

BROTHER OF THE MONSTER by NICOLE MAINARDI

“Come back before the sun sets, boy,” Declan’s father grumbled from where he sat at the table, the untouched food before him gone cold.

“I will, Papa,” the boy promised, tightening his cloak around his shoulders and shutting the door behind him.

This is what the boy and his father said to each other every morning before the boy headed off to the palace, where he looked after the horses at the royal stables: an honor his father had once often reminded him of.

Now, all his father cared about was that his only son return home before the sun’s light dipped below the mountains.

Declan understood, for it had been at night when his twin brother, Tomas, had been stolen on the Marbh Bothar. The treacherous road was the only path from Carraig castle to their village of Baile, and he’d left after the sun had gone down. Declan remembered peering worriedly out the window as dusk settled across the moors, wondering where Tomas was—when something sharp had twisted in his chest, and he’d cried out.

But it hadn’t been his own pain; it had been the pain of his brother.

Months had passed since that night, and the Marbh Bothar only grew more dangerous. The princess’ maids told stories of how a terrible beast they called Balor—the demon king—hunted along the road at night. And, each morning, it was discovered that another villager had been taken.

Declan had garnered more than enough sympathy for his brother being the first of the Togtha—the Taken. But he avoided people at all costs nowadays, and it hadn’t taken long for the sympathy to dry up.

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Declan was content to be left on his own in the stables, brushing the horses, tending to their injuries. Many had told him they thought it a lonely existence, but it was the only thing that could soothe his troubled mind.

That is, until the day he met the princess.

“Where’s my horse?” A girl’s voice rang out along the wooden rafters.

Declan turned at the sound, dropping the brush in his hand as Princess Saoirse stood in the archway, her curved figure and fiery-red hair silhouetted by the late-afternoon sunlight. Having never seen the princess before, he was struck by her beauty as she strutted towards him, a determined glint flashing in her green eyes.

“I said,” she continued once she stood before him, placing her delicate hands on her hips, “where is my horse?”

“My apologies, your highness,” he answered, clearing his throat. “I do not know which is yours.”

She stared at him a moment before pointing at the brown mare he’d been brushing. “That one. The only mare in these stables, and she’s mine.”

Declan nodded, noting the short sword in its leather scabbard around her hips before swallowing against the force of her gaze. She could have him killed if she wished, he realized, and he wasn’t sure if that frightened or exhilarated him.

“Where does your journey take you, your highness?” he wondered aloud while he saddled the horse.

“That’s no business of yours,” she said with as much authority as her position commanded, then sighed. “I suppose someone should know, were I not to return. I’m off to hunt the demon king on the Marbh Bothar.”

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Sharp pain shot up Declan's spine as he whipped around. "Are you mad?"

Her mouth dropped open, and he bit his tongue when he realized his mistake, tasting blood. "How *dare* you speak to me that way? I could have you beheaded for that."

"I must beg your forgiveness again, your highness," he said, not sounding the least bit sorry. "But you must know how dangerous the road is, especially with the night approaching."

"That is precisely why I must go."

He opened his mouth to protest once more when she kept on, "My father refuses to do anything about Balor, claiming the abductions don't matter because they're mere commoners."

Declan clenched his jaw, biting back his objection. Their king had never been one to cater to the people, but to hear it from his own daughter...

"If you insist on going," he said, and surprise flitted across her pretty face, "I'll accompany you."

She shook her head. "That's not possible. I cannot guarantee your return."

Declan grinned. "I'm sure you don't know who I am, your highness, but my brother was the first of the Togtha. If anyone is going to kill the demon king Balor, it's going to be me."

A smile grew on the princess' face. "As you wish..."

"Declan," he offered.

"Declan. But please, don't call me 'your highness.' To you, I am merely Saoirse."

Declan caught her gaze, wondering what she must've seen when she first looked at him: a commoner. He did not appear strong, but he'd wielded a sword all his life. His features were dark, unlike most others in the kingdom, but he was born in Baile. He'd never quite fit in—not the way his twin had, with his fair looks and easy smiles. But if he could avenge his brother, at least he'd feel like he could breathe again.

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“Saoirse,” he said softly, a whisper amongst conspirers.

The smile dropped from her face, her gaze sweeping over him, and heat brushed up his neck at her attention before she spoke again.

“Let’s go kill the bastard.”

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The silent moors were painted black with the night as Saoirse dismounted her mare. Declan followed, tying his own horse to the tree beside hers.

“A villager came to my father, claiming he’d seen the demon king disappear into the forest with his cousin at this very spot,” the princess said, and he nodded slowly, peering off uncertainly into the darkness.

They’d been quiet on the Marbh Bothar. Declan had flinched at every sound the forest made, waiting for the demon king to appear out of the shadows. But Saoirse had remained stoic, one hand on the reigns, the other on the hilt of her sword. Declan felt the weight of his own strapped to his side; she’d found a blade for him rather quickly, and he had a suspicion that she’d simply commanded one of her father’s soldiers to give it to her.

He’d never met anyone like her, and he found himself wondering what it might be like if she wasn’t the princess. Or if he was a prince.

But that mattered little now, when they might both be heading straight to their deaths.

“I assume you know how to use that thing,” she said, glancing down at the hilt of his sword.

Unsheathing it, the ringing of the metal harsh against his ears, he flipped the blade in his hand, deciding to be brave for once in his life, and slashed at the branch of the Leatherwood tree near Saoirse’s neck. Her gasp filled the silence as he picked up the red-rimmed Ballerina flower that laid at her feet, and offered it to her.

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“Does that answer your question?” he asked, wondering if he’d just done the stupidest thing in his short life.

But when she plucked it from his hand, turning away to hide a smile, he thought perhaps he hadn’t.

“You know,” she said, “if we weren’t about to die, I might’ve kissed you just then.”

Disbelief and want made his stomach drop, and she laughed.

“You’re too serious, Declan. Learn to live, while you still can.”

With that, she strode off into the forest, and he trailed behind before the darkness could swallow her.

It wasn’t long before they came to a great tree whose roots had grown taller than three grown men, the maw-like threshold lit only by the haunting green light of will-o’-the-wisps.

“I’d say we found where he lives,” Saoirse murmured.

Moving cautiously through the first of the fanged roots, blades glinting softly, Declan slowed his breath so that it came only as a whisper. He fought off the chill that crept along his skin the further in they went, as he thought of what to say to Saoirse: to wish her luck, to tell her—he wasn’t sure what, but it felt important.

When the long tunnel of roots finally ended, they found themselves in a den of broken bodies. The will-o’-the-wisps’ pulsed along the flesh and bone and blood strewn across the peat ground—it was soaked in it.

He heard Saoirse’s quick intake of breath, and followed her gaze. His grip on the hilt of his sword tightened as he looked at the creature that had stolen his brother:

Balor, the demon king, perched on a throne of the dead.

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His sinewy form was covered in cracked, scaly skin that resembled blackened tree bark, his fingers long and sharp like knives. Sitting atop his head was a crown made of bony branches dipped in tar, with horns stealing out the sides. But it didn't seem to be framing any kind of face. Where there should've been eyes, a nose, lips, there was nothing, just a cold, sharp jaw—

“Don't do something senseless,” Saoirse hissed, and he realized he'd moved past her, closer to the beast that had ruined his life. She gripped his arm tightly, wrenching him back to her side.

But, at the sound of the princess' voice, the demon king's head snapped up, and something fluttered open at the middle of his crown. Declan's breath shuddered out of his chest: it was a single, golden eye. The demon king stood disjointedly, limbs erratic, until the eye settled on Declan, and his legs gave out from under him.

Brother... a voice called, invading his mind. Declan grunted as the word sliced painfully through him, and he fell to his knees in the bloody soil.

Releasse meeeee, the voice begged.

“Tomas,” Declan called out. “Where are you? Where is he keeping you?”

I am him, Tomas' voice claimed. *He is me*.

“No,” Declan gasped out.

“Declan, what the hell is going on?” Saoirse asked, and he realized she was crouching before him, her back to the demon king.

He looked past her, catching the golden eye of Balor once more. “How do I free you, brother?”

Kill meeee.

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With a strength he didn't know he possessed, he stood against the crushing ache in his bones.

"There must be another way," he reasoned, grabbing his sword from where it had fallen at his side, his insides twisting in agony. "I cannot kill you."

No other way—only you, Declan, he rasped, and Declan flinched at hearing his name in his brother's voice again. *This body... it's impenetrable, except beneath my crown, between... the horns.*

But hurry. She comes.

