

l'ani stands outside of the temporary tent he and the rest of the Fianna had set up for the night, making him sit outside to stop any Fay army attackers. *He could never understand how Fionn could always pick a fight with them every decade or so, even his naming conventions weren't as bad as his temper. Seriously naming the band of warriors you brought together 'Brave Warriors' jezz.*

"Boo!," someone behind him yelled directly in his left ear, making him jump, "Ha, gotcha!" Turning around he glared upwards at his older sister smirking at him.

"Can you not do that when I'm on guard duty maybe?"

"Oh, loosen up, I'm stronger than any of the Fay. And you, especially you. So don't go worrying; if they do attack, I'll use you as a meat shield. You'll die an oh, so valiantly death brother," She put her chin on his head.

"Someday, somewhere, someone is going to kill you. And I'll watch, laughing, and I'll only feel sad because it wasn't me," he said, accepting his fate as her headrest.

"Oh don't be so mean and delusional Shorty Mcshortypants. You could never kill me, your arms wouldn't be long enough to hit any vitals. Unless you tried really really hard to get on your tippy toes."

"How are you, my older sister, *older* for crying out loud!"

"Cause I'm better than you," she said in a sing-songy voice

l'ani rolled his eyes and elbowed her in the gut. Making her step back and double over, letting out a groan.

"How's that for my arms being too short."

After recovering she quickly slid her fingers down his back. Making him straighten up and let out a tiny squawk.

Turning around he looked into her eyes with playful malice. And he saw... her eyes hollow. They were hers... the same amber color, the same large red fleck in her right eye. Same face, body, hair, and teeth. But worn all wrong.

Like a mannequin in a suit with every piece a few sizes too small or big. Like a portrait done by a man blind from birth. Like a piece of cloth washed till the color was faded and torn. Like something trying to replicate what it could not understand.

l'ani face dropped, then he said in a cold level tone, "I will kill whichever of The Others hoard you are, that dared to take the face of my sister."

Silence, then, "...That is quite a rude thing to say. l'anikaela."

The illusion dissolves around him like shattering ink. A wide meadow of rolling hills sprawling, ending in a haze. Making a circle a thousand feet or so in diameter. A woman sitting in front of him at a table made of laced-together metal. The woman's entirety made up of shades of white. From the pupils to its hair, its hand's laking nails, and the puffy bell-shaped dress combining with the skin. The two having no start or stop. The Being in front of him letting off a subtle glow.

But centered around is a rot, slowly blackening the grass and turning it into a sludge. Choking the air around it with an invisible smog, and even the sky. A blot in the sky slowly

crawling out, like spilled coagulated ink devouring even the stars. In front of the Black Queen on the table, a butterfly made of sunshine pinned to a quark board.

"Would you mind taking a seat? It would be rather nice of you," it said, taking a sip from an upside-down teacup covered in un-repeating patterns.

"Nah, I don't think so Black Queen."

"Please try to be more civilized than the Purple Piper, please?."

"Please try to be more civilized than the Purple Piper," he said in a mocking tone, "Oh boo hoo. You can die in a fire for all I care-" He blinked and the next thing he knew he was sitting at the table, "What the?"

"Now that we can have a proper conversation-"

"How about no," He stands up going to attack, but then again he blinks, and again he's back in the chair.

"Now are you done throwing your temper tantrum?"

I'ani crosses his arms and huffs.

"Well then, I have come here to bargain with you, dear sir-"

He scoffs.

"For you to personally surrender, in exchange we will not hurt you-"

I'ani outright laughs at that.

"And we will give you this, it is the last stable fragment of your sister's soul we have in possession," It pushes forward the board containing the butterfly made of sunshine, smelling like a child with flowers in its hair.

I'ani stares at it, unmoving.

"Ahem," it said not clearing its throat but saying the word, "In a conversation you must respond I'anikaela. I've recently learned that you don't even need words to do so."

"So... that's my sister, eh."

"Yes, indeed. And if you accept we will give you your sister's soul which you'll be able to regrow into what she once was. And bring up to ten people of your choosing to remain in whatever environment you want as long as you don't try to retaliate-"

It said while I'ani just stared at it, he reached forward, touching the head of the butterfly, murmuring under his breath "I'm... sorry, sis."

"Is that an agreement?"

I'ani stayed silent, unmoving.

Then he launched himself forward. Grabbing it by the hair and slamming its face repeatedly onto the table. Its broken nose un-bleeding

Then he blinked as he was back to the chair.

"I ask you to remain civilized-"

He shoved his fingers in its open mouth, grabbing it by the jaw. Holding the shoulder as he reached over the table and snapping its neck with a turn.

He blinked, back in the seat, "Seas and Stars that's annoying," he snarled. Calling upon all of his Icons and Authority, reduced as it was in the in-between realm.

And reverted time back, *no not time, actions*, he thought to himself. His crown of Authority adorning his head. As he held the limp vessel of the Queen, kicking up the board with

his sister's soul on it. He went to catch it but the Black Queen vessel reached out before him. Teleporting away with it.

I'ani blinked, letting his authority slightly cede to its, the two of them reversing before he kicked the board up. Throwing the Queen's vessel far away, burning a small stream of his life force to keep it paralyzed. Then going to destroy the pin sealing his sister to the board. He strained against it but it wouldn't budge. Letting out a grunt of annoyance he broke off a chunk of his life force, burning it. The flare of power popping the pin right off.

The insect of light and force fluttered into the air, unfurling into the golden ghost of a woman. Her form peppered with holes like she'd been skewered with a dozen spears, wisps of energy like mist dripping and drifting away.

She reached out, putting a hand on his tear-streaked cheek, "I'm... sorry, squirt. They lied to you. There's not enough of me in the universe to bring me back, it was a gambit to try and bind you with your Oath Icon. But I will give you my last gift, my Epitaph," Her eyes glazed over and her mouth moved like it was pre-recorded.

"Grating hate against decaying sentries

Wander one, awaiting broken daylight

Musters armies under Crimson for Faites

Must the holy suns null by the entries-

"Nonooownonfierwbxc," A screech that sounded like it was glitching rang out from the vessel of the Queen, face, and mouth unmoving.

A surge of energy pushed against his binding, the thing blurring forward. Its arm turning into a spike and piercing through his sister's shade. Shattering it, opening its mouth to eat the pieces. He grabbed onto it, pulling it away.

Then he blinked, disoriented, a small spike of power slightly pushing back against his authority. While it opened its mouth, as he stood still looking at the scene dumbly. Frantically he moved to grab it just in time, but with another spike of force, it blew away the pieces beyond the in-between realm, into the physical world.

He went to track them but the pocket dimension started to dissolve and he was back in his physical body. He sat up restarting his task. But a pang of weakness made his core give out, and fall back. The life force usage draining the body of strength, its soul much weaker than he was used to.

He laid down, looking at the ceiling of the canvas tent he and his apprentice set up, his consciousness fading back and forth. And before he fell asleep he opened his soul pocket, pulling out a wooden carving that was meant to look like a fish. But resembled more a banana with a couple of spikes on it, holding it to his chest, the last gift of his sister, as he fell unconscious.