to the ever mindful ravens, and the stone rings that littered the countryside, the places the ancients made for their gods.

"Christ Almighty," Gavin said, making the sign of the cross.

They took turns keeping watch throughout the night, making sure to keep the fire high and hot. Brennan tossed and turned through the night, lingering in a place between sleep and waking, and when he faded into sleep he heard a hollow voice speaking to him from the dark of the cave, from the painted room of bones. It said, "You have a debt, Brennan Madigan. You are ours."

The next morning, they broke camp and again took up the wolves' trail, the tracks becoming clearer, more distinct. The pack was small, no more than five in number, but

occasionally one set of tracks would appear, paw prints much larger than the others, diving deep and heavy into the snow.

Brennan said nothing about what he heard in the cave. Surely Gavin and his father would think him frightened witless by the bones, or perhaps mad like Murtagh had said. Instead, he tried to press the memory of the voice from his mind, and focus on the sounds of the forest, listening for the wolves, knowing they were doing the same.

Just past midday, the wolfhounds caught a scent and scampered into the brush. “We’re away,” Gavin said, dropping his walking stick and pack. He followed the wolfhounds at a run, hatchet in hand, and Bran and Brennan followed. They followed the hounds into a small gully. They had cornered a wolf there, snarling and snapping its jaws as the hounds made passes at it. One hound made a rush to tackle the wolf, but slid in the snow underneath the wolf. The beast clamped its jaws around the hound’s throat, shaking and tearing it away, while the other hound came crashing into them both. Gavin rushed in while the wolf was occupied by the second hound which had ahold of the wolf by a foreleg. A flurry of yips and snapping jaws came to an end with a *thwap* as Gavin sunk his hatchet into the wolf’s skull.

A low whine hung in the air. The second wolfhound had also been savaged by the wolf as it held the beast fast. Brennan helped Gavin pull the dead wolf from atop the injured wolfhound while Bran checked the other hound, finding it already dead. Gavin hushed the wolfhound like and upset child. “Easy, easy,” he said. “Let me see.” His hands moved gently, pulling aside fur to see the deep wounds cut by the wolf’s teeth. Gavin looked up at Brennan and Bran, grimly shaking his head. “I’m sorry,” he said, taking the hatchet and splitting the hound’s skull just like the wolf’s.

They sat in the gully panting from the run and action. Gavin wiped the hatchet blade clean and said, “We need to get the skin and leave. Quickly. If we linger too long, the other wolves will return.”

“Brennan,” Bran said. “Go fetch the packs. We’ll start on the skin.” Brennan climbed out of the gully and started towards where they dropped their packs. As he left, his father said, “Keep the axe handy.”

The forest was silent as the grave, nothing stirring, but Brennan could not shake the feeling of being watched. His footsteps in the snow echoed in the trees, everything he did, every move, every breath seemed too loud, and the snow shined so white, it hurt his eyes.

He found the packs and walking sticks where they had dropped them and started back to the gully. He heard howls from that direction, then shouts.

Brennan ran back towards the gully. He once again dropped the gear save one walking stick. The cries and growls grew louder.

When Brennan came to the edge of the gully, he saw Gavin swing his axe into the side of a wolf that had the hunter’s hand clamped in its jaws. The wolf let out a yelp and collapsed in the snow. Further down the gully, his father wrestled underneath a monstrous wolf with coarse black fur. Brennan yelled and tumbled down into the gully, sliding in the snow and falling. He picked his face out of the cold mush, seeing a spray of blood seemingly freeze in the air. There was a horrible gurgle. Rushing to his father, he brought the walking stick down onto the wolf’s head, snapping the stick in two. The wolf fell beside his bloodied father. Brennan took his hatchet while trying to hold the wolf down with his other, but the beast snapped at him, catching his wrist and tearing at it.

Brennan brought the axe down on the wolf back, feeling the spine break. He swung again and again until the wolf stopped yelping, until it stopped breathing, then he fell back into the snow.

His vision blurred and a fire seemed to burn in his wrist. He heard what sounded like choking, and Gavin appeared above him. “Up, lad,” he said. “You’re father needs you.” The hunter hauled him up, and they both kneeled over Bran.

Brennan’s father was covered in blood. The wolf had torn at his face and neck, leaving him in tatters. Bran reached up and grabbed Brennan’s hand with a painful grip. His eyes were wide, the whites bright on his red face. He coughed and spat blood, trying desperately to speak. Brennan could not find his word, he couldn’t say anything. He looked down on his father, mouth agape, not a sound escaping, no tears falling.

Gavin pressed his hands down on Bran’s neck, trying in vain to stop the bleeding, but Brennan felt his father’s grip on his hand grow weaker and weaker until, at last, he let go.

For what seemed like an eternity, Brennan stared into his father’s eyes, brown eyes that didn’t look back at him any longer, but instead stared straight through him as if he weren’t even there.

They didn’t take the time to skin the wolves, instead bandaging their wounds and building a sled to drag Bran back home. Neither Brennan nor Gavin spoke. Before pulling themselves out of the hellish gully, Gavin curled Bran’s hands around the hunter’s rosary, and Brennan laid a blanket over the body. He kept seeing his father’s eyes staring at him.

Gavin broke the silence. “Night will fall soon,” he said. Brennan looked up, but his words were stolen from him. His face was a mask of horror, pale and streaked with the tears that finally

fell. Gavin grabbed him by the shoulders. “Listen,” he said. “We will need to drag him through the night. We won’t be able to hold the wolves off if we camp.” Snapping jaws flashed through Brennan’s brain. The sight of his father’s legs sticking out from beneath the black wolf. “We need to get back to Limavady, fast. Do you understand?”

Brennan nodded.

“We won’t stop. Are you ready?”

Brennan nodded, and Gavin checked that the rope was tight around Bran’s body. They both took hold of a pole and lifted the sled. They dragged the sled through the forest.

A full moon fell bright through the trees. The branches made shadow-fingers on the blanket of snow. Brennan heard the voice again. *You have a debt, Brennan Madigan. Was this not payment enough? You are ours.*

He knew, high above them and the sled, the Crags of Binevenagh pointed skyward. He didn’t turn to look, but Brennan imagined them glowing in silver moonlight.

Limavady glowed in the distance. Warm candlelight bursting through the windows. Brennan could smell juniper burning, could taste salmon on his tongue. Like his first memory of the village, he heard keening on the wind. Perhaps it will rain, he thought. Perhaps. If not for the sled weighing heavy in his hands, he could have easily forgotten what had happened in the gully. He could have forgotten the wolf. And yet...

Brennan forced himself to forget the word goodbye.

Keening

Brennan slept for two days. When he woke, his wrist was stitched up and ached. Seeing the wound, he remembered. A memory scored into his flesh.

His mother slept in her bed on the other side of their hut. Her face was puffy, and Brennan could barely tell if she drew breath. He crawled out of bed and crept to her side and held his hand under her nose. The faintest breath whispered over his fingers. He remembered her screams when Gavin pulled the blanket from his father's face, how she trembled, shaking her head as if to refuse the cruel spell that had befallen her.