She? he wondered, but didn't have time to think about what he meant. If his brother was in pain—if someone was forcing him to wear the crown of the demon king—then Declan was going to save him. Even if that meant one, or both, of them was going to die.

"I'm sorry brother," he said, tears piercing behind his eyes as he took the crown from Balor's head and threw it to the ground. He gripped his sword with both hands, drew a trembling breath, and—

"Wait!" a far-off voice called that sounded very much like the princess. But she was standing right behind him...

"Saoirse?" he asked, turning to her.

A strange, sickly smirk invaded her lips. "Unfortunately, no," the stranger said, her voice no longer recognizable. "Though I do wish she'd waited until you'd killed Balor. It would've made this so much easier."

Her appearance shifted before him, and his grip loosened on his sword as her muddied green dress became swathed in gossamer shadows. They swept over her eyes and along her red locks, staining them black. Ebony ink swirled across her cheeks, marking her as a sorceress—her

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magic glimmered around her like a sickness. As the shadows settled, he realized he knew this witch.

Carman. The goddess of malevolent magic.

Behind her, the real Saoirse appeared. She was bone-thin, her dress only rags now, her red hair lifeless around sunken skin. Her breath rasped as she tried to catch it, and she clutched at her chest.

“Don’t... listen to her. You can only free your brother if you kill *her*.”

She pointed at the witch, who sneered at Declan.

“I knew I should’ve killed you a long time ago, your highness. Your father deserved to mourn you as you were, but when I return you to his doorstep, he’ll have wished he’d never bore you.”

Resolve glittered in the princess’ green eyes, dulled only by the murk of their cage. “Then come and get me, you soith.”

The sorceress bared her pointed teeth at the insult and turned towards the princess—

Declan gripped his sword with unsure hands and shoved the blade straight into the witch’s heart.

Carman’s body shuddered, and she screamed as shadows fled from the gaping wound. Declan stumbled back from it, throwing an arm over his eyes—and then the witch was gone, reduced to ashes, her remains soaked with old blood.

He dropped his sword, his gaze finding the princess before turning towards Balor—his brother.

The metal scales of the demon king had cracked apart, pieces of his horns shattered among the distorted bodies of the dead. And there was his brother, naked and trembling in the mud.

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Removing his cloak from around his shoulders, Declan picked his brother off the ground and wrapped him in it. He was made of nothing as Declan held him, Tomas' shallow breathing the only sign that he was still alive.

"Tomas!" Saoirse—the real Saoirse—called. Declan turned when she appeared beside him, her eyes on Tomas as if she knew him.

As if she loved him.

Declan watched his brother open his eyes when she touched him, and he whispered her name like he needed it to breathe. A pang of jealousy ripped through him, and he hated himself for it.

Then Tomas finally looked at his twin; relief flooded his weary gaze. "Declan, thank the gods. I didn't know—I wasn't sure you would come. But you did it; you freed me from my curse."

Declan beamed at his brother, whose scratched and bloody face he never thought he'd see again.

He took Tomas' cheek in his palm. "I wish I'd known. I would've come sooner. I would've *done* something."

His twin coughed, closing his eyes, and Declan's heart constricted when a spatter of blood flecked across his lips. "It's done now; Carman is dead. It's over."

Tomas opened his eyes again and glanced over at Saoirse, tears cutting down her dirt-caked face.

"How did this happen?" he asked them.

Tomas regarded his brother. "That night, on the Marbh Bothar, a fairy came to me. She told me that she could bring our mother back, at a price. So I made a deal with her, idiot that I was. But she asked the impossible of me, and when I couldn't hold up my end of the bargain, the fairy

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revealed herself as the witch, Carman, stealing Saoirse and cursing me to become the demon king. To roam the Marbh Bothar each night until I found my next victim.”

“What was the price, Tomas?” Declan whispered, almost afraid of the answer.

Tomas swallowed hard. “I had to kill the woman I loved—a life for a life. And I couldn’t do it.”

Saoirse reached out to Tomas, and Declan realized he’d never known the real princess. This girl was unrecognizable to him, and now the woman his brother had fallen in love with. Maybe he hadn’t truly known his brother, either.

Bringing Tomas to his feet with great effort, he said, “Come, let’s get you home.”

On trembling legs, his brother nodded, swinging his arm around Declan’s shoulder, and the three of them walked out of hell.