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Keaghan Banaitis

Asteria exists, yet she does not.

And then, Gregor came.

Asteria was one and twenty. He looked older, by a bit, with ruddy gold hair and deeply pockmarked skin. He stole into her home—larger now, after listening to her mother bemoan the holes in the thatched roof, her sister complain of sharing a bed—in the dead of night on feather-light

freedom in oblivion, in eternity. But, I am all too happy to sow discord until you are alone by your own designs. I grow impatient, but I can wait a year or two more."

Her blood heated, burning from head to toe as rage pulsed through her. How dare he? Who was this man, this creature, meant to force her to sign away her life? "You have no right to come into my home, to threaten me, to—"

The walls around her fell away, turning to silt and drifting like dust. "I am not asking Asteriea Ó Foghladh. This has been my burden to bear for nigh on two hundred years. I have grown weary. I crave the escape of death."

The cool winds of autumn kissed her cheeks, stealing away hot tears. She imagined her sister, away at their aunt's with her mother, and her father in town visiting the pub with friends. She wondered what they would say if they were to come to a house of ashes and a witch of a daughter. The shame weighed around her neck like a yoke, dragging her off her cushioned stool and to the ground.

"What am I to do?"

The anger and urgency on Gregor's face gave way to sorrow. "Merely sign the book in your blood. Scratch out my name, and free me from

Perhaps she is foolish or perhaps Salem is more conniving than he seems to be.

Perhaps it is the fact that he has Seamus's green eyes and black hair and strong nose. Perhaps he is Seamus, sent by the old gods or the monsters in liminal spaces to punish her for what she did.

But she gives him the book and makes him promise to visit her once in a while. She does not tell him the nature of the curse, knowing deeply, instinctively, that he will abandon her if she does. She resolves to tell him of the life he has condemned himself to when he returns, about the eventual isolation that will envelop him.

Asteriea will be benevolent, she decides as she folds his hands around the book and whispers instructions in his ear. She will give him twenty years, or perhaps thirty, before she collects his soul.

Salem does not come back.

He tears apart the fabric of the world at the seams, more greedy than she ever dared to be. an she ever imagined she could be.

He wards himself from her with words, creating walls of steel and tungsten and pure magic to keep her out.

And Asteriea rages, heartbroken and all too aware of her fault