They had dragged his father into the hut, and before Gavin could return with the bailiff and priest, Brennan had collapsed and slept. Brennan was shamed to remember this, leaving his mother like that.

Brennan stepped outside and the cold wind slapped him awake. A silver sun burned through the mist hanging over the lough. Gavin stood by the door, smoking a pipe. Surprise caught him at the sight of Brennan. "You're awake. How are you feeling?" he said. Brennan could only stare. His words had not returned to him. He wanted to say thank you, and reached for Gavin's hand, but the hunter's hand was gone. Brennan felt the tears welling up. How many had he failed in these last few days?

"Lord Phillips sent for a physician," Gavin said. "Infected by that wolf bite. You were lucky." Brennan had lost his breath, and gasping to find it, wept. "Easy, now, lad," Gavin said. "It's not so high a price. Not so high at all."

You have a debt...

Brennan stumbled away, and Gavin let him go. Brennan found a rock by the shore and sat on it, watching the waves roll in and out. As the mist peeled back he could see the boats on the

lough. Ailbe was there, and he desperately wanted to see her now, despite his brokenness, his shame.

His mother woke late into the day. Brennan had been tending the fire. Staring into the flames, he had visions of snow and trees, carved and painted caverns, bones, and rising towers of rock. And the gully. Why had he left to get the damned packs? They knew the wolves were so close. If only he would have stayed. If only he wouldn't have fallen, been faster. He heard his mother stir, and when she caught sight of him, she crawled out of bed and held him. It was like they had both gone to sleep and woke as different people. She had aged twenty winters it seemed, deep lines now carved into her face, gray streaking her hair in slashes. Brennan thought he must look so battered to her. The thread was still visible in his arm, and he had the look of a man returned from the dead. A ghost.

He didn't know how to tell her. Didn't know if he could.

They cried.

Brennan did not sleep that night, nor the next, and he began to wonder if he and Gavin had returned from the hunt at all, or perhaps they had been eaten by wolves, or froze to death dragging the sled back to the village. His flesh itched and he heard voices all around him, things speaking from the ether. When he scratched at his skin, he imagined the skin slicing open underneath his fingers as if they were clawed.

Fairy locks tied in his hair even though he didn't sleep.

With the funeral nearing, Brennan, Keavy, and Gavin took Bran's body outside to the shore of the lough. They needed to wash him before burial. So once again, Brennan and Gavin—his pole tucked under his one good arm—hefted the sled and dragged him to the water. When Gavin pulled the blanket aside, both Brennan and his mother had to look away, but once she'd composed herself, Keavy started removing Bran's clothes, while Brennan fetched a bucketful of water. With rags they scrubbed the dried blood from him, starting with his clawed hands and working up towards his neck and face. Brennan tried to clean his father's neck, but a long, ragged strap of skin tore away, and Brennan retched.

If only he could just walk into the lough and drown.

“You don't need to do this,” Gavin said, but Brennan had never heard such a well-intended lie. Bran was his father, and he would not fail him now, not again. He retrieved the rag, and as gentle as possible washed his father. Keavy just clung to Bran's hand, her knuckles white, as if trying to pull him from the otherworld.

Limavady poured into the churchyard the gray morning they buried Bran Madigan. Keavy and Brennan stood arm in arm before the grave, staring down at the box housing Bran. Father Reid came before them all and said the Latin words all had memorized but few knew. Brennan just stared into the dirt pit, not repeating the words. His voice had not returned, and he started to doubt it ever would. The words had been stolen by the jaws of a wolf.

When Father Reid had finished his part, he joined the rest of the village. A silence fell over the churchyard, Brennan sobbed. They didn't have enough money to pay for keening women, and were too proud to ask Lord Phillips, and Englishman for such charity.

But from the back of the mourners, a cry rang out, melodic and haunting, starting as a high wail before descending into a low song in a language, the crowd only half knew, some words familiar to their Irish ears, yet older and only half-remembered. But Brennan had heard the language often over the past few days, they were the words whispered to him from the lough and stream, from the forest and fields.

Brennan turned to see the keening woman with the rest of the mourners, all giving the woman space as she knelt on the ground, the song pouring from her like a flood. All around her, the mourners wept, men and women who had never seen or said a word to Bran or his family, all weeping as if he were their own father, brother, or son.

“Blessed Father,” Gavin whispered at his side, and Keavy clutched Brennan’s arm tight. At that moment, had he a voice, Brennan too would have sung, the low melody ringing in him, all of them, a fire that could not be extinguished.

The voice too, was familiar to his ears. He’d heard it drifting from the lough and over the fields where he tended Lord Phillips’ flock, and pushing through the mourners, he saw the keening woman was Ailbe, a veil hanging over her face and almost indistinguishable from her black hair, her hands clasped in front of her, the Claddagh now on her left hand, the tip of the heart pointed towards her fingertips.

As if struck down by God, Brennan crumbled, his legs losing all their strength, his body folding into the ground. He gasped for air, and all went black.

Exile

When he woke, Brennan found himself in his family's candlelit hut. Faces peered over him. Ailbe and Murtagh, Keavy and Gavin, Father Reid, and a bearded man he did not know. Father Reid's permanent scowl parted just enough for him to say, "Blessed Be. He's awake."

The unknown man said, "His fever appears to be breaking as well," while holding his palm to Brennan's forehead.

"Christ boy," Murtagh said, getting a rotten look from the priest, "we thought you were lost."

"Make room," the unknown man said, clearing the rest away from the bed. "Let me work. Brennan, I'm Darragh, a physician. Lord Phillips sent for me to tend to you and Gavin here." Darragh sat next to him on the bed, looking at him curiously through spectacles. "Tell me, have you experienced tremors, had a cough, anything like that?"

Brennan opened his mouth, trying to force the words out, but there was nothing. He shook his head and looked away. "Mr. Darragh," Keavy said. "He has not spoken since he returned."

"Aye," Gavin said. "The boy fell silent just after the wolves attacked."

Darragh cocked his head. "Interesting. Has he normally been possessed by a melancholic disposition?"

"No," Ailbe said, stepping forward. "Before they left on the wolf hunt, Brennan was quite happy, I think."

"He and Ailbe are to be married, you see," Keavy said.

"Strange," Darragh said. "I've never seen such a sudden fit of madness."

“Will all due respect, doctor,” Murtagh said. “His father did just die. Perhaps madness is bit understandable at the moment.”

“Of course, of course,” Darragh said. “I’m just trying to understand what is afflicting him.”

There was a long silence, before Father Reid stood, and with a grim voice said, “Perhaps there is another explanation.” All eyes turned to the priest, and Brennan felt an anchor in the pit of his stomach. “I have seen young Madigan here, along with Ailbe, behaving most strangely.”

Anger flashed over Ailbe’s face, but before she could get after the priest, Murtagh took her arm, saying, “Now what are you saying Father? Strangely how?”

