

la·cu·na

/lə'koonə/

noun

an unfilled space or interval; a gap.

"the journal has filled a lacuna in Middle Eastern studies"

a missing portion in a book or manuscript.

...

The war-drum beat of running fills my ears as I pant like the dog whose name I bear.
Emer trails along behind me, stumbling over root and stone as she is pulled along in my wake,
flame's flickering shadow lighting our way forward. How did it come to this?

...

Some Time Ago...

I looked up at the pale, sharp face of Forgall Monach, lord and sorcerer of great renown.
"I love her, my lord. If you let me, I'll take care of her for all my days."

His smile was like a knife, his voice smooth like ice. "But why my daughter? Surely
you'd be more suited to one of those village girