

Harbinger

Emrys huffed as he hauled the netting over the side of the boat, letting it slap wetly onto the deck, no catch in sight once again. They'd been on the water for hours, rocking gently on the waves, and only had fifty or so fish to show for it. Not enough to pay the entire crew even a quarter of their usual income. He worried the captain would let some of them go soon.

Wiping away the salty spray from his brow with the back of his hand, he resigned himself to give up for the day. With any luck, his stubborn captain would agree. He made his way to where Byrne sat on a crate, staring out over the water, a far-off look in his deep-set eyes, nearly hidden under his furrowed brows.

“Ler seems to have somethin’ against us this season, eh, Emrys?” Byrne grumbled, spitting onto the deck. Emrys stepped back lightly to avoid it seeping into the cracks of his boots, suppressing a grimace.

“I wouldn’t accuse the sea, Captain. Not as long as we’re in his territory.” Emrys didn’t know much about the gods specific to this area, having grown up in a small commune in the Midvein highlands before leaving to Westport when he turned seventeen. His people had never spoken much of the ocean, focusing instead on the gods of life and death, but everyone who had any knowledge of the oceans had heard of the gods that embodied them. Ler was one of the more significant ones, his influence known to everyone who worshipped gods. You would have to be a fool to insult him.

Byrne barked out a harsh, humorless laugh and jumped down from his perch, landing solidly on the slick deck. He walked past Emrys, slapping him on the shoulder roughly. Emrys’s knees buckled under the force of it.

“You’re too uptight, lad.” He paused, squinting at the darkening clouds. “Let’s head to shore. I’m sick of bein’ out in this drizzle and it looks like it’ll only get worse.”

Emrys silently thanked whatever deity put the thought into his captain's head, grateful that he didn't have to make the suggestion himself, and went to inform the other crew who were slouching lazily over the rails, looking down into the murky waters. Once they heard they would finally be headed home, the crew snapped to attention. They did their work with more efficiency than they'd shown all day.

The rain fell harder as they made their way back to land, and everyone was eager to dock and hole up in the tavern to warm the chill in their bones. They always invited Emrys along, and he always declined. Sitting in a dim, dingy bar while old men laughed obnoxiously and flirted with the serving girls wasn't his idea of a good time. He preferred the quiet of his living room, with the only noise being the crackle from the fireplace and the turning of the page of a good book.

The ship bumped lightly against the dark wood of the dock and two of the crew jumped off, tying the boat off to keep it from drifting away with the tide.

After departing the deck and bidding the crew goodnight, Emrys made his way through the village street, burying his chin further into his cloak to block out the cold rain. The downpour turned the walkways into a soggy mess and drops of water blinded his vision. His boots were old and he could feel the water seeping through the cracks, soaking his socks even more than the day at sea had. Emrys hoped they made some real money soon. These shoes wouldn't last much longer, and he didn't have another pair. Not to mention the snowy season was coming; Autumn making the air crisper with each passing day.

His cabin sat outside the main cluster of homes and buildings, up on a small hill. It was old and abandoned when he bought it cheap, and he'd been fixing it up whenever he had an afternoon to spare. The path leading up to his house was in rough shape as well. Dips in the dirt,

broken stone and pieces of old fence posts made it difficult for any cart or carriage to pass through. Emrys loved it thought. It was quiet and soothing, something he hadn't had growing up.

He stepped up to his front door, grabbing for his key, but paused. The door was already open, just a crack, hardly noticeable. Switching his hand from his key to his knife, he pushed it open further with the toe of his shoe. It was dark and quiet inside. No sign of life anywhere. He stepped through, wincing as the floorboards creaked under his foot. If anyone was there, they didn't react to the sound.

"Come out now, and I won't hurt you," he called into the dark. There was only silence in response.

His chest constricted and his breathing became shallow. There was a box of matches on the end table by his chair, and a candle next to them. He made his way over slowly, eyes sweeping the room, before grabbing the matchbox and striking one and lighting the candle. The low flicker gave him enough sight to see the room. His heart skipped when his gaze landed on the mantle of the fireplace.