“Nothing lewd, I assure you,” Father Reid said. “But on All Souls’ Day, I saw both these two releasing Fallon’s chickens. Just turning them out into the street.”

“You sanctimonious wretch!” Ailbe said, and Murtagh did his best to restrain his daughter.

“Come now, Father,” Gavin said. “You know well what the young folk get up to during Mischief Night. Trickery is half the tradition.”

“But invoking spirits and false dieties?” Father Reid said. “What if perhaps, young Madigan his invited a demon into his body.” A silent dread hung over the room.

Keavy started to sob. “There is no way to know. No way to tell. He’s my son. Look at him.”

“There are ways,” Father Reid said. “The doctor and I must discuss this.” They left the hut, Gavin and Murtagh chasing after them, shouting, begging.

Brennan caught Ailbe’s eye as she cradled his weeping mother. Her face started to crumble slowly, her lip trembling, tears welling. She turned her face away, and wiped her nose

with a kerchief. His mother joined the argument outside, her voice cracking high and vicious.

Ailbe neared the bed, and looking down at him asked, “That is you, right? It’s always been you, right?”

He tried to speak, tried to will his thoughts and feelings into words, but it was impossible. He nodded for her, and the tears fell from them both. She bent and kissed him, whispered in his ear, “I remember it all. The apple, all of it. I remember. I always did.”

A cough racked him, and Ailbe ran to the door, calling for the doctor. Darragh and Father Reid appeared over him once again. Father Reid said, “There is no time to waste. The spirit is killing him.”

Brennan thought of the legends of changelings, and how children supposed to be the spirits were often held over an open flame until the fairy turned the child loose, often after they had been burned to death.

“We don’t know that,” Darragh said. From his bag, he produced a tonic. “Drink this,” he said. “It will help with the cough.” Brennan drank the sticky and sweet tonic, nearly choking on it. Darragh turned to the priest, and said, “Give me until the morning.”

“Fine. Until first light,” the priest said and stalked out the door.

The doctor stayed until nightfall, tending to Brennan’s needs while Ailbe and Keavy watched on like hawks. But as the night wore on, the doctor realized there was nothing more he could do, and he went home.

Exhausted, Brennan drifted in and out of sleep, always Ailbe and Keavy sat by the fire, speaking in hushed tones. Plotting, he knew, before falling back to sleep.

He woke again to the sound of a wagon's wheels trundling outside the hut. Terror gripped Brennan as he thought the dullahan had finally come for him, but when the door swung open, Gavin stepped inside, followed by Ailbe, Keavy, and Murtagh.

Keavy looked to Ailbe and said, "Help me get him up," and they helped him from the bed, his arms draped over their shoulders. He wanted to ask them where he was being taken. Carefully, they loaded him into the wagon, covering him with blankets. They looked at him from the foot of the wagon.

"Gavin is taking you to Dublin, to get out of here and to get help," his mother said.

"Yes, boy," Murtagh said. "Get well, and we'll make things right with the priest here. Mark my words, the man will see reason."

He met Ailbe's eyes. She said nothing. It was as though her voice had been taken as well. They just watched each other as Gavin flicked the reins, pulling him away.

Interlude – Bedlam

Brennan was taken to Dublin and placed in the care of a doctor who promised to send word of his progress to Limavady. Gavin departed, and the voices returned, speaking in the language of the ancients, the words of the Good Folk. And still, his own voice refused to return, and no word came from Limavady. A season then two passed, then finally a letter was handed to the doctor, who read it aloud to him carefully and clearly.

Brennan Madigan, your mother has passed. A fever took her in late spring. I am sorry for your troubles. She was buried by your father's side. They rest together in the arms of the Lord. It has also fallen to me to inform you, that your betrothed, Ailbe Cabane and her father Murtagh have left the village for the southern coast. I begged them to remain for your sake, but they would not. Upon your better health, I would advise you seek them out. No one is left for you here.

-Holy Father Reid

Brennan watched the doctor's eyes rise from the letter. "I'm sorry for your troubles," he said. The next evening Brennan, was chained in the dark hull of a ship, the doctor relinquishing responsibility for him to a hospital in London. Brennan knew why. The doctor would not receive his pay if his family was dead or had abandoned him. So for days he listened to the fish sing in their own languages with words not unlike a keen.

In London, he was taken to Bedlam. He was chained to a wall, with nothing but the voices and other madmen for company. He found that time had no meaning in Bedlam. Days were immeasurable. He knew then that the worst prison in creation was his own skull.

One night, in the damp and foul dark, the voice spoke once again, saying, “Your debt has not been repaid, Brennan Madigan. But soon, very soon, your salvation will arrive. When the time comes, you will know.” He knew the words must have come from the mouth of a madman, but the spirit of something else.

Every night he dreamed the same dream. A tall, gray crane standing cloaked in its own wings in an icy stream. The crane’s beak always pointed to the water, watching the fish slide by, until the crane reached down and took some unlucky fish. The voices crept back into his mind. *You will be our ferryman, our dullahan. Forever, you will wander the land and take the living to the land of the dead. This is your atonement, Brennan Madigan, from now until you join your charges.*

He couldn’t know how many days had passed when he heard the doctor speaking with a young German. The German begged the doctor for assistance, but not for any help with a melancholic disorder. The German asked for workers. “I know you could spare some orderlies,” he said. “There’s not much for them to do with all your patients chained to the wall.”

“I assure you, the chains are necessary.”

The German scoffed. “I think I’d sooner trust the madmen, in any case.”

“Then take me,” Brennan said. His voice sounded nothing like he remembered it, like the life had all died out of it. “Take me,” he said. “I’ll do anything you ask.”

“I have no doubt,” the German scoffed. “Why should I, though?”

“I have nothing else.”

Part 3 – Venice, 1629

Penance

Brennan opened a vein in Rafael's arm. "Dolor?" Niall asked, using a wooden cup to catch the blood.

"No."

Brennan nodded. "Bueno."

The Spaniard's brow beaded with sweat. "Your Spanish is not so good," he said.

"It's true," Brennan said, smiling behind his mask.

"You are a young man, yes?" Rafael looked up at him. A black, ankle-length robe made of waxed canvas, the gloves, the wide-brimmed hat, all black. The knife and the mask. Glass apertures for the eyes, the long beak filled with lavender, lemon, ambergris, and juniper. Rafael didn't look at him. Rafael looked at himself.

"Also true."

"And what have you seen of the world? Is it to your liking?" Rafael asked.

Men picking at their flesh in Bedlam. His father torn to ribbons by wolves. "I've seen enough."

Rafael stroked his white beard. "You haven't seen anything. I've seen the leviathan itself, swimming alongside the ship that took me across the sea, paying us no mind. And the serpents nesting in the seagrass. I've seen much."

"You've been to the Americas?"

"Peru."

Brennan bandaged the cut. "You will send for me should the fever continues," he said.

"Yes, of course."

