

“Where are we?” he asked. “I wandered here blinded by the grey foehn.”

“Goulacullin Station. How can you not know that?”

He did know. But he was trying not to.

“This is where it started. Dolour’s sole SRBM cut its dash from here, surely you, of all people knew that. And but the Lugubrians tracked it back: a retaliation. They were well killed too.” And she spat into the hole.

He looked askance at her. “Your talk’s shorn military. Yet your demeanour is... Flowered with the magick of Biddy Early.”

She shrugged.

“I owe you thanks,” he said. “Tell me your name and I’ll know who I’m thanking.” Even under the sun’s welding arclight her face froze him and made him sorry for asking. But she answered, “Lorelei.”

“Thank you, Lorelei.”

Her lips were a lush tract and spilt no lies. It was a state overseen by her dark headscarf. “You are alive, though how?” she said. “That is the question with the vaulted answer.”

“Are you sorry for it? It pains you to have rescued me.” Borrada could not mark her well but he could sense her hormonal flux.

“Ha! A reader of people? Boy, he was correct. ‘Lorelei Anòir,’ he said, ‘you will become your own worst enemy’ and which had seemed an odd encouragement and but here I am: it was all true and foretold.”

Her accent was mixed, muddled and hidden. But this place was a long way from Borrada’s home, so he was uncertain.

“I don’t understand.”

“The man with the long hair.”

“Gottisttot?”

She shook her head. Borrada could see she was young: more a girl than a lady; like the sister of a sister. “I never heard of that name,” she said.

“Either way, I thought you’d leave me,” he said.

“I could not have had you die like that.”

“How would you have had me die then?”

Her smile bent to half its extent and revealed her cheekbones. It made Borrada’s pulse throttle with many fuels. He turned away insolent thoughts and his glances galloped to the horse, at whose every whinny, Lorelei’s eyes would turn nimbus and foreboding. The animal had a steroidal temperament. It clattered and swayed under contempt but the rider admonished in only small percentage. Borrada shrank at its bitter hoof. He heeled the grey dusts at it: this sorrel brute so scum-sided and ravaged yet immense with gargled admirations of a hundred men.

“What has you here wandering?” she said. She watched him shake fists of mahogany hair and momentarily, she forgot her intent.

“I’m an escapee led by his nose,” he said.