A triquetra was painted, crudely, as if done with a finger, in bright crimson, still wet and dripping slowly. The streaks that rolled down from the circle melded with the three-point knot that wove through it and turned the symbol into a muddy, twisted mess. Emrys was familiar with this symbol for life and death, and seeing it painting so clumsily stirred something in his heart. That sign was important to him, and though he left that life behind, he still held a deep respect for the teachings he grew up with. It was meant to be branded or carved into the tops of doors, not slapped haphazardly into a fireplace.

He shook his head, pushing the mark to the back of his mind, and made his way through the rest of the house, carefully making sure each room and closet were void of intruders.

Whoever had been there had left everything untouched, save the mark of paint that glared at him.

Why break into his home just to paint his people's mark on his mantle? Was this some dumb kid's idea of a prank? It wasn't funny. He scrubbed the mark away with an uncomfortable itch under his skin, and headed to bed. He slept fitfully, waking every hour with red stained on the back of his eyelids.

The mark was there when he woke, and reappeared with each new day. If this *was* the work of children, they were clever and persistent. Or he'd managed to piss off some stray fae and they were having a go at him. Neither thought did anything to ease his growing anxiety.



The rain had been going strong for a week and Emrys's roof had begun to leak. He swore as he tripped over a bucket in the middle of his kitchen, spilling rainwater everywhere. After the day the mark had shown up his luck had been sour. He was out of work due to the storms, so he was left to struggle with his leaking roof, what little food he had left, and his worries.

He'd been having dreams, too. They felt so real, yet he barely remembered them in the few moments after he jolted awake, gasping for breath. Flashes of blood-stained hands, rivers running red, crows pecking at snow covered soil, and a smile that stretched too far across a face played through his mind in disjointed flashes before fading away, forgotten. Even after he woke and shook off any lingering sleepiness, the unease remained.

The rain let up in the late afternoon, finally, and Emrys made his way to town. He really was running low on food, so he dug into his coin stash and began the winding trek to the market. The path down the hillside was muddy, littered with pockets of water that were near impossible to avoid without sloshing through the damp grass, and he nearly slipped several times.

It seemed like most everyone had the same idea, because the streets were packed. He kept his eyes trained mostly on the ground, avoiding the cracks in the cobblestone roads, and murmuring polite apologies when he bumped into someone. Vendors shouted from the popup stalls the lined the sides of the streets and circled the courtyard. Most shop keeps stored their wares at home and set up on the main street on the weekends. Constant necessities held more permanent residence in small connected buildings under apartment homes.

The town was small and dreary compared to the cities Emrys had travelled through on his way to Westport, but it made progress toward betterment with each season. Until recently, the fishing market was booming and Westport was on the rise to becoming a semi-major hub for the trade. If the drought kept up, however, that stance would dwindle and die, something no one wanted.

He was mulling over some potatoes that didn't look too great, but were much better than those of the vendor he'd seen before had to offer, when he felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder. He turned his head to see Byrne by his side, looking weary around the eyes, but with a small smile playing on his lips. He'd let the scruff along his jaw grow into something that was almost the start of a proper beard, peppered gray among brown.

"How's the rain been treatin' ya', kid?" He asked, snatching the potato from Emrys's hand to put in his own basket.

“Like shit, sir.” Emrys sighed, dropped his tensed shoulders. He’d been jumping at shadows all day. Byrne narrowed his eyes, looking at Emrys with a careful expression. The older man was perceptive, and Emrys knew he had caught on to his discomfort.

“Come out with me an’ the boys tonight,” Byrne said suddenly. “Stayin’ cooped up in that ol’ shack of yours ain’t doin’ you no favors.”

Emrys opened his mouth to protest, but then closed it, frowning down at the basket in his hands. Maybe getting away from the mark for a while *would* do him some good. It was all he thought about lately, and he could feel it taking a toll on his health. He needed a change, even for a few hours. He nodded and Byrne slapped his back.

“Atta boy! We’ll be meetin’ at the Blue ‘round supper time.” He payed the vendor and walked down the street until he disappeared into the crowd.

“You gonna buy somethin’ or what?” The question snapped Emrys out of his reverie and he apologized, snatching a few potatoes and handing over some coins.