Brennan retrieved his lantern from the windowsill. Outside, naked men paraded through the dark streets, whipping themselves. Their blood rained on the cobblestones. They chanted, “Asperges me, Domine, Hyssopo, et mundabor: Lavabis me, Et super nivem dealbabor.”

“They are fools,” Rafael said.

“We should all seek the Lord’s mercy.”

Rafael laughed. “There is no penance for the plague. The plague *is* penance.”

Brennan hung his lantern from the crook of his staff. “I will return in the morning. Eat, sleep, drink clean water.” Rafael shooed him away with a pale hand.

In the street, the last flagellant begged Brennan to cane him, but Brennan held to his covenant with the city and passed by in silence. Arriving at the canal, Brennan found Dietmar counting the bodies as they were loaded onto the gondolas to be taken to Lazzaretto Vecchio or Nuovo or even the pits on Poveglia. Brennan heard him murmuring from within his own mask, “Work, work.” Brennan joined him in the counting. Always counting the dead and the soon to be. Each face gone slack, the lips and noses blackening.

Brennan caught Dietmar pause at the body of a young girl. Trembling, Dietmar said, “Are you sleeping, dear one?”

On the Lazzaretto, Brennan left Dietmar to oversee the burial, passing him the cup of Rafael’s blood to go into the pit with the others. “Sleep, my friend,” Dietmar said, and Brennan returned to his cell on the opposite side of the Lazzaretto. In the windowless room, Brennan lit a candle from his lantern. He removed his uniform piece by piece. The hat and boots, the robe, and finally the gloves and mask. The smell hit him, whiffs of the lagoon and something rotten. He dipped his hands into a basin of cold water and washed his face, but the smell wouldn’t go away.

Seeing himself in the water, hair stuck to his wet forehead, sunken eyes, Brennan could not find his youth. He remembered it, but no trace remained visible. In the corner, the mask stared at him.

Brennan thought of the twenty ducats Doge Contarini paid him every month for wearing the mask. The contract: see only the dead and dying, then return to the Lazzaretto and see no one. You will be paid.

Brennan got in bed, looked back at the mask. He blew out the candle.

No Kindness

Dietmar waited for Brennan in the skiff the following morning. Brennan knew it was him despite the clothes they wore. The way he moved, as if he wasn't weighed down by what he was, what he saw. And the blue flowers he stuck in his collar.

Crossing the lagoon, Dietmar asked, "Irländer, have you always been a doctor?"

"What else would I be?"

"You carry the stink of the priesthood." Dietmar reached out with his staff and touched the crucifix hanging from Brennan's neck.

"We all do the Lord's work."

"Perhaps we should do our own?" Dietmar said. "The Lord can take care of himself."

"And what were you?" Brennan asked.

"A drunkard. I sang for thalers."

"And what led you here?"

Dietmar shrugged. "Same as you. Misfortune."

At the mouth of the canal, Brennan and Dietmar parted ways. Brennan headed directly for Rafael's home just off the market. He watched the Venetians scurry out of his path. Mothers pulled their children from the street when he passed. Men drew the blinds or shut the doors to their shops. Even the beggars uncupped their hands at the sight of him. They knew the beak of his mask was a raven's.

Brennan did as he was bid, rapping his staff on the rear door instead of the front. Rafael's servant Belia opened the door and hurried him in, holding a washcloth across her face.

"The Señor is not well," she said.

"His fever?"

“Yes, but pain now in the neck.” Her blue eyes watered, and for a moment Brennan forgot the plague.

Ailbe. Her eyes were blue as well. He remembered. “Let’s catch Fintan,” she had said when they were children. “If we eat his flesh, we’ll be wise like him.” They would hike out to the mouth of Lough Foyle with the old rods and nets her father could no longer use. They never caught anything, impatient as they were, and would climb amongst the mossy rocks hiding from each other. But when they returned, Ailbe’s father always had smoked salmon for them. Eating the orange flesh, Brennan felt no wiser, but happier.

“Medico,” Belia said, “this way.”

Rafael’s sheets were soaked with sweat. “Belia, the Señor will need new sheets. Do not touch these. I will take them.” Belia paled and left.

“I will be the death of her,” Rafael said.

“It is not certain.”

“I will release her.”

“She said you’ve been pained.”

“Yes, in the neck.”

Brennan examined Rafael’s neck without touching but couldn’t discern anything. Gently, he pressed with his gloved fingers. He felt fluid building under the skin. “A bubo will form,” Brennan said.

“And what will you do?”

“There are a number of treatments.”

“Do any work?”

“If the Lord wills it.”

“You would have me beg.” Rafael said. “Tell me, how many Egyptian mothers begged for their firstborn to come back to them?”

Belia returned with fresh sheets. Placing them on Rafael’s desk, she said, “I will return soon to change the sheets.”

“You will not,” Rafael said.

“Señor?”

“Take some paper, and write every word I say,” Rafael instructed. Belia dipped a quill in the inkwell. “Signor Crivelli, I have released my servant Belia from my service. She is diligent and kind. Please accept her into yours. Humbly, Rafael Aurelio.”

“Señor?”

“Use the wax and seal.”

Belia’s hand shook as she melted the wax and stamped it with Rafael’s seal.

“And your pay,” Rafael said, pointing to a gilded box on the desk. “Take what’s in there.” Belia cracked open the box and looked inside, gasped.

“No, Señor. It is too much.”

“I won’t hear it. Deliver yourself to Crivelli tomorrow morning. Show the men at his Palazzo my seal. They will let you in.”

Belia took the box and held it to her chest. She approached Rafael. Brennan stepped between her and the bed. “You shouldn’t come closer.” She peaked around Brennan’s shoulder, looking down at her master.

“Thank you,” she said and left.

Brennan turned back to Rafael.

“You think I’m kind,” Rafael said. “That was not kindness.”

“What was it?”

“Only necessary.”

Brennan nodded. “I’ll return in the morning, if not the evening. We’ll proceed from there.” He collected the sheets and made his way from the house. Exiting the back, Brennan found Belia.

“Medico,” she said. “You will save him, yes?”

“I will try.”

“He is good, despite what he says.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Brennan said. “Good or bad, I will try.”

“Deus te benedicat,” Belia said and turned to leave.

“Belia, I have something for you.” Brennan reached into his satchel and pulled out a vial.

“Take this.”

“Am I sick too?”

“Not that I can see, and this will keep it that way.”

“What is it?”

“Four thieves vinegar. Rub it on your hands, ears, and temples. It will keep the bad air away.” Belia took the vial and looked up at him. No, at the mask. But she tried, those blue eyes trying to see through the apertures. The raven stared back at her.

“Put it on now. Your hands, your ears, your temples.”

All Waters

Brennan sat on the dock at the Lazzaretto. Twilight swarmed the lagoon, the smoke from Poveglia drifting up through the fading red. Footsteps on the planks behind him. A corpse sat down beside him. No, a man. A leper.

“The Doge would not favor this,” Brennan said.

“You think the Doge gives a shit about us on this island, beak doctor?”

“I suppose not.”

“What’s your name? Huginn? Muninn, perhaps?”

