

The Nightmare Queen

Story by Bloodstone

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“Matti, you have to work on your anger. Your sister is just trying to help.”

“She’s not. She’s trying to control me.” Matti picked at her black fingernail polish. “This is just a way for her to get leverage over me. Now I ‘owe’ her.”

“Well, do you want to stay here, in prison?” Miss O’Brian asked.

Matti sat quietly, staring at the Celtic knots tattooed on her forearm. “...No.”

Miss O’Brian had seen plenty of troubled young women, but Matti stood out, even among the most difficult and angry. Like so many others she wore dark and ancient tattoos, morbid jewelry, and black clothes. Her short, messy hair was a deathly shade of black, cut with a sharp streak of red. But there was something else. Miss O’Brian sensed that boiling within this young woman, hidden just behind her glaring eyes was a terrifying violence.

“Where will you go, if not to your sister’s house?”

“I’ll call my other sister, Eva.”

“And how are things with her?”

“Better than they are with Bridget. The more kids Eva has, the less she bothers me.”

“I’m sure Bridget doesn’t think that she is bothering you. I’m sure she is trying to help you. She wants what is best for you. I think maybe you should try to see things from other peoples’ points of view. Don’t take things they say so personally.”

Matti barely made an effort to roll her eyes.

“If Bridget hadn’t stepped in, you were facing up to five years, Matti. She really helped you out.”

“Yeah. Five years for fightin’ at a pub? Doesn’t that seem extreme?”

Miss O’Brian flinched at the raw malice that laced Matti’s tone and she looked away in fear. Feeling the need to back up her statement, she flipped through Matti’s file. She could feel a subtle but disturbing rage emanating from the young woman across the table and her fingers fumble with the papers. “Well,” she cleared her throat and pulled out a page to read. “You were going to be charged under Section 18 of the Criminal Justice Act; Assault with Intent to Commit Bodily Harm. That carries up to five years. But your sister got it reduced to just public misconduct.”

Matti scoffed. “Who’s ever assaulted someone *without* intending to commit bodily harm?” She rolled her eyes. “That’s ridiculous.”

“That poor man spent three days in the ICU, Matti.”

Matti sneered in disgust. “That *poor man* was a filthy pig who deserved what he got and more!”

The sudden rage in Matti's eyes forced Miss O'Brian back to shuffling papers. Too afraid to look up, she knew the awful glare in Matti's eyes would cause her to start babbling or worse, crying. So she kept her eyes on the papers as she shuffled them clumsily back into her folder with sweaty, shaking hands. "Well, that will be for the courts to decide." she said weakly. Her voice trembled nearly as much as her hands. She felt short of breath; worried and anxious. She sensed violence nearby. There was something unnaturally dangerous about this young woman and she suddenly imagined Matti flying into a murderous frenzy. Miss O'Brian's eyes ran over the files she was shoving into the folder; previous court papers and arrest documents. 'Violent Disorder, Assault. Assault. Violent Disorder. Threatening Behavior. Willful Obstruction. Assault of a Peace Officer, reduced to Violent Disorder.'" She glanced at Matti and froze.

Matti was staring at her from across the table, arms folded across her chest. Cold and detached, her black eyes seemed to see everything; the counselor's quaking heart, her scattered thoughts, her naked fear. She felt like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck; transfixed. Faintly she heard her hands closing the folder.

Suddenly Matti's eyes become like burning stars, "What's wrong with you?"

Sweat broke on Miss O'Brian's face as she lurched from the chair and snatched at her purse. "Nothing." She managed a weak smile. "I'm fine." She turned for the door, stumbling over the table, the chair, and her own feet as she escaped the terrifying little woman.

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A few hours later Matti was standing on the corner outside the Mountjoy Prison in the center of Dublin, her bag over her shoulder. The cloudy afternoon sky cast a dreary, grey shadow over everything and the city streets, wet with rain, were nearly vacant. Although it was midsummer, the heavy clouds and cool wind brought an ominous scent of doom to the fading afternoon.

Soon Matti spied Eva's lime green Toyota splashing up the road. It stopped at the curb and Matti opened the back door to throw her duffle bag in.

"Hey!" Eva greeted her older sister with a broad smile. "Careful of the grocery bags. There are eggs in there."

"Ok." Matti set her bag on the floor, closed the backdoor, and climbed into the passenger seat. "Thanks for picking me up." She said as her seatbelt clicked.

"No problem. It's good to see you." Eva smiled as she put the car in gear and drove away.

Matti hadn't seen her little sister in almost a year and as she looked at her now, she saw that Eva had changed. She'd had another kid; her face was chubby and her thighs and stomach were bloated.

"How are the kids?" she asked after a moment.

Eva sighed. "Well, not very good lately. Danny and Melissa have been misbehaving a lot. Yesterday, Danny got in a fight at school after stealing some other kid's money. And last weekend Melissa set the tool shed on fire and laughed about it."

Matti sat quietly for a minute looking at the storefronts speeding by. "What do you think has gotten into them? Is everything ok with Dan?"

