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Morrigan's Cross

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Extract

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Prologue



It was the rain that made him think of the tale. The lash of it battered the windows, stormed the rooftops and blew its bitter breath under the doors.

The damp ached in his bones even as he settled by the fire. Age sat heavily on him in the long, wet nights of autumn—and would sit heavier still, he knew, in the dark winter to come.

The children were gathered, huddled on the floor, squeezed by twos and threes into chairs. Their faces were turned to his, expectant, for he'd promised them a story to chase boredom from a stormy day.

He hadn't intended to give them this one, not yet, for some were so young. And the tale was far from tender. But the rain whispered to him, hissing the words he'd yet to speak.

Even a storyteller, perhaps especially a storyteller, had to listen.

"I know a tale," he began, and several of the children squirmed in anticipation. "It's one of courage and cowardice, of blood and death, and of life. Of love and of loss."

"Are there monsters?" one of the youngest asked, with her blue eyes wide with gleeful fear.

"There are always monsters," the old man replied. "Just as there are always men who will join them, and men who will fight them."

"And women!" one of the older girls called out, and made him smile.

"And women. Brave and true, devious and deadly. I have known both in my time. Now, this tale I tell you is from long ago. It has many beginnings, but only one end."

As the wind howled, the old man picked up his tea to wet his throat. The fire crackled, shot light across his face in a wash like gilded blood.

"This is one beginning. In the last days of high summer, with lightning striking blue in a black sky, the sorcerer stood on a high cliff overlooking the raging sea."

Chapter 1



Eire, the region of Chiarrai
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There was a storm in him, as black and vicious as that which bullied its way across the sea. It whipped inside his blood, outside in the air, battling within and without as he stood on the rain-slickened rock.

The name of his storm was grief.

It was grief that flashed in his eyes, as bold and as blue as those lightning strikes. And the rage from it spit from his fingertips, jagged red that split the air with thunderclaps that echoed like a thousand cannon shots.

He thrust his staff high, shouted out the words of magic. The red bolts of his rage and the bitter blue of the storm clashed overhead in a war that sent those who could see scurrying into cottage and cave, latching door and window, gathering their children close to quake and quail as they prayed to the gods of their choosing.

And in their raths, even the faeries trembled.

Rock rang, and the water of the sea went black as the mouth of hell, and still he raged, and still he grieved. The rain that poured out of the wounded sky fell red as blood—and sizzled, burning on land, on sea so that the air smelled of its boiling.

It would be called, ever after, The Night of Sorrows, and those who dared speak of it spoke of the sorcerer who stood tall on the high cliff, with the bloody rain soaking his cloak, running down his lean face like death's tears as he dared both heaven and hell.

His name was Hoyt, and his family the *Mac Cionaoith,* who was said to be descended from Morrigan, faerie queen and goddess. His power was great, but still young as he was young. He wielded it now with a passion that gave no room to caution, to duty, to light. It was his sword and his lance.

What he called in that terrible storm was death.

While the wind shrieked, he turned, putting his back to the tumultuous sea. What he had called stood on the high ground. She—for she had been a woman once—smiled. Her beauty was impossible, and cold as winter. Her eyes were tenderly blue, her lips pink as rose petals, her skin milk white. When she spoke, her voice was music, a siren's who had already called countless men to their doom.

"You're rash to seek me out. Are you impatient, Mac Cionaoith, for my kiss?"

"You are what killed my brother?"

"Death is . . ." Heedless of the rain, she pushed back her hood. "Complex. You are too young to understand its glories. What I gave him is a gift. Precious and powerful."

"You damned him."

"Oh." She flicked a hand in the air. "Such a small price for eternity. The world is his now, and he takes whatever he wants. He knows more than you can dream of. He's mine now, more than he was ever yours."

"Demon, his blood is on your hands, and by the goddess, I will destroy you."

She laughed, gaily, like a child promised a particular treat. "On my hands, in my throat. As mine is in his. He is like me now, a child of night and shadow. Will you also seek to destroy your own brother? Your twin?"