“Brennan.”

“Irish, hmm,” the leper said. “A pensive, Irish, beak doctor.” Under the soiled bandages, the leper’s eyes narrowed. “Aren’t you going to ask my name?”

“Of course,” Brennan said. “And your name?”

“Lazarus,” the leper said, cackling. Brennan groaned. “Ah, what? The Almighty can’t take a bit of sacrilege? A dash of heresy? Poor Omnipotence.”

“Your real name?”

“Gregers.”

“What brought you here? Other than...”

“Yes, other than the corruption of my soul. Eels.”

“Eels?” Brennan looked down at the water. When the sun went down, all waters looked alike. The Foyle, the lagoon, the Adriatic, the North Sea, the Atlantic, all black and undulating. Depths that could not be fathomed.

“You were a fisherman?”

“No, more of a merchant,” Gregers said. “Elver from Spain, pond eels from Sardinia, smoked eel from Jutland, and the most prized: eelskin leather. The point is I keep my feet on dryland when I can.”

“And now you’re here.”

“No one will buy eel from a leper.”

In his room, Brennan peels off the mask, and the smell hits him again. Less salt water, more rot. He buries his hand into the beak, taking out the browning herbs. Dietmar had recommended taking a sponge and soaking it in the four thieves vinegar, so Brennan did and stuffed the dripping sponge into the point of the beak, covering it with what remained of his supplies. Rose petals plucked from Bordeaux the spring before, Corsican mint. Lavender, the purple rows Ailbe and he ran through, hid in. They were no longer children. The color, the smell, the same.

And the juniper. Green fronds, spiky, conical, pressed in a jar amid the squashed blue berries. But the juniper never smelled like it should. Not fresh like a cold morning he knew would grow warmer. Brennan only smelled it burning. His first home on fire, with the rest of the homes in that first Derry. The firelight, the only light, orange against the black. The men that burned his home had said, “You are fortunate. We could have—should have—killed you all.” And they were right. Within a year, Brennan and his family had rekindled their lives in Limavady. Within a year, those men were dead. And yet...

A knock at the door. “Yes,” Brennan called, and Dietmar’s voice answered.

“Supper and a gift,” he said. “I’ll leave it outside.”

“My thanks.”

Brennan cracked open the door and peaked out. A bowl of broth, corn, kidney beans, and tomato steamed on a tray. A bottle of wine next to it. Down the torch lit hallway, a young man like himself—brown hair and a ruddy complexion—smiled.

“Eat, my friend.”

He saw the broth, felt the warmth of it, but couldn’t taste it. Not even the wine. None of it. When the bowl and bottle were empty, he still felt hungry. He drifted to sleep, smoke in his nostrils, salmon on his tongue.

Lanterns

The bubo on Rafael's neck had swollen to the size of an egg. His fever persisted, body racked with chills and spasms. Even behind the mask, Brennan kept his distance.

"I've deserved this," Rafael said. "We killed the sun itself, for silver. We killed the sun one person at a time. With sword, arquebus, and plague. Measles, pox. So many died sick. Their armies never stood a chance."

"The sun rises every day," Brennan said. "You haven't killed it."

"Shut up."

Brennan opened his satchel and pulled out a hen's feather and a jar of leeches. "You have a choice," he said.

"You're joking."

"The sun will rise. Do you want to see it?"

"You won't be stabbing me with a damned feather."

Brennan plucked a leech from the jar. He dropped the squirmer into Rafael's hand.

"Directly on the bubo," he said.

Rafael tilted his head to the side and placed the leech as directed. He winced as it took hold. "When we crossed the jungle into the Peru, we saw such beasts. Serpents longer than canoes, fish that shred ducks in seconds. Wondrous creatures. But these? Only a nuisance."

"This one might save you."

"God's lesson in humility: Don Rafael Aurelio saved by a bloodsucking worm."

"The Lord works—"

"Don't say it," Rafael said. "His works are anything but mysterious."

Brennan waited for the skiff to ferry him back to the Lazzaretto. There were too many bodies to carry him as well. He watched the hell-glow on Poveglia rise.

A mad cackle meandered from an alley just off the canal. “Hello?” Brennan called into the dark. A tall man in a priest’s robes emerged from the alley. He showed none of the signs of plague: buboes, decaying flesh at the fingertips or nose. But he had clawed at himself, the fresh wounds from his fingernails marring his cheeks, his hair ripped from the scalp.

“Beak doctor,” he said with a grin. He opened his arms wide. “One of my flock.”

“Father, you mustn’t come near.”

He cackled. “Do you not know me? Can you not see?” The priest sprang forward and snatched Brennan’s lantern from his staff. Looking into the light, the priest said, “Such a pretty thing.” His torn face was more of a veil, his eyes sunken deep, skull-like, teeth wobbly, dirty, or missing. “You see me now?”

“Father?”

“Beware of tricksters,” the priest said, dropping the lantern. Glass shattering. Candlelight gone. The din of the city crept in on Brennan. Singing—even nearing Midwinter—in the tavern down the street, bells at midnight. The priest whispered in Brennan’s ear, “You’ve always known me. Not your father, but *the* father. Donn, you’ve called me. My home, Tech Duinn. You know it.”

Frozen, Brennan thought of the gray rock off the southern coast of Eire. He had called it Bull Rock like the other young folk. But not the elders. They called it Tech Duinn, house of Donn, house of the dark one.

The priest’s laughter echoed around him, and Brennan lashed out with his staff, striking nothing.

In his room on the Lazzaretto, Brennan carved a face into a turnip. Eyes like crescent moons and the priest's smiling face, teeth. Ailbe had said that Mischief Night so many years ago: "A turnip lantern keeps the Good Folk away."

Brennan barely slept the night before, and he only wanted to doze off in the skiff crossing the lagoon, but Dietmar wouldn't stop yammering. "What happened to your lantern?" he asked.

"I dropped it."

"Careless," Dietmar said, clicking his tongue. "That turnip will not give you enough light."

"The Lord provides," Brennan said.

"Indeed, but it is Midwinter. Today there will be darkness."

Brennan looked out over the lagoon's gray, choppy waters. A cold, north wind blew in clouds. Rain would follow, perhaps snow at night. The veil between worlds was still thin on Midwinter, the sun hiding in the sky. Candlelight glinted out of the windows of the city, yellowing the pale light of morning. But not every window.

Dietmar whistled a jaunty tune from beneath his mask.

"Must you?"

"What?" Dietmar said.

"You whistle as if people are not dying, as if the bodies aren't burned nightly."

"And I'm supposed to be troubled by that?" Dietmar said. "We all die. You will. I will. Our families, our lovers."

"You have peace with *that*?"

“Of course. You don’t?”

Brennan couldn’t muster words. He only looked to his crucifix, clutched it in his hand. He prayed wordlessly. *Nam et si ambulavero in medio umbrae mortis non timebo mala quoniam tu mecum es virga tua et baculus tuus ipsa me consolata sunt.*

“Irländer, you are a doctor. You must be at peace with death. Or how could you set out to do this?”