The Blue Banshee was a dingy, rough tavern on the docks, and the only people who went there were those who worked the shipyard, or came in on the tide to rest and resupply. The floor was sticky with spilled ale, and the air smelled like smoke and sweat. Lanterns lined the wall, infrequent enough to give the room a dark, sullen atmosphere. It felt private with an edge of danger that had Emrys clenching his jaw.

Emrys sat crammed between two of his crewmates who were leaning around him to talking animatedly with each other, ignoring his presence completely. He pressed himself back against the wooden planks of the wall and sipped his drink, grimacing at the sour taste.

Byrne sat across from him, a serving girl resting her hip on his shoulder as he told her about one of the many times he'd almost died at sea. His words were slurred slightly from drinking, and his beard shone with sweat and spit. It was disgusting. Most of the men in the tavern looked similar; past tipsy and making a mess of themselves. Emrys wanted to leave. His palms were clammy and his hands trembled where they were clasped tightly around his mug. He felt trapped, like he was suffocating, and he needed to get out and away from the dank haze of the tavern.

He prepared to excuse himself when the girl said something that caught his attention.

“—coming home to see that... she was so scared you know. An' with Pa gone, she's all alone, so the mark wouldn'ta been for anyone else,” she was saying. Emrys leaned forward, straining to hear over the chatter on either side of him. Byrne patted the girl's hand sympathetically.

“'Tis probably a coincidence.” He nodded solemnly. “Some kids playin' with myths an' all that. She just happened to pass the same night. She *was* up there in age.”

“O'Conner down by the woods died yesterday, too.” The man to Emrys's right interjected. “Went over to check on him just this mornin' and him dead in his sleep.”

“Did he have a markin' too?” The girl asked.

“Red as blood, right on his front door.”

Emrys felt suddenly sick. Death omens were no joke. They had a few in Midvein and his mother spoke of them more than anything else in her bedtime warnings to him. He grew to be

wary of black dogs and pale women in the mist, and to respect the crows because they could communicate with Death, and if you disrespected them, they might put in a bad word. He remembered watching his father carve a triquetra above their door, assuming it to be a blessing, and a ward against evil, though now, thinking back to the one staining his mantel, he wondered if it had other meanings.

When he got older, he was allowed to watch the priests perform their sacrifices. They would slice open the neck of a deer and drain its blood into a bowl. Praying for a year of good health, they painted marks onto their faces, and for the safe passage of those who passed, they drank it too. He'd thrown up the first time he witnessed it, but it got easier to handle over time, though he was never allowed to participate. His mother said he was blessed enough and didn't need the help. She glowed with pride as she said it, and Emrys never understood.

He went to speak, but stopped himself. The mark they were talking about could be completely different from the one in his own living room. If it was the same and he told them about it, they may see him as bad luck, marked by Death but not taken. He'd become a plague. So, Emrys kept his mouth shut and sat back, downing the drink in his hand, and another one after that until he felt his head grow foggy and his vision began to swim and it was easy to pretend that he didn't have anything to worry about.

And hour later, Byrne and Emrys stumbled out of the tavern after saying their goodbyes to the grew and the bar staff. Byrne had his arm around Emrys's shoulders, trying to keep his balance as they swayed down the muddy road towards their homes. He was slurring something and chuckling, but Emrys couldn't make it out. He laughed along anyways.

“Ya' ain't so bad. The crew was a bit wary of ya' at first. But you're just—” Byrne tripped and swore. “You're just uptight.”

Emrys frowned, insulted, and opened his mouth to retort when a bird flew in front of them, flapping its wings in their faces and landing on a cracked fencepost. It looked at them with one black, beady eye, cocking its head to the side and ruffling its slick black feathers.

“Damn crows!” Byrne slurred. He picked up a rock and threw it at the bird, which squawked and took off, flying into the darkness of the nearby forest. Emrys felt angry suddenly. He shoved Byrne’s arm away from him, causing the captain to stumble and fall back, landing on his rear in the mud.

“The hell—!”

“Why would you do that?” Emrys demanded. He felt hot, offended. His hands shook. His calm was slipping and he could feel the anger boil in his blood, but he couldn’t seem to get a handle on his emotions.

“What—? It’s just a bird!” Byrne scrambled to his feet, staggering before finding his balance.

