

# SWORD of the SUN



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1

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*This one's for you.*









# Prologue

1979

*Unseen and unheard, two figures moved near the summit of Mweelrea, staring out at the Atlantic Ocean from the top of that great mountain. Both were tall – one so much so that it was clear he had not been shaped or formed by any part of nature. He looked like magic striding on two legs, his long silver hair blowing in the frosty breeze and his skin almost blue, though not with cold. In one great hand he held a sword. Beside him walked a woman, her steps unimpeded by the snow. Her hair flickered like a black candle flame, wreathing her head in darkness. The trail of her footsteps was littered with feathers, like those from an old crow. Her eyes were rimmed with shadow that seemed to move of its own accord, and within the murk her irises shone with an eerie*

*violet light. Her lips were as red as crushed beetles, her cheeks feverish pink and her robe skittered about her like it was afraid to touch her skin.*

*The footprints she left as she climbed Mweelrea were sometimes made by one set of feet and sometimes three. Indeed, the woman herself – had any human eye been there to see her – looked, at times, as though she had two companions, one on either side; sometimes she turned to speak to them. And in the next blink they were gone, and she was one person again.*

*‘The Cailleach rises,’ said the man. His voice was like the shifting of rocks beneath the earth’s surface.*

*‘Let her come,’ the woman replied. She spoke in a voice that was not one but three, a sweet, melodious tone with a sharp, harsh croaking tucked underneath, and above both of these could be heard the sound of warbling, cracked words, like they were being uttered by a person of immense age. ‘I do not fear the Hag of the Hills. Nor should you, Nimhfolá, son of Nuada.’*

*The tall figure turned to regard his companion. ‘You would do well, She-Who-Is-Three, Battle Crow, Shadesinger, not to underestimate your enemy. Particularly when she comes wrapped in the power of the Old Magic –’*

There was a strange skittering sound in the room, and the man looked up from the book he'd been reading. His papers sat in the pool of light thrown down by his lamp, like an island in a sea of murk. How had it grown so late? Surely the children would already be in bed . . . He glanced at the small clock he kept on his desk. Nearly midnight. He sighed. Maura was probably asleep herself by now, and he imagined her seething anger, settled around her as tightly as any blanket. *You're never here to help me with the girls! They don't even know you, Brendan! They might as well have a hat stand for a father!*

Brendan sighed, moving in his chair. His back ached, his head thudded. The November night was cold and still outside his window. Snow glinted on the straggling hedgerow, and the ground was slick with ice. He looked out into the dark, seeing the reflection of his 'office' in the glass – a desk, a chair, a stack of books, some of which he'd written himself, an empty ashtray, a pinboard on the wall with all manner of notes stuck to it, his daughters' drawings and notes buried somewhere at the bottom, like treasure waiting to be excavated. He sat in the middle of all this industry, floating and golden, suspended in the night.

He could see the muffled shapes of the mountain on the horizon, and at the end of the garden, the cave . . .

Quickly, he darted out of the chair to pull the curtains closed – *too* quickly, according to the muscles popping in his back and shoulders. He hissed in pain, rubbing at the sore spots, before turning back towards his desk.

There was someone standing at the far side of it.

Brendan stopped, his heart thocking wildly in shock. He opened his mouth, but the words were somehow stoppered in his throat. The person – the *woman* – looked up and smiled, and Brendan swallowed his question.

It was as if she had stepped out of the pages he'd been reading. He knew who she was, for she was unmistakable.

'Greetings,' she said. There were only the barest traces of her other voices in her words, but Brendan could hear them. They were there, like discordant, echoing whispers, somehow lingering, even though their owners were mere memory.

'Get out,' Brendan said, finally unsticking his tongue from the roof of his mouth. He coughed. 'Get out of my house, or I'll call the Guards.'

The woman laughed loudly, harsh and sudden. ‘The telephone is in the hallway, Brendan. I know I’m not,’ she waved a hand, ‘of this *era*, so to speak, but I do know how certain things work.’ She took a step, and Brendan fought to hold his ground. ‘And how long do you think they’ll take to get here, anyway? This house, in the middle of nowhere . . . Bad conditions on the roads . . .’ She tutted, pretending to be concerned. ‘I really don’t think we need to worry about the Guards.’ Her violet eyes flashed. ‘Guardians of the *Peace*,’ she said, almost spitting the words. ‘Such a thing was never known, in my time.’

‘Your time is long past, Anand,’ Brendan said. The woman flinched at the sound of her name, and something in Brendan’s chest flared hopefully. She preferred to be known by her title, which she used when all three of her Aspects were together, the name that described them all. *Morrígan*. Great Queen. The Battle Crow. But her other Aspects – her sister-selves – were long gone now, banished by the Cailleach, and by Manannán Mac Lir, one hundred and forty years before.

But the woman before him was much, much older than that. Old enough to have walked with gods.



Old enough to have fought in battles that had passed into legend. Old enough to have watched humanity rise and fall and rise and fall again, in war and peace and bloodshed, each revolution nourishing her like a prayer.

She narrowed her eyes as she regarded him, and Brendan felt his hope sputter out.

‘And yet, I live,’ she said, her voice low. ‘Perhaps there is still some space in this modern world for She-Who-Is-Three.’

Brendan swallowed hard. ‘She-Who-Is-One. Your sisters are gone.’