“You know. You saw me in Bedlam. I would have done anything to get out. Anything was better than those walls.”

“And after you are done here?” Dietmar said. “After the plague has gone, what will you do?”

“I would go home,” Brennan said. It was easier than he thought, the lie just falling out of him. Home did not exist anymore, but he could still see it. The blue-gray waters of the Lough surrounded by green hills. The warmth of a hearth, juniper burning. The lavender farms to the south. Salmon. Ailbe. Wouldn’t it have been enough to fish with her for the rest of his life?

“Anyone waiting for you?”

“No.”

Dietmar sighed. “The lady stands alone,” he said. Brennan nodded, his mask looking up at him from the sick green water of the canal.

Midwinter

Brennan gave Rafael another leech. The initial bubo had stopped growing, but others had formed on his groin. “Perhaps I should try the feather this time,” Brennan said.

“There’s no need,” Rafael said. His breath was shallow, eyes barely open. “Just talk, doctor. I don’t get much conversation these days.” He tried to chuckle, but the pain was too much.

“What would you have me say?”

“That’s not how conversation works,” Rafael said, sighing. “I’ll start.” Rafael dragged himself into a sitting position in the bed. “I knew a man in Peru, a native. Native, heh. The first thing I called him was ‘Savage.’ He called himself Apacheta. He would have hated this place. I can see it every day through that window. The smoke. Apacheta’s people believed that the dead should not be burned. The camaquen, as he said, would disappear. How many more of his people died because they did not burn the bodies of the sick?”

“They worshipped false idols,” Brennan said, and Rafael threw his cup of water at him.

“Don’t talk to me about false idols. What of your turnip there? Did Christ ordain its light?” Rafael slumped. “I heard the Doge vowed to construct a church in honor of the Virgin Mary once the plague has run its course. We all cling to idols. Some are made of marble, others turnips.”

“What happened to Apacheta?”

Rafael looked out the window. The sun descended between the stone towers of the city, the clouds turning orange. “He went the way most did, ridden with pox. They wrapped him in leather like the nobles, and left him in a cave overlooking Vilcabamba.”

“Sounds beautiful.”

Rafael laughed. “Yes, but I don’t think Apacheta would have cared so long as he wasn’t burned. He said he had never been lost. Always knew the path he was on. The path to the other world would be no different.”

Evening bells rang from the basilica. “I should go,” Brennan said, but Rafael grabbed his gloved wrist.

“When it’s my time, before you throw me in the burning pits, put a piece of silver in my mouth for Charon.” Rafael laughed. “I spent my life for silver, fought for it across the sea. Only fitting that it should ferry me away.”

Snow fell after the sun went down. Brennan crossed the city by only the light of the jack o’ lantern. His breath frosted the apertures of his mask. It seemed that he walked through a fog. For a while he only heard the clicking of his boots on the cobblestones of the empty streets. Then drumming, a steady, slow beat growing louder, closer. He turned, an orange glow in the fog. Torches, hundreds of them held by masked citizens dressed in the clothes of his home. They too wore masks, golden and varied. At the head of the procession, their leader in a wolf skin coat, raven’s feathers hanging from her sleeves.

And more followed. Spirits. The Good Folk all passing him by, dropping gifts at his feet. Hazelnuts, feathers, and one silver denarius.

In his room, Brennan placed the silver denarius between his teeth and bit down. He’d seen his father do this with gold coins. He bit until his teeth hurt. The coin was real. He supposed there was no reason to chew on the feather or hazelnut. He stared at the three of them on the table in front of his cold soup. Sleep fled from him, his mind turning over and over. The smells.

Salt and rotting seagrass in the morning, then juniper, burnt. And lavender. All day those things, not smelling what he should be smelling. The sweat, blood, and bile. The smoke, knowing what is burning.

And yet...

The snapping of wolf jaws.

Brennan put the denarius in his mouth, resting it on his tongue. He told himself, this is what it feels like, smooth worn silver, the face of a long dead Caesar. Render unto... He told himself, this is what it tastes like.

Misfortune and Folly

The pale sun rose, and seeing the snow, Brennan thought it was ash. But ash doesn't crunch under boots, only turns from flakes to powder, crumbling finer until it was hardly a thing at all.

The skiff was late, so Brennan sat in the courtyard between the leper-house and the rooms provided for the doctors. Sitting under a bare tree, he hoped to see Gregers again. To talk to anyone. He felt the sickness in his soul, and for once he was grateful for the mask. What used to hide himself, now hid his shame. Without the mask, everyone would see his melancholy.

He thought that perhaps Rafael was right. That the plague was penance. Perhaps they were all sick, doomed.

The plague sealed without, melancholy within.

When the skiff arrived, Brennan and Dietmar boarded. Dietmar was not himself, his head hung low. "Where did your flowers go?" Brennan asked, pointing to Dietmar's collar.

"I do not wear them every day," he said.

"What is troubling you?"

Dietmar sighed. "I never told you of my misfortune. I've been a drunkard. A sin, but not a crime. I have only one crime. I used to sing with a lute player. Mannfred, a man with genius in his fingers. We quarreled one night at a tavern by the Danube. I pushed him in, drunk as I was. I don't know if it was the current, or the drinks he'd had, or some beast from the depths, but he never came back up. I only saw his lute sailing downstream."

"You didn't mean for him to drown."

“No. I can’t remember what we fought about. The bill? A song? A woman? The tavern keeper wanted to have me hung, so I fled.”

“The Lord knows it was not your intent.”

“The Lord,” Dietmar laughed. “The Lord is nothing. I prefer gods with the capacity for vengeance. The God the pope prays to has no character. Wotan though. He has character. Feels like us. The Lord, he is empty.”

They disembarked, and Brennan watched Dietmar’s tall figure turn down an alleyway. Down the street, a priest hobbled along. When Brennan passed him, he noticed the bandages covering his face. The priest turned towards him, but Brennan hurried away.

Rafael murmured, “There’s a fog coming. Bad air. I can feel it.” He shook continually, the buboes aching and not subsiding. Brennan wondered if they would burn so many, that the whole city would be submerged in the smoke.

“You will have to keep your windows shut,” he said.

“I like to hear their voices,” Rafael said. “The gutter children. They keep playing regardless of the filth and air.” Rafael threw a handful of ducats out the open window, and a cheer lofted up before Brennan closed it.

“The cold and the bad air will thicken your blood. The buboes will grow.”

“Doesn’t matter. I know what it means,” he said. “Would you tell me something?”

“Of course.”

“How many do you save?” The question that always came towards the end, whether the patient regarded themselves as among those to be saved or not. How many Venetians looked down from their homes at the bodies of their neighbors being loaded into the gondolas and

skiffs? How many walked in the market, and didn't see the beggar at the corner they always gave a crust of bread, or the drunkard staring red-faced out of the tavern window, the merchant whose stall is now empty, the kind guard who refused to carry his halberd? Would they know? Of course, and yet the disappearances continued, and they all became used to the market crowd shriveling away.