The ground fog boiled black, folded away like silk as she waded through it. "I smell your power, and your grief, and your wonder. Now, on this place, I offer this gift to you. I will make you once more his twin, Hoyt of the Mac

Cionaoiths. I will give you the death that is unending life."

He lowered his staff, stared at her through the curtain of rain. "Give me your name."

She glided over the fog now, her red cloak billowing back. He could see the white swell of her breasts rounding ripely over the tightly laced bodice of her gown. He felt a terrible arousal even as he scented the stench of her power.

"I have so many," she countered, and touched his arm—how had she come so close?—with just the tip of her finger. "Do you want to say my name as we join? To taste it on your lips, as I taste you?"

His throat was dry, burning. Her eyes, blue and tender, were drawing him in, drawing him in to drown. "Aye. I want to know what my brother knows."

She laughed again, but this time there was a throatiness to it. A hunger that was an animal's hunger. And those soft blue eyes began to rim with red. "Jealous?"

She brushed her lips to his, and they were cold, bitter cold. And still, so tempting. His heart began to beat hard and fast in his chest. "I want to see what my brother sees."

He laid his hand on that lovely white breast, and felt nothing stir beneath it. "Give me your name."

She smiled, and now the white of her fangs gleamed against the awful night. "It is Lilith who takes you. It is Lilith who makes you. The power of your blood will mix with mine, and we will rule this world, and all the others."

She threw back her head, poised to strike. With all of his grief, with all of his rage, Hoyt struck at her heart with his staff.

The sound that ripped from her pierced the night, screamed up through the storm and joined it. It wasn't human, not even the howl of a beast. Here was the demon who had taken his brother, who hid her evil behind cold beauty. Who bled, he saw as a stream of blood spilled from the wound, without a heartbeat.

She flew back into the air, twisting, shrieking as lightning tore at the sky. The words he needed to say were lost in his horror as she writhed in the air, and the blood that fell steamed into filthy fog.

"You would dare!" Her voice gurgled with outrage, with pain. "You would use your puny, your pitiful magic on me? I have walked this world a *thousand* years." She slicked her hand over the wound, threw out her bloody hand.

And when the drops struck Hoyt's arm, they sliced like a knife.

"Lilith! You are cast out! Lilith, you are vanquished from this place. By my blood." He pulled a dagger from beneath his cloak, scored his palm. "By the blood of the gods that runs through it, by the power of my birth, I cast you back—"

What came at him seemed to fly across the ground, and struck with the feral force of fury. Tangled, they crashed over the cliff to the jagged ledge below. Through waves of pain and fear he saw the face of the thing that so closely mirrored his own. The face that had once been his brother's.

Hoyt could smell the death on him, and the blood, and could see in those red eyes the animal his brother had become. Still, a small flame of hope flickered in Hoyt's heart.

"Cian. Help me stop her. We still have a chance."

"Do you feel how strong I am?" Cian closed his hand around Hoyt's throat and squeezed. "It's only the beginning. I have forever now." He leaned down, licked blood from Hoyt's face, almost playfully. "She wants you for herself, but I'm hungry. So hungry. And the blood in you is mine, after all."

As he bared his fangs, pressed them to his brother's throat, Hoyt thrust the dagger into him.

With a howl, Cian reared back. Shock and pain rushed over his face. Even as he clutched at the wound, he fell. For an instant, Hoyt thought he saw his brother, his true brother. Then there was nothing but the screams of the storm and the slashing rain.

He crawled and clawed his way up the cliff. His hands, slippery with blood and sweat and rain, groped for any hold. Lightning illuminated his face, tight with pain, as he inched his way up rock, tore his fingers in the clawing. His neck, where the fangs had scraped, burned like a brand. Breath whistling, he clutched at the edge.

If she waited, he was dead. His power had waned with

exhaustion, drained with the ravages of his shock and grief. He had nothing but the dagger, still red with his brother's blood.

But when he pulled himself up, when he rolled to his back with the bitter rain washing over his face, he was alone.

Perhaps it had been enough, perhaps he'd sent the demon back to hell. As he had surely sent his own flesh and blood to damnation.

Rolling over, he gained his hands and knees, and was viciously ill. Magic was ashes in his mouth.

He crawled to his staff, used it to help him stand. Breath keening, he staggered away from the cliffs, along a path he'd have known had he been blinded. The power had gone out of the storm as it had gone out of him, and now was merely a soaking rain.

He smelled home—horse and hay, the herbs he'd used for protection, the smoke from the fire he'd left smoldering in the hearth. But there was no joy in it, no triumph.

As he limped toward his cottage, his breath whistled out, hisses of pain that were lost in the rise of the wind. He knew if the thing that had taken his brother came for him now, he was lost. Every shadow, every shape cast by the storm-tossed trees could be his death. Worse than his death. Fear of that slicked along his skin like dirty ice, so that he used what strength he had to murmur incantations that were more like prayers for whoever, or whatever, would listen.

His horse stirred in its shelter, let out a huff as it scented him. But Hoyt continued shakily to the small cottage, dragging himself to the door and through.

Inside was warmth, and the ripple from the spells he'd cast before he'd gone to the cliffs. He barred the door, leaving smears of his and Cian's blood on the wood. Would it keep her out? he wondered. If the lore he'd read was fact, she couldn't enter without an invitation. All he could do was have faith in that, and in the protection spell that surrounded his home.

He let his soaked cloak fall, let it lay in a sodden heap on the floor, and had to fight not to join it there. He would mix potions for healing, for strength. And would sit through the night, tending the fire. Waiting for dawn.

He'd done all he could for his parents, his sisters and their families. He had to believe it was enough.

Cian was dead, and what had come back with his face and form had been destroyed. He would not, could not, harm them now. But the thing that had made him could.

He would find something stronger to protect them. And he would hunt the demon again. His life, he swore it now, would be dedicated to her destruction.

His hands, long of finger, wide of palm, were tremulous as he chose his bottles and pots. His eyes, stormy blue, were glazed with pain—the aches of his body, of his heart. Guilt weighed on him like a shroud of lead. And those demons played inside him.

He hadn't saved his brother. Instead, he had damned and destroyed him, cast him out and away. How had he won that terrible victory? Cian had always been physically superior to him. And what his brother had become was viciously powerful.

So his magic had vanquished what he'd once loved. The half of him that was bright and impulsive where he himself was often dull and staid. More interested in his studies and his skills than society.

Cian had been the one for gaming and taverns, for wenches and sport.

"His love of life," Hoyt murmured as he worked. "His love of life killed him. I only destroyed that which trapped him in a beast."

He had to believe it.

Pain rippled up his ribs as he shucked off his tunic. Bruises were already spreading, creeping black over his skin the way grief and guilt crept black over his heart. It was time for practical matters, he told himself as he applied the balm. He fumbled considerably, cursed violently, in wrapping the bandage over his ribs. Two were broken, he knew, just as he knew the ride back home in the morning would be a study in sheer misery.

He took a potion, then limped to the fire. He added turf so the flames glowed red. Over them he brewed tea. Then wrapped himself in a blanket to sit, to drink, to brood.

He had been born with a gift, and from an early age had soberly, meticulously sought to honor it. He'd studied, often in solitude, practicing his art, learning its scope.

Cian's powers had been less, but, Hoyt remembered, Cian had never practiced so religiously nor studied so earnestly. And Cian had played with magic, after all. Amusing himself and others.

And Cian had sometimes drawn him in, lowered Hoyt's resistance until they'd done something foolish together. Once they'd turned the boy who'd pushed their younger sister in the mud into a braying, long-eared ass.

How Cian had laughed! It had taken Hoyt three days of work, sweat and panic to reverse the spell, but Cian had never worried a whit.

He was born an ass, after all. We've just given him his true form.

From the time they'd been twelve, Cian had been more interested in swords than spells. Just as well, Hoyt thought as he drank the bitter tea. He'd been irresponsible with magic, and a magician with a sword.

But, steel hadn't saved him, nor had magic, in the end.

He sat back, chilled to his bones despite the simmering turf. He could hear what was left of the storm blowing still, splattering on his roof, wailing through the forest that surrounded his cottage.

But he heard nothing else, not beast, not threat. So was left alone with his memories and regrets.

He should've gone with Cian into the village that evening. But he'd been working, and hadn't wanted ale, or the smells and sounds of a tavern, of people.

He hadn't wanted a woman, and Cian had never *not* wanted one.

But if he'd gone, if he'd put aside his work for one bloody night, Cian would be alive. Surely the demon couldn't have overpowered both of them. Surely his gift would have allowed him to sense what the creature was, despite her beauty, her allure.

Cian would never have gone with her had his brother been by his side. And their mother would not be grieving.

The grave would never have been dug, and by the gods, the thing they buried would never have risen.

If his powers could turn back time, he would give them up, abjure them, to have that one night to re-live that single moment when he'd chosen work over his brother's company.

"What good do they do me? What good are they now? To have been given magic and not be able to use it to save what matters most? Damn to them all then." He flung his cup across the little room. "Damn to them all, gods and faeries. He was the light of us, and you've cast him into the dark."

All of his life Hoyt had done what he was meant to do, what was expected of him. He had turned away from a hundred small pleasures to devote himself to his art. Now those who had given him this gift, this power, had stood back while his own brother was taken?

Not in battle, not even with the clean blade of magic, but through evil beyond imagination. This was his payment, this was his reward for all he had done?

He waved a hand toward the fire, and in the hearth flames leapt and roared. He threw up his arms, and overhead the storm doubled in power so that the wind screamed like a tortured woman. The cottage trembled under its might, and the skins pulled tight over the windows split. Cold gusts spilled into the room, toppling bottles, flapping the pages of his books. And in it he heard the throaty chuckle of the black.

Not once in all of his life had he turned from his purpose. Not once had he used his gift for ill, or touched upon the black arts.

Perhaps now, he thought, he would find the answers in them. Find his brother again. Fight the beast, evil against evil.

He shoved to his feet, ignoring the scream in his side. He whirled toward his cot and flung out both hands toward the trunk he'd locked by magic. When it flew open, he strode to it, reached in for the book he'd shut away years before.

In it were spells, dark and dangerous magicks. Spells that used human blood, human pain. Spells of vengeance and greed that spoke to a power that ignored all oaths, all vows.

It was hot and heavy in his hands, and he felt the seduction of it, those curling fingers that brushed the soul. Have all, have any. Are we not more than the rest? Living gods who take whatever is desired?

We have the right! We are beyond rules and reasons.

His breath came short for he knew what could be his if he accepted it, if he took in both hands what he'd sworn never to touch. Unnamed wealth, women, unspeakable powers, life eternal. Revenge.

He had only to say the words, to rebuke the white and embrace the black. Clammy snakes of sweat slithered down his back as he heard the whispers of voices from a thousand ages:

Take. Take. Take.

His vision shimmered, and through it he saw his brother as he'd found him in the muck on the side of the road. Blood pooled from the wounds in his throat, and more smeared his lips. Pale, Hoyt thought dimly. So very pale was his face against that wet, red blood.

Now Cian's eyes—vivid and blue—opened. There was such pain in them, such horror. They pleaded as they met Hoyt's.

"Save me. Only you can save me. It's not death I'm damned to. 'Tis beyond hell, beyond torment. Bring me back. For once don't count the cost. Would you have me burn for all eternity? For the sake of your own blood, Hoyt, help me."

He shook. It wasn't from the cold that blew through the split skins, or the damp that whirled in the air, but from the icy edge on which he stood.

"I would give my life for yours. I swear it on all I am, on all we were. I would take your fate, Cian, if that were the choice before me. But I can't do this. Not even for you."

The vision on the bed erupted in flames, and its screams were past human. On a howl of grief, Hoyt heaved the book back in the trunk. He used the strength left to him to charm the lock before he collapsed on the floor. There he curled up like a child beyond all comfort.

* * *

Perhaps he slept. Perhaps he dreamed. But when he came to, the storm had passed. Light seeped into the room and grew, bold and bright and white, to sear his eyes. He blinked against it, hissing as his ribs protested when he tried to sit up.

There were streams of pink and gold shimmering in the white, warmth radiating from it. He smelled earth, he realized, rich and loamy, and the smoke from the turf fire that was still shimmering in the hearth.

He could see the shape of her, female, and sensed a staggering beauty.

This was no demon come for blood.

Gritting his teeth, he got to his knees. Though there was still grief and anger in his voice, he bowed his head.

"My lady."

"Child."

The light seemed to part for her. Her hair was the fiery red of a warrior, and flowed over her shoulders in silky waves. Her eyes were green as the moss in the forest, and soft now with what might have been pity. She wore white robes trimmed in gold as was her right by rank. Though she was the goddess of battle, she wore no armor, and carried no sword.

She was called Morrigan.

"You have fought well."

"I have lost. I have lost my brother."

"Have you?" She stepped forward, offered him a hand so he would rise. "You stayed true to your oath, though the temptation was great."

"I might have saved him otherwise."

"No." She touched Hoyt's face, and he felt the heat of her. "You would have lost him, and yourself. I promise you. You would give your life for his, but you could not give your soul, or the souls of others. You have a great gift, Hoyt."

"What good is it if I cannot protect my own blood? Do the gods demand such sacrifice, to damn an innocent to such torment?"

"It was not the gods who damned him. Nor was it for you to save him. But there is sacrifice to be made, battles to be

fought. Blood, innocent and otherwise, to be spilled. You have been chosen for a great task."

"You could ask anything of me now, Lady?"

"Aye. A great deal will be asked of you, and of others. There is a battle to be fought, the greatest ever waged. Good against evil. You must gather the forces."

"I am not able. I am not willing. I am . . . God, I am tired."

He dropped to the edge of his cot, dropped his head in his hands. "I must go see my mother. I must tell her I failed to save her son."

"You have not failed. Because you resisted the dark you are charged to bear this standard, to use the gift you've been given to face and to vanquish that which would destroy worlds. Shake off this self-pity!"

His head rose at the sharp tone. "Even the gods must grieve, Lady. I have killed my brother tonight."

"Your brother was killed by the beast, a week ago. What fell from the cliff was not your Cian. You know this. But he . . . continues."

Hoyt got shakily to his feet. "He lives."

"It is not life. It is without breath, without soul, without heart. It has a name that is not spoken yet in this world. It is vampyre. It feeds on blood," she said, moving toward him. "It hunts the human, takes life, or worse, much worse, turns that which it hunts and kills into itself. It breeds, Hoyt, like a pestilence. It has no face, and must hide from the sun. It is this you must fight, this and other demons that are gathering. You must meet this force in battle on the feast of Samhain. And you must be victorious or the world you know, the worlds you have yet to know, will be overcome."

"And how will I find them? How will I fight them? It was Cian who was the warrior."

"You must leave this place and go to another, and another still. Some will come to you, and some you will seek. The witch, the warrior, the scholar, the one of many forms, and the one you've lost."

"Only five more? Six against an army of demons? My lady—"

"A circle of six, as strong and true as the arm of a god. When that circle is formed, others may be formed. But the six will be my army, the six will make the ring. You will teach and you will learn, and you will be greater than the sum of you. A month to gather, and one to learn, and one to know. The battle comes on Samhain.

"You, child, are my first."

"You would ask me to leave the family I have left, when that thing that took my brother may come for them?"