"Yeah, he's fine. Just frustrated with them, like me. He's been working a lot. He spends more time filling out paperwork and going to different government agencies than he does in the barn."

"Yeah, farming isn't what it used to be." Matti observed.

"Yeah." Eva agreed. Then, "The baby has been sick, too." she added, darkly.

"Oh, what's wrong?"

"Not sure. She's been crying a lot and doesn't want to eat. I took her to see the GP, but he couldn't tell me much. I'm waiting to see a pediatrician next week."

They rode in silence for a moment before Eva asked the question that had been hanging awkwardly in the air. "How is little Tommy?"

Matti squirmed. "I haven't seen to him since I got locked up the first time. Figured it wasn't right for him to see him mum in jail. He's way down in Brighton with his father's family. They got custody of him now... "

Eva squeezed her sister's hand for comfort. She couldn't imagine the pain of being separated from her children.

*

It was twilight when they pulled into the farmyard. When Eva spied the old brown Volvo parked next to Dan's truck she remarked, "Ah, Conner is here."

"Who?"

"Conner. He's a friend. I met him a few weeks ago. He's real interesting. You'll like him. He's into ancient lore and fey, and the standing stones. All that stuff." Eva got out as she added, "He talked Bridget into springing you."

Matti grabbed her bag from the backseat and followed her sister into the house. As they crossed the farmyard in the fading twilight, a crow leapt from the roof of the barn and swooped low over the grass, disappearing in the night.

Inside the farmhouse was little Danny, almost five years old now. He had a willow switch in his hand and was hitting Benji, the wolfhound, with it. The huge grey dog, backed against the wall, was grumbling with irritation.

"Stop that!" Eva snatched the stick from his little hand. "What's wrong with you, boy? Are you trying to get killed?"

He whined, but she pointed to the other room and said, "Now! And no crying."

He stomped off, sobbing and murmuring. Eva tossed the stick outside and closed the door as she said to Matti, "See what I mean? I don't know what's gotten into him. And Melissa is just as bad."

Eva's husband Dan entered the kitchen with another man close behind him. The stranger was Matti's age, mid twenties. He had a scruffy red beard and shaggy hair and he wore bracelets and a necklace made of leather thongs and cheap beads. He smelled of incense and was dressed in sandals and earthy tones.

Mattie rolled her eyes. 'Hippie.'

"This is Conner O'Mally." Eva introduced him.

"Hi," Matti was guarded and suspicious.

"A pleasure to meet you." He smiled warmly. Then to Eva he asked urgently, "Did you bring the eggs?"

"Why, yes." Eva laughed, pulling them from the grocery bag. Are you that hungry for eggs, Conner?"

Smiling, he took them and said, "I'm not going to eat them. Here, why don't you gather the kids in the other room, by the fire? I'll be there in just a minute."

"Ok." Eva and Dan went into the living room and called little Danny and Melissa to sit near the fireplace with them.

Matti stayed in the kitchen watching Conner suspiciously as he cracked the eggs, dumping the contents into one bowl and saving the shells in another. A minute later she followed him from the kitchen as he carried the bowl of crushed eggshells into the living room. She watched as he knelt by the fireplace and uttered a few strange syllables of Gaelic and cast the eggshells into the fire.

When Melissa and little Danny heard the ancient chant they cried out. Eva caught hold of Melissa as the girl tried to run, but Little Danny sprang from his father's lap and seized the bowl in Conner's hand. Conner had been wary of trouble and held fast to the vital eggshells, keeping them from spilling. In the next moment Dan hauled the boy back by the arm saying, "Now come here! Stop that!"

Inspired by her brother, Melissa kicked and squirmed with newfound vigor, but her mother was far too strong for her.

With the children restrained, Conner began again, chanting in Gaelic and throwing eggshells into the fire. The children kicked and fought and writhed, first like evil children, but then—like something else. Dan and Eva were shocked as their beloved children suddenly changed in their very arms. Their soft pink skin became knotted and warty and their cherubic faces twisted into hideous caricatures with enormous noses, drooping dog-like ears and broken, yellow teeth. The grotesque little monsters kicked and flailed their arms like wild animals.

Horrified, Dan and Eva released the disgusting creatures and the things bolted for the door on stiff, bent legs. The two little monsters escaped while everyone stared in shocked surprise. As they disappeared into the night, Dan slumped on the floor, his face a wasteland of despair and Eva screamed in terror and confusion.

Matti was the first to speak. "What the hell just happened!?"

"My babies!" Eva wailed. She turned to the bassinet where baby Jessica lay, but she too was gone. In her place was a piece of cordwood, ready for the fireplace.

"What happened?" Eva cried. "Where are my babies!"

"They've been taken." Conner said. "By the sidhee."

"The what?" Dan asked.

"Evil fairies. They've stolen your children away and taken their place, disguising themselves with magic. I broke the spell that was concealing them so now they've run off."

"Changlings?" Matti scoffed. "Switching babies with evil fairies? That's a myth! No one believes that anymore."

"Then you tell me what just happened." Conner challenged her.