“Few.”

Rafael nodded. “I guessed. Thank you for your honesty.” With a shudder, he rolled over in the bed, turning his back to Brennan. “Come tomorrow, but leave me for now.”

In the pale light of evening, Brennan saw the ashes floating in the lagoon, the way they would sit like little rafts then break apart and sift down, taken. The skiff's boatwoman, Barcaruola, let her dour look fade. She said, “Your friend showed me his face today.”

“He did?”

“I know he isn't supposed to—”

“He could catch the plague.” Dietmar knew better, Brennan thought. “He was a fool.”

Barcaruola's face soured. “Let him breathe. I've seen all kinds on this boat. He is a good man, but you...”

Brennan's head snapped up. “Yes, what am I?”

“Troubled,” she said. “Your friend should not wear the mask. It does not suit him. You should.” She tried to look through the apertures. “Are you young like him?”

“Not as young, but yes.”

“Yet, you wear that horrible mask. Like a raven. Picking at the dying in their last days. Counting, burning their bodies. It won't be long until you will take off your mask to find that

your nose has grown long and sharp. Your eyes will turn yellow, black feathers sprouting from your neck.”

In the water, Brennan saw gray faces, eyes open and unseeing. Faces everywhere.

At the dock, Brennan flipped Barcaruola a ducat and went to his room. He took off the mask and looked in the basin. A face in the water. No beak. Not yet. But the creases around the face—his face—where the mask had bit into his flesh all day.

After he'd washed his knife, Brennan stripped out of the waxed canvas robe, the gloves. Melancholy, rooted in the spleen's black bile, could be bled, Brennan remembered. He looked at his left hand, the large vein that ran across the back of it and between the first two knuckles. Brennan looked to the knife, but to travel the city, seeing the dying with an open wound. Another way for the sickness to take him.

The blade slid into the vein, a searing. But he forgot a cup to catch the blood, so he bled into the basin, the red swirling, mingling with the water. His hand hung over the rim, he closed his eyes. Only the warm between his fingers, the bile going out.

When it was time, he bandaged his wound, wrapping a strip of clean linen around his hand. The water was a cloudy pink. Not the blackened, rotting mere he'd expected.

He slept.

Storm

Brennan woke late, a pounding on his door. The porter's voice said, "Medico, come quick."

"You know the contract," Brennan said.

"Yes, but your friend. He has fallen ill."

"Dietmar? And he sent for me?"

"Yes."

Brennan delayed no longer. Out of bed and under the mask, and still he was not ready to open the door and see the horror on the porter's face. "This way," he said and led Brennan down the hallway. Brennan felt like he was in a mausoleum, the bootsteps echoing off the cold stone. At Dietmar's door, Brennan stopped the porter, saying, "I will go in first and call you if you are needed."

Dietmar laid in bed, his robes, hat, and mask scattered on the floor. The room was destroyed, desk and chair upturned, quills staining in spilled ink, papers everywhere marked in German and in musical notation.

"Irländer," Dietmar said. He shivered from the fever, sweat beading down his forehead, brown hair matted and wet. He offered a wan smile. "Not my best day."

"How long have you known?"

"Since yesterday."

"Don't lie to me."

"You didn't ask how long I've suspected."

"Fool."

"I've never denied it."

Brennan knew there was no reason to investigate how Dietmar had contracted the illness. He could only do his best for Dietmar. Hope and pray. His anger cooled, a hand releasing his heart. “Buboes?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you wish to be bled?”

“I can do it,” Dietmar said. “Will you have my robes burned?”

“I’ll see to it.” Brennan cradled Dietmar’s uniform in his arms and turned to leave. Yet, something caught in his throat. He looked back. Dietmar fought to smile. “I’ll bring you your meals.”

“Of course. Go now. You have others to see.”

Brennan left, shutting the door behind him. The porter had waited outside the whole time.

“Is it—”

“Yes,” Brennan said. “No one is to enter his room other than me. Leave his meals or anything else with me.”

At the dock, Barcaruola waited on her skiff. Seeing her, Brennan said, “We must hurry.”

“Yes, a storm is coming,” she said pointing to the southeast. Dark thunderheads lumbered from the sea, skirted by fog. “And your friend?”

“He will not be coming.”

A blind man sat at the back door of Rafael’s home. Grayhaired, wearing rags, an empty bowl in his hands, and cradling his staff against his shoulder.

“Who are you?” the blind man asked.

“A doctor. Here to see Rafael.”

“A beak doctor?”

“Yes.”

“I smell it on you.” The man’s head sunk. “Explains why Belia won’t come to the door.”

“Rafael released her into Signor Crivelli’s service.”

“That’s good. I doubt you will let me talk to my old friend.”

“I will not.”

The blind man stood. “Tell Rafael that he need not worry about me any longer, and that the troubles will pass.” He set off down to the market, staff guiding him, bowl held out to passersby.

Upstairs, Rafael gripped the bedsheets, his knuckles going white. His fever had grown worse, aches and spasms shaking him. At the sight of Brennan, he groaned. “It will not be long,” he said. “Better you tend to those that need you.”

“I have a mandate: to help until the end.”

“Relentless,” Rafael said, rolling his eyes. “Tell me, who was bashing my door in?”

“A blind beggar. Claimed to be an old friend. Knew Belia.”

“Yes, he is her father.”

“He wanted me to tell you that you need not worry about him, that the troubles will pass.”

“He knows then?” Rafael said. “That I’m dying.”

“Yes.”

“You must do something for me, beak doctor.” He winced as he sat up, his eyes bleary, yet insistent. “Find him, and keep him safe. He is a dear friend, and deserves none of the ill that has fallen upon him.”

“Where would I find him?”

“Belia knows. Take some money—however much—and my ring. Show her the signet, and she will know. Use the money for his care. Please.” Brennan did as he was bidden.

“What trouble is your friend in?”

“I will not say. Tiresias will tell you if he chooses. If you want no part of this, just give my ring and the money to Belia.”

“I will do at least that.”

“Hurry. Tell me if you found him when you come tomorrow.” Niall wanted to speak, to say that he had other patients, but Rafael said, “What are you waiting for? Go.”

In the market, the Venetians fled Brennan and his mask, the crowd parting into a corridor. There would be no way to find Tiresias or Belia in his uniform, walking around like death itself. But the skiff would not return until the evening, and people were dying. Brennan tucked Rafael’s money and seal into his satchel and set out to finish his rounds.

By nightfall, the fog arrived. Clouds of ghostly air hiding in the lancet arches of the buildings, cobblestones wet, the smell of rotting seagrass blew in from the Mediterranean, thunder drawing closer. The Venetians heading home or to the taverns hurried in the streets, paying him no mind. They shut doors behind them, drew the curtains, and hid. Even the watchmen and Doge’s guard abandoned their patrols, wanting only to hold their wives and children tight.