"The thing that took your brother leads this force."

"I wounded her—it. I gave her pain." And the memory of that bubbled up in him like vengeance.

"You did, aye, you did. And this is only another step toward this time and this battle. She bears your mark now, and will, in time, seek you out."

"If I hunt her now, destroy her now."

"You cannot. She is beyond you at this time, and you, my child, are not ready to face her. Between these times and worlds, her thirst will grow insatiable until only the destruction of all humankind will satisfy it. You will have your revenge, Hoyt," she said as he got to his feet. "If you defeat her. You will travel far, and you will suffer. And I will suffer knowing your pain, for you are mine. Do you think your fate, your happiness is nothing to me? You are my child even as you are your mother's."

"And what of my mother, Lady? Of my father, my sisters, their families? Without me to protect them, they may be the first to die if this battle you speak of comes to pass."

"It will come to pass. But they will be beyond it." She spread her hands. "Your love for your blood is part of your power, and I will not ask you to turn from it. You will not think clearly until you have assurance they will be safe."

She tipped back her head, held her arms up, palms cupped. The ground shook lightly under his feet, and when Hoyt looked up, he saw stars shooting through the night sky. Those points of light streamed toward her hands, and there burst into flame.

His heart thumped against his bruised ribs as she spoke, as her fiery hair flew around her illuminated face.

"Forged by the gods, by the light and by the night. Symbol and shield, simple and true. For faith, for loyalty, these gifts for you. Their magic lives through blood shed, yours and mine."

Pain sliced over his palm. He watched the blood well in his, and in hers as the fire burned.

"And so it shall live for all time. Blessed be those who wear Morrigan's Cross."

The fire died, and in the goddess's hands were crosses of gleaming silver.

"These will protect them. They must wear the cross always—day and night—birth to death. You will know they are safe when you leave them."

"If I do this thing, will you spare my brother?"

"You would bargain with the gods?"

"Aye."

She smiled, an amused mother to a child. "You have been chosen, Hoyt, because you would think to do so. You will leave this place and gather those who are needed. You will prepare and you will train. The battle will be fought with sword and lance, with tooth and fang, with wit and treachery. If you are victorious, the worlds will balance and you will have all you wish to have."

"How do I fight a vampyre? I've already failed against her."

"Study and learn," she said. "And learn from one of her kind. One she made. One who was yours before she took him. You must first find your brother."

"Where?"

"Not only where, but when. Look into the fire, and see."

They were, he noted, in his cottage again, and he was standing in front of the hearth. The flames spiked up, became towers. Became a great city. There were voices and sounds such as he'd never heard. Thousands of people rushed along streets that were made of some kind of stone. And machines sped with them.

"What is this place?" He could barely whisper the words. "What world is it?"

"It is called New York, and its time is nearly a thousand

years from where we are. Evil still walks the world, Hoyt, as well as innocence, as well as good. Your brother has walked the world a long time now. Centuries have passed for him. You would do well to remember that."

"Is he a god now?"

"He is vampyre. He must teach you, and he must fight beside you. There can be no victory without him."

Such size, he thought. Buildings of silver and stone taller than any cathedral. "Will the war be in this place, in this New York?"

"You will be told where, you will be told how. And you will know. Now you must go, take what you need. Go to your family and give them their shields. You must leave them quickly, and go to the Dance of the Gods. You will need your skill, and my power, to pass through. Find your brother, Hoyt. It is time for the gathering."

He woke by the fire, the blanket wrapped around him. But he saw it hadn't been a dream. Not with the blood drying on the palm of his hand, and the silver crosses lying across his lap.

It was not yet dawn, but he packed books and potions, oatcakes and honey. And the precious crosses. He saddled his horse, and then, as a precaution, cast another protective circle around his cottage.

He would come back, he promised himself. He would find his brother, and this time, he would save him. Whatever it took.

As the sun cast its first light, he began the long ride to An Clar, and his family home.