Emrys growled, a low rumble in his chest that was too deep to be natural. It wasn’t just a *bird*. He flexed his hands and felt the joints of his fingers pop. He saw Byrne’s eyes widen in fear, and before he could question why he looked so afraid, Emrys’s mind went blank and he lunged at the captain, wrapping his arms around his waist, and sent them tumbling back into darkness.



He dipped his hands in the freezing water of the river, red washing away downstream. A crow watched from a tree branch and a woman, slender and pale, crouched at his side, helping scrub

the blood away. A body laid next to them on the bank, still and lifeless. The woman tipped her head back and screamed.

Emrys's eyes blinked open slowly. He was home, in his bed, staring up at the stripped wood of his ceiling. He groaned and turned over to bury his face in his pillow, blocking out the morning rays of the sun that streamed through his window. Everything hurt. His head ached and his muscles twinged with pain every time he shifted. The joints of his fingers cracked, sending jolts of pain shooting up his forearms. The strangest thing was the bruises on his knuckles, and scraped across his arms. He had no idea how that could have happened.

Sitting up, he swung his legs out of bed, setting his feet on the cold wooden floor. His vision swam. What happened last night? His memories blurred together until he couldn't pick them apart from each other. Nothing made sense. He knew he went to the tavern, remembered stumbling outside with Byrne and then... nothing. Something tugged at the back of his mind. He was forgetting something important, but nothing came to him. Emrys shook his head. It probably didn't matter anyway.

Outside, the sky was littered with clouds and the day looked promising. Perhaps there would be work available on the dock, or maybe he could try his hand at river fishing. It was the last month that salmon would be swimming up the Avon-Aina. Hopefully he could catch enough to sell and take some home for himself.

Emrys pulled on his jacket and grabbed his fishing gear from the closet by the front door and stepped out into the cool morning air. He took a moment to breathe, closing his eyes and inhaling the fresh air that smelled like grass and soil and life. A low fog rolled over the hills, not thick enough to obstruct his vision, but it gave the scenery a soft, calming look. For a moment he

felt his stress ease. Today could be good. Fishing always helped him slip out of his own anxious mind and into a peaceful lull.

The trees of the Cianna woods were shorter than the ones in Midvein had been, but they were clustered tighter, making the forest dense and dark, and they ran right up to the beach. Patches of light littered the ground where the sunrays managed to peak through the branches, but those were few and far between. No one went there after dark. There were plenty of tall tales spread around to scare the daylights out of anyone who even thought of spending a night in the woods. Most thought they were just myths, but Emrys grew up in forests and had seen fairies and gnomes and once, he even met a naiad kicking her feet in the water of a brook.

Emrys didn't mention these things to his crewmates often, though when he did, they would look at him in wide-eyed wonder. Byrne always said he had a way with spinning stories. Emrys never pressed the truth of them. If the fae didn't exist here, then he wouldn't force the belief on people. Sometimes, they didn't want to be known by humans, and that was fine. It was their business and messing with it could get him in trouble.

He made his way along the trail, stepping over stones and letting twigs snap under his feet as a warning to any creature that he was there, and if they didn't want to be seen they should make themselves scarce. His father taught him that it was respectful to give the fae warnings of your presence by making some kind of noise, and he always kept that in mind when he walked the paths through the Cianna.

He heard the river before he saw it. The sound the water made as it moved was one of Emrys's favorite things, and today the calm trickle of the slow-moving current, interrupted by rocks that peaked above the surface, was exactly what he needed to help his headache and nerves.

Ducking under a branch, he stepped onto the riverbank. There was a stone by the water's edge, and he made to set up there for the day. He crouched down to unlatch the tacklebox, but froze. On the other side of the river, there was a body on the ground, and dozens of crows perching in the branches surrounding the area. They were all still and quiet, not a single feather twitched. Emrys rose slowly and walked into the river. The water reached his hips at the deepest point, but he barely registered the chill. His eyes were trained on the body and the familiarity of it. He recognized those black boots, scuffed from work but still fairly new, the heavy pants tucked into the tops of the shoes to keep the edges from soaking of up water, and the scraggly beard, greying with age.