At the skiff, Barcaruola cursed him when he arrived. “We must go,” she said, untying the skiff from the dock. The storm arrived as they crossed the lagoon, the water rough and washing

into the skiff. A freezing rain fell, and lightning cracked all around them. The mast, rudder, and sails groaned against the wind, and Barcaruola shouted through it, “I should have left you.”

Brennan bailed water with a soup bowl while Barcaruola tried to keep the skiff from being torn apart. Brennan bailed and whispered to himself, “Manannán, make me a salmon. Make a salmon.” Fintan survived the flood by turning into a salmon even after his wives and children drowned.

A thunderclap, and a bolt of lightning struck the lagoon, the pale green of the sea illuminated. The spectral shadows of the creatures in the depths, the whales and serpents, tendrilled things of unspeakable horror, and the fish great and small. Barcaruola screamed at the sight. In the storm clouds too, riders marched in a spectral procession, lit by lightning. Thunder the call of their horns. Brennan froze, feeling the spin of a gyre in his heart, that descent into the cold depths.

The hanging lantern tore from the prow, and they were shrouded in the dark, the wind and water. Barcaruola turned the skiff to face the brazier that was kept lit during storms on the Lazzaretto. And yet the waves battered the skiff, and Brennan continued to bail. “Make me a salmon. Make me a salmon.”

Barcaruola missed the dock, instead burying the skiff into the rocky beach. Pelted by rain, they anchored the skiff to a boulder. In the doctors’ building, Brennan said, “I’ll find the porter. He will set a room for you tonight.” Barcaruola nodded, looking weary. “Understand: you will remain in your room. This is a Lazzaretto. There are beak doctors here, lepers. Too much contact could end your life. Do you understand?”

“I will stay in my room.”

“Good.”

Brennan found the porter in the kitchen. “Medico, you should not be here,” he said.

“True, but I have a task for you,” Brennan said, placing one of his ducats on the table.

The porter shoved the silver in his pocket.

“What would you have me do?”

“The boatwoman, Barcaruola is in the foyer. Make her a room for the night, and stay outside her room all night. See to her needs. Make sure she doesn’t leave her room. There will be more silver for you in the morning.”

“Yes, medico.”

Outside his room, Brennan found bowls of soup for both him and Dietmar. His friend was already asleep, but he left his bowl next to his bed. In his room, Brennan peeled off his sopping uniform, laying them out to dry. The herbs in his mask made a soaked mash. Brennan could only smell the sea on them. He replaced them from his stores. Eating his cold soup, Brennan looked up at his staff and the jack o’ lantern hanging from the crook. The candle had been doused by the storm, but Brennan still saw the carved turnip—just starting to rot—and the mouth now sagging open in what he thought could only be the scream of death.

Brennan took the basin, desperate to wash the image from his face. He dipped his hands into the water and saw the pink stain of his blood. He wanted to scream. What hell had come to the world? Would the Lord not save them? After the storm, Brennan didn’t have the strength to bleed himself. His hair still wet, he went to bed, the din of thunder surrounding him, the shadows of creatures unknown haunting his thoughts.

Two Ravens

The storm blew out the fog, but the clouds still hung gray over the lagoon. That morning, Brennan dug a small pit and dropped Dietmar's robes, gloves, and mask inside. He poured oil over the clothes and burned them. He let Barcaruola leave her room to repair the skiff, knowing he could not be away from the city long. She scrutinized the battered hull for some time, patching the cracks from the collision.

When the clothes were nothing but ash, Barcaruola approached Brennan and said, "I can get you across the lagoon." She looked weary, pale.

"My thanks," Brennan said. "Will you continue to ferry for us?"

"I will think on it."

"Very well. I will gather my supplies."

On the way to his room, Brennan checked on Dietmar who sat up in bed, scribbling verse on paper with a devilish madness. Drops of ink marred the bedsheets.

"How are you feeling, friend?"

Dietmar didn't look up from his writing. "I saw something last night." Sweat poured out of him, dripping onto the paper, mingling with the ink.

"Your fever has progressed."

"Of course. It will kill me," Dietmar said, finally looking up.

"We will see."

Dietmar shook his head. "You aren't listening. My death is coming. I saw it."

"I don't understand."

"I dreamt that I rode with Wotan on the hunt. We rode over the world, and his ravens flew over us, his wolves at our sides. There were many of us, carrying the tools of our trades.

Broken spears, the huntsmen gored by slain boars. And me, I had no voice, and the inkwell was dry. Manfred rode ahead of me, trying to mend the strings of a broken lute. I saw the city, the lagoon below us through the haze and Donar's light." Dietmar resumed scribbling. "I have to write it down while I can."

"Dietmar."

He froze. "Don't say my name while you wear that thing."

A silence hung in the room until Dietmar's quill again scratched at the paper.

"I'll leave you be."

Brennan gathered his supplies, realizing he'd not carved a new turnip. He didn't have time now, knowing Barcaruola wanted to be off the Lazzaretto. He would have to go without a lantern, and take an offering for the Good Folk. He tucked the hawk's feather, a hazelnut, and the silver denarius into his satchel and left for the skiff.

Barcaruola dropped him at the mouth of the canal. Brennan knew she was keen to get home, to see the children she'd often spoken of, but before she left Brennan asked, "Where's Signor Crivelli's Palazzo?"

"On the north end of the city. Take a gondola. It will be faster than walking."

"Thank you. Be well," Brennan said.

He made his way along the streets, still soaked and glistening. The damp air carried the chill of winter, and Brennan's robes hadn't dried. Before heading to Crivelli's Palazzo, he would stop and check on Rafael, tell him that he was on his way to see Belia, and change out of his robes and mask. The Palazzo's guards would only admit a beak doctor if there was evidence of the plague, and there had been no reports from the immediate area yet.

Brennan came to the rear entrance as usual, but a rustle of feathers above him caught his attention. A single raven perched above the door, a shining ducat in its beak. The two regarded each other, the beady eyes and apertures, beaks of bone and leather. Brennan eased away from the door. The raven showed no fear, did not flap away into the sky. “Away,” he said, waving his staff at the bird. The raven retreated enough for Brennan to enter the house.

Rafael’s home sat quiet and cold, a draft coming from his room upstairs. The door and bedside window had been propped open, cold air blowing in. Rafael was dead, his mouth hanging open, eyes wide yet unseeing. His bedsheets were soaked from the rain that had blown in through the window. Ducats littered the floor beneath his bed and window sill. Brennan knew he must have been casting them down into the street for the paupers.

Brennan’s mask fogged. Rafael’s face wouldn’t leave him. He did what he could: closed Rafael’s eyes and—remembering the Spaniard’s wishes—placed the found denarius on his tongue. Brennan crossed his friend’s arms.

Shutting the door behind him, Brennan descended the stairs into the house’s foyer. There he removed his mask. A drizzle fell outside, skies still gray, yet weakening.

It felt odd to look at Rafael’s house without the mask, and how open and hollow it seemed. But echoes lingered. How could he not hear them, the whispers of what was, of who once lived, and yet he still felt the straps of the mask pinching against the back of his head, pulling at his hair.