Silence fell as Matti considered. Then she doubled up her fists and anger filled her eyes, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Conner threw up his hands and backed away from her as if she had pulled a gun, "My name is Conner O'Mally!" He trembled and cowered. "I'm here to help you! Please don't hurt me!"

Amused by his reaction, Matti grinned. Apparently her reputation was far more fearsome than she thought. "Help us how?" she asked. "How do you know Bridget? And why did you talk her into getting me out of jail?"

He sighed, "I don't know everything that is going on and if I told you everything that I know, you wouldn't believe half of it."

"Try me."

He swallowed hard before continuing. "What do you know of the tuatha de danann and the Formarians?"

"A little," Matti replied. "What they teach us in school; myths and legends of the old Celts. Fairies and giants and trolls and gods, stuff like that. Why?"

"I'm a druid." He stated flatly. "I've been sent by the Sylvan Court to bring you three together and help you work out your differences."

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I only know that Nemmi has an interest in keeping the three of you separated. My instructions are to thwart her efforts. It was her minions that got you thrown in jail for brawling at [Captain America’s](#),” he told Matti. “It was her minions that took the children. And those were her minions that were here tonight.”

“Who’s Nemmi?” Matti asked.

“Queen of the Sidhee.” Conner said. “She is plotting against mankind and the three of you are somehow involved. That’s all I really know. I was told to bring you together and help you work out your differences. And try to protect you from the Sidhee. But I’ve failed.

Now we need to get to Bridget, she is probably in danger. Now that you are out of jail and the changelings are revealed, there is no telling what Nemmi might do to keep the three of you apart.”

“What is her beef with us? Why does she care if we are getting along or not?”

Conner answered, “I don’t really know,” but Matti felt like he was hiding something.

“Where are my babies? How can this be?” Eva sat on floor and cried.

“Yes. Where are the children?” Matti asked Conner, who was still trembling with his hands raised.

“I don’t know. All I know is that I was sent here to help ease the tensions and—“

“Why do they want my babies?” Eva cried.

“Yes, what do they want with the children?” Matti pressed.

“I don’t know.” Although that was technically true, Conner knew enough about evil fairies to field a few guesses – and none of them were pleasant. “We should go see Bridget,” he urged. “She is in great danger.”

Matti stepped back from him, still suspicious, but no longer threatening him. “Let’s try calling her first.”

Eva grabbed her mobile phone and tapped on her sister’s name. It rang five times and went to voicemail. “Hey Bridget, call me as soon as you can. It’s an emergency.” Her voice was still choked with tears.

Conner grabbed his coat as Matti headed for the car. Eva asked Dan to stay at the house, “If the children escape, this is where they will come.” she reasoned. “Someone should be here, just in case.”

He agreed and they kissed and embraced before she dashed out the door and jumped into the Tercel. Matti and Conner were already in the car, seatbelts fastened.

Along the way to South Dublin, Eva tried to call her big sister four more times, she got the voicemail every time. And every time, her heart accelerated with fear.

She tried again.

“Hey sis!” Bridget answered.

“Hey. Are you ok?” Eva asked urgently.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Why? Are you? Sounds like you’ve been crying.”

“I don’t really know what just happened. I just know the kids are gone.”

“What? Gone? Who took them?”

“I don’t know...”

“Have you called the police?”

“No, that would make things worse.”

“Why? Is it a ransom or something? Did they threaten the kids if you call the cops? Do you need money?”

“No. No, Bridget, listen. I can’t really explain, but Conner can.”

“Conner?”

“Yeah. Can we come see you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Matti, too? She’s with us.”

“Eva...” Bridget wasn’t sure if that was a good idea.

“Bridget, please, this is an emergency.”

“Ok, fine.” Bridget conceded. “But I don’t want any fighting.”

“Ok. We’ll be right there. Lock your doors. Don’t let anyone in until we get there.”

“...ok. Should I call the police?” Bridget asked.

“No. No, I wouldn’t know what to tell them. They would think I’ve gone crazy. And it would be bad for your career too. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. Just keep the door locked. Don’t let anyone in until we get there.”

“Eva, what’s happened? If the kids have been taken, we should call the police.” Bridget insisted.

Eva gasped with frustration. “They’ve been taken by fairies!”

“What? Are you joking?”

“Just wait till we get there, please... and don’t call the police.”

“Ok. Ok. See you soon. Bye.”

As Bridget hung up the phone, there was a knock at her door. She checked the peephole and spied three large, ugly men dressed in casual business attire crowding her doorstep.

“Ms. Neman?” the one at the front called out.

“Who’s there?” She shouted through the door...

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Twenty minutes later Eva, Conner, and Matti arrived in the swanky seaside neighborhood of Killiney in south Dublin. They could see from the driveway that the front door was standing wide open, the doorjamb broken as if it had been kicked in.

Matti sprang from the car and pulled a knife from her pocket as she dashed into the house. In the den she found her eldest sister, tied to a chair with three large, grotesque men standing around her. The one behind her had a knife to her throat.

“Stop right th—” one of them began, but Matti sprinted into the room and leapt at the one with the knife, forcing him to either kill Bridget or defend himself

To be continued...

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