Anand glanced down at the book Brendan had been reading. ‘January, 1839,’ she intoned, reading from the text. ‘*Oíche na Gaoithe Móire* – the Night of the Big Wind.’ She looked back at Brendan. ‘The night that the Cailleach of Mullaghmore and her lackey, Mac Lir, stole from me the people I hold dearest, banishing my sisters to places even I cannot reach.’ She smiled, a cruel twist of her lips that was barely there before it was gone. ‘And that was not all they stole from me that night. I am heartened to see, at least, that our battle is remembered, even if history has recorded it as a mere storm.’



Brendan held her gaze. ‘Hundreds of people died. It was more than a mere *storm*.’

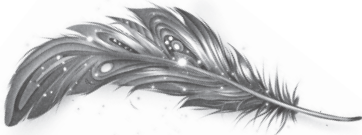
Anand seemed to hold herself straighter, as though mentioning death gave her relief. ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘I remember.’

Brendan tried to push away his fear, but his thoughts were panicked. *The children. Maura. I have to get them out . . .* ‘What do you want?’ he asked, willing himself to stay steady. He was an O’Donnell, and this was his duty.

‘What do I *want*? You know what I want, Brendan O’Donnell, son of Hugh, son of Liam, son of Seán.’ She stared him down. All Brendan could see were her eyes, shining like polished blades.

‘I will not give you a single thing,’ Brendan said, unable to stop his voice from trembling. ‘My people have stood as guardians here since the Cailleach brought you down, and we will stand here forever. My father, his father before him, and his –’

‘Enough!’ she hissed. ‘For you *have* no sons, Brendan Finian O’Donnell. Only two daughters, mewling brats who have no love for you.’ She took another step, around the desk. ‘Nobody to keep your name. No O’Donnell to continue your line.’ She licked



her lips. ‘You are a weak link in the chain.’

Brendan blinked against sudden tears. ‘My daughters are fine girls, who will understand why I had to work so hard. They’ll know, when they’re older, and they’ll carry on their duty with as much heart and courage as any O’Donnell before them. You wait and see.’

Anand leaned against the desk. She picked up a photograph in a frame and scoffed at it, before turning it to Brendan. He didn’t need to look at it, but he did anyway. The image showed two small girls, one newborn – Aisling, who was heading for two years old now – and her then three-year-old sister Niamh, cradling her. Brendan’s chest filled with panic. His babies . . . And his wife, asleep, with no idea of the evil that was in their house . . . *And it’s all my fault.*

‘The only way they’ll carry on anything,’ Anand said, replacing the photograph, ‘is if they are trained, and schooled, as you were. No warrior can face the field without first being formed. Wouldn’t you agree?’ She toyed carelessly with a lock of her black, black hair as she spoke. ‘And without a master, a warrior might as well be a lump of rock.’





Brendan's heart picked up pace. 'I won't let you –'  
'You have precisely *no* power to stop me doing anything,' Anand growled, becoming a swirling dark cloud for a blink before solidifying once more, so close to Brendan that he could feel the fierce heat from her skin. Brendan stumbled back, almost colliding with the window behind him.


'Don't harm my children,' Brendan said, in a strangled gasp. 'Or – or my wife. They're innocent.'

Anand's cruel eyes glinted. 'There are no innocents. But be assured, I'll let them live. I'll watch them fail, confused, not even knowing what their duty is, undoing through their own ignorance all the work you've done, and all the work your forefathers did, and I'll watch your family crumble.' She smirked. 'Yes, believe me. I won't deny myself that joy.'


'No,' Brendan gasped. His heart was galloping now, like a panicked horse. It hurt, the pain crushing, like a band of iron slowly tightening around his ribs.

Anand levelled her cold gaze on him and, as he watched, her eyes turned blood-red. He felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room, and his brain filled with screaming taunts and accusations. *You didn't even fight! You weakling! You're unworthy*



A collection of various feathers, including peacock feathers with iridescent patterns and simpler quills, scattered across the top of the page.


*of the name O'Donnell! Everything that follows this will be your fault!*

A vertical column of feathers on the left side of the page, including several peacock feathers and quills.

Brendan clutched his chest and dropped to one knee. At the same moment, Anand burst into a cloud of crows, which shed feathers like snowflakes. The crows swirled around him, the feathers pressing against his face, smothering him in darkness. All the while, the voices kept shrieking inside his head. *Your daughters will hate you! They'll never understand! You're a failure, a pathetic excuse for a guardian . . . Everything will fall, and when the world burns, when I have the Sword once again and my sisters are free, your family will be the first to die . . .*

Brendan struggled to his feet, fumbling for his chair. He collapsed into it and picked up a pen, desperately trying to write something – anything – to explain, to warn Maura, to tell his daughters . . . to tell them how much he loved them, and how he wanted to protect them, and how he'd got it all wrong . . . But his hand was weak, and he couldn't keep his grip. His vision grew dark around the edges as he stared at the photograph of his children.

He slumped forward, his head landing on the still-open book in front of him. Slowly, the crows stopped

A decorative border of various feathers, including peacock feathers with iridescent patterns and simpler quills, framing the top and right sides of the page.

their spinning, the feathers blanketing the floor. They each found perches, and they watched, impassive and calm, as the life drained out of Brendan O'Donnell.

Once his last breath had hissed out into the dark room, the crows leaped as one. They swirled together, becoming the woman once more. She stared down at Brendan's body, her lip curled in disgust, before turning and walking out of the room.

Anand left the house as silently as she had entered it, watched by no one.