Byrne's clothes were stained with blood. The shirt on his chest was shredded, showing long, deep gashes that raked down his chest. His neck was ripped out, leaving his head to tilt unnaturally to the side. Byrne's once dark eyes, now clouded over, stared unblinking up at the pale blue sky.

Emrys knelt down, one hand covering his mouth, and ran the other of Byrne's cheek. He looked like he'd been beaten and mauled, but what could have done this? Byrne was a stubborn ass, but no one had anything against him. At least, not that Emrys was aware of. He couldn't remember where Byrne went after they left the tavern the night before. Had he wandered into the woods? But... there was something sickeningly familiar about this; about the scenery and the way Byrne's body was prone in the mud. Emrys's mouth tasted like copper and he jolted as an image flashed into his mind of himself digging his teeth into Byrne's throat, but after flicking his tongue, he realized he'd bitten into his cheek.

A gust of wind rustled the branches, but the crows stayed still, and Emrys's skin crawled. The whole thing was strange. There were so many birds, all blinking down at him. Emrys felt

sick. He pulled his hand away from Byrne's face and squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to stave off the rising nausea in his throat. Everything seemed too loud all of a sudden. The rustling branches above combined with the sound of the water behind him and his own heavy breathing blurred into a single, overwhelming cacophony of *noise*. He took a deep breath and buried his head under his arms. His hands shook violently as he gripped his hair. Then, he felt a shock pulse through his veins, and the world fell silent.

Slowly, he raised his head. Everything was stopped in place. The river was no longer running, a squirrel was frozen mid-jump from one branch to another, and the crows didn't blink. Everything except for Emrys was stuck.

He stood and turned around slowly, and froze when his eyes landed on a banshee, standing in the middle of the river. She was pale with long, tangled hair that dripped down her shoulders and brushed the surface of the water. Her eyes were wide and piercing blue with deep purple bruises under them. She looked exhausted, and her thin white dress blue gently as if brushed by the wind, even though the air was still.

Emrys tried to speak, but his voice caught in his throat. She smiled, and dark liquid oozed from between her crooked teeth, thick and slow like tar and harsh against her white skin. It rolled down her chin and neck, staining her dress and dropping wetly onto the frozen water.

"You can't ignore him forever."

Her lips didn't move, but her voice echoed through his mind, reverberating through his skull. He winced and shut his eyes. When he opened them again, the woman was gone, the world resumed moving, and the crows were nowhere to be found.

Looking down at Byrne's lifeless form, Emrys clenched his hands into fists and felt a cut on his bruised knuckles split open. He didn't like how he felt as though he'd been here before;

how Byrne lying dead on the ground didn't catch him *that* off guard, like he already knew he would be there. Something had happened between them; he could sense it. The bruises on the dead man's face and the matching ones on his hands were enough to suggest he the captain has at least fought before Byrne had been attacked by... whatever it was that left those marks. Emrys couldn't have done it, couldn't have killed him. He would remember something like that.

He should tell someone that the body was there, but they could see his hands and match them with Byrne's injuries. They would blame him. He already faced enough silent scorn and wariness from the villagers since he was foreign. They wouldn't hesitate to pin the murder on him.

Emrys crossed back to the other side of the river and grabbed his gear with trembling hands. The events of the day so far made it difficult to breathe properly. He came out here to calm down, to finally find a moment of peace, but instead he had been confronted with a dead body, weird birds, and a banshee. And then there was what she said. *You can't ignore him forever*. What did she mean? Was it the same person who marked his home? Did they kill Byrne as a warning to Emrys? His head was in a constant state of hurt from the confusion and anxiety that stressed his frazzled mind endlessly.

He walked home in a daze, barely registering when rain began to fall, and plopped down in the chair by his fireplace. His feet were soaked, but he couldn't bring himself to take off his boots to dry them. He sighed and closed his eyes, slouching further into the old lumpy cushions, and rested a hand over his eyes. What a shite day. What a shite *week*.

He didn't move the rest of the day. Not to eat, or to sleep, just sat there and stared at nothing. He didn't even move to restart the fire after the last embers died out and he was left in cold quiet as darkness slowly took over the room. Outside, he heard crows begin to caw, calling

to him. The woman's voice echoed in his thoughts. *You can't ignore him forever.* But he could try. He could lock himself away, ignoring the growing itch under his skin. He was irritable. The *drip, drip, drip* coming from his kitchen as the ceiling leaked set him on edge and he clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth. He'd had enough of being confused and scared and lost, but there wasn't a way out of it, not really.

The fact that he was surrounded by crows and a banshee appeared, as well as the triquetra on his own mantle made it clear that whoever was after him was marked by Death, and had marked Byrne too. It lined up with things his mother had taught him. All her bedtime stories had been centered around death in some way, and pieces fell together in Emrys's mind as he stewed in his thoughts, making the pit in his stomach grow hollower the longer he sat.

When Emrys had announced that he planned to leave his commune, the elders met with him and offered him anything he wanted if he would stay. There was nothing he wanted more than freedom; they had already given him everything else anyway. He had been raised like he was favored by the gods, cherished and protected and given the greatest care, but he was always being watched. He wasn't allowed to go out on his own, and after the one time he did, he was kept in his families tent under watch for a week. He hated it. Hated having everyone's eyes on him all the time. He especially hated how adoring the people acted. He wasn't any different from the other children and wanted to be left alone. Leaving was the best choice he ever made, but now he was starting to wonder if there was a reason they had kept him locked up. Too many symbols of death had accumulated in his life over the past week to be coincidental.

The first rays of the morning sun streamed through his window and Emrys finally stood, stretching his arms above his head and wincing as his spine let out a series of loud cracks. He

was determined to have a peaceful day, even if it meant locking himself in his home and pretending the world outside didn't exist.

The day passed slowly, again, but Emrys's mood didn't improve. His gums ached, like when he was young and losing teeth. He kept scratching at his forearms until they were red and raw, the itch under his skin was unwavering. His eye twitched incessantly.

A knock sounded on his door and he flinched so violently he shattered the glass in his hand. Shards cut into his skin, but he barely registered the pain as he wrapped it clumsily with a rag while he walked to the door. It was just one more sensation on top of everything else. He wondered if he was getting sick.

He opened the door and raised an eyebrow at the girl standing outside. It was the waitress from the tavern. She was shorter than he recalled and her hair was down, tumbling over her shoulders in delicate waves. Her blue eyes were rimmed red and she chewed on her lip before she spoke.

"Byrne's dead." Her voice was little more than a whisper.

Emrys inhaled sharply. She started to cry again and wrapped his arms tightly around his waist. He stiffened and patted her blonde hair awkwardly. Comforting people was never his strong suit, and considering the circumstances, any comfort he gave would be false. But he couldn't let her know that he already knew Byrne was dead, so he allowed her to sob into his chest and tried to breathe deep and steady his racing heart.

She pulled back eventually, much to Emrys's relief, and frowned.

"What happened to yer hands?"

"I've been fixing my ceiling. It's got a leak." He said hurriedly.

“Not very handy, are you?” She smirked slightly and Emrys huffed out a small laugh in return, shaking his head. Teasing was better than crying, and hopefully, now that she’d passed on the news, she would leave.

“I’m sorry to hear about the captain. I didn’t realize you two were close.”

“Yeah, well...” she trailed off, blushing slightly. “Will ya’ come for the festival tonight? If you’d rather be alone thought, I wouldn’t blame ya’.”

Right. It was *Calan Gaef*, the day they celebrated the dead. He had almost forgotten about it. He didn’t want to be surrounded by so many people. Not when his anxiety was already off the walls and his temper was short, so he told her he’d rather be alone and bid her good night, despite the circumstances.

He shut the door and let his forehead *thunk* against the wood. He just couldn’t catch a break. He was sure if it weren’t for the fact that he had been mauled, someone would question why Byrne looked like he had been in a fight and why Emrys was the last one seen with him. They might come anyway, but Emrys hoped he would get at least one quiet evening to himself before he had to deal with that. He might need to find a new job too...

He growled low in his throat and shoved away from the door. There was too much to deal with. All he wanted was a calm, private life, but what he got was a broken house, a crappy job, and connections to Death that just wouldn’t leave him be. And then there was the constant underlying feeling that he was missing something important. The final piece to the puzzle that when put into place, would make the whole picture clear. His eye twitched again.

He set himself to actually doing what he told the waitress and tried to patch up his kitchen. The sun began to set, casting everything in a soft, pink hue. White noise had filled his ears as he worked, but it was broken by the distant sound of drums and the chanting of the

people, calling out to the spirits. The celebration was starting and he could feel a tug in his gut. It was stranger. He felt like they were calling *him*. But today was for the departed and he was very much alive.

His heart beat heavily in his chest and his skin crawled. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The world was enhanced. Suddenly, he could hear the buzzing of the bugs outside. The dust particles that drifted through the air sent through jolts up his forearms when they landed on them. His breath quickened. He didn't feel right.

Outside, the sky grew dark. He could see the light of the bonfire from the square. He couldn't breathe. He pressed himself against the wall, sinking down until he could bury his face in his knees. He tried to inhale, but it felt choked. What was *happening* to him? Everything hurt, like he was being torn apart.

Something tugged at his heart and he felt the urge to run, to get out of his house and hunt. The joints of his fingers popped and snapped and he stared in wide-eyed fear as the skin broke and his bones grew into long, sharp claws. He tried to scream, but his voice caught in his throat in a strangled gasp. His gums twinged and he tasted blood as it filled his mouth from where bone broke through, shaping into large, sharp canines that hooked over his lower lip. His hands shook violently as he stood, staring down at himself in horror as his bones broke and his joints contorted, breaking through his flesh like paper.

He felt a punch in his gut and doubled over, hacking up blood and bile as his spine shaped itself into a new form. He couldn't stand up straight, and fell on all fours, digging his nails into the floorboards as they extended into sharp claws, leaving gashes on the faded wood. His chest gaped open and blood pooled on the floor beneath him, but among all this, he felt a clouded sense of calm fall over his mind. His panic vanished and his vision cleared, becoming

sharper. Emrys felt like he'd been pushed back into his own mind, experiencing everything secondhand and looking at the world through a lens.

He felt his body move to the open window and he jumped out, landing heavily on the wet grass outside. From his place on the hill, he could see people mingling, bobbing for apples and laughing. Lights pulsed in their chests, bright white and so, so pure. There was nothing there for him. From the forest, he heard the distant sound of a voice calling his name.

Emrys.

He ran, faster than he ever had before. His claws dug into the earth, kicking up mud behind him. He jumped over the river, unnaturally far, past where Byrne's body had lain. His heightened senses made the noises of every animal that slept in their burrow clear, and he could see the fae that hid behind the trees.

The moon was high in the sky by the time he slowed to a stop at the edge of the clearing. At the center, as if waiting for Emrys, stood a man clad in black garments that seemed to absorb the light around him. His cloak nearly dragged the ground, fastened under his chin by a sliver, glimmering triquetra. His face was hidden in darkness under the brim of his hat.

"Come." His voice reverberated through the air, warbling through Emrys's ears. It made his head pound.

Emrys walked forward slowly, almost against his own will, and stopped a few paces away from the man. Now that he was closer, he could see him more clearly. He hovered just barely above the ground. His limbs were slightly too long to be natural. His face was thin and pale, his lips chapped and cracked with dried spots of blood around them. His cheeks were dark hollows under high arches, accentuating his pointed features, but his eyes were stunningly human; pale blue and full of emotion. Emrys realized with a start that he recognized him.

He had come to his commune a few times through Emrys's life, always meeting with the elders in private and leaving as soon as they were done. He never stayed long, and he never talked to anyone outside of the leaders.

Emrys tried to speak, but found his voice broken and he could only let out a low growl. His lips curled into a snarl and drips of drool dropped to the earth.

The man grinned and crossed his legs in the air, hovering, and set his elbow on his knee, resting his cheek on his fist. "I didn't expect you to leave Midvein. You've been a pain to track down, and I'm the Ankou. I'm usually good at finding dead souls like yours."

Emrys growled again. When he first arrived in Westport, he sat at an inn and listened to the bard tell stories to the crowd. He told of an old prince, overconfident and proud, who challenged Death to a hunt. Whoever could kill a black stag first would be indebted to the other. Death agreed and, of course, won, binding the prince to his service as his harbinger and collector. When he had gathered enough souls, he would earn his freedom, but Emrys didn't understand his place in all of that. He didn't even know what he *was*, let alone why the harbinger would be looking for him.

Ankou laughed and hopped lightly to the ground. "Come, we have much to do." He waved his hand and a dark, black hole appeared, suspended in midair.

Emrys felt his body move to follow, but he resisted, digging his heels into the soil. The growling grew deeper as he fought with himself. He wouldn't just go blindly. He had worked hard to gain his independence and he wouldn't sit back and be bossed around by a stranger like some *dog*.

"Don't be so difficult." Ankou scowled and grabbed for the scruff on Emrys's neck.

Emrys snapped at him, and the harbinger jerked his hand away just in time to avoid it being snapped between Emrys's sharp teeth. Ankou's mouth pressed into a thin line, and his eyes grew hard. He slapped Emrys across the face with the back of his hand with surprising strength, sending him to the ground.

Emrys felt his control slip, and he stumbled back to his feet.

"You think you get a say?" Ankou's voice echoed through the forest again, enraged, causing the branches to shake. Emrys could feel the power rippling off of him, and his grip on his own consciousness slipped even more. "You were born for this, *raised* for it. Slauch don't get a say."

Emrys jolted at that word. *Slauch*. They were disgusting creatures, like mutilated dogs that hunted down the old souls of the world, the ones who had evaded death, and devoured their spirits, snuffing them out for good. They didn't even get a chance at redemption in the afterlife. Once a slaugh got you, that was the end.

Emrys felt that thrum in his blood again; an urge to hunt. His conscious was slipping more and more with each passing second. Any chance he had at freedom faded away. Why couldn't he have a say? Had his mother known? His elders? Was he just being raised up to be the slave of this creature in front of him? It wasn't fair. He worked so hard, *so hard*, to have a life of his own, and in seconds it was falling through his fingers like water, all because of some fate that had been thrust upon him and he hadn't even known it. He shook, suppressing the urge to bolt.

"You feel one, don't you?" Ankou grinned, his lips stretching past his eyes and up his cheeks, showing off crooked, rotting teeth. "What are you waiting for? *Fetch*."

Emrys lunged, like a puppet yanked on strings, leaping through the hole and was swallowed by darkness.



The man was old and his soul was withered and rotten. He was walking alone, limping heavily on his cane. Emrys stalked behind him, sticking to the shadows. His jaw twinged, aching to clamp his teeth down into the old man's flesh and dig his soul out of his chest. He was hungry, and his meal was only a few steps away.

He waited until the man turned down a dark street before he pounced. The old man didn't even have time to scream before Emrys's jaws closed around his neck, tearing it out and silencing his voice. He clawed at the man's chest, ripping through the muscle and bone, revealing his heart. His tongue licked around his muzzle and he bit down into it, swallowing the heart and soul.

He felt a presence appear behind him and he turned his head, a growl rising in his throat, but it died when he saw who it was. The harbinger clapped slowly, walking towards Emrys and his prey. It had been weeks since Emrys had begun traveling with Ankou. Every day it became easier to sniff out the expired souls and hunt them down while the harbinger collected those that had just departed, or set warnings for those who would soon pass.

"He'd been avoiding Death for a long time." Ankou nudged the old man's cheek with the toe of his boot. "It's about time he was snuffed from this world."

All Emrys cared about was the chase. He couldn't remember who he had been before this or what he had done, and time blurred together until the days became one with the nights and he couldn't tell how much time had passed.

He hardly remembered meeting Ankou anymore. It seemed like nothing stuck, but it didn't matter, not when he had a job that didn't require memory. But sometimes, when he and the harbinger stopped to rest, he would look out over the scenery and something would tug at the back of his mind. There was a feeling of emptiness inside of him, like he was missing a piece of himself.

Looking out over the sprawling fields of wherever they had made camp, he felt the pull to run. Not to chase or devour, but to experience freedom. Completely unchained and with no duties tying him down. The feeling never lasted long, though, fading away into nothingness, and soon, he forgot there was anything he had wanted at all, other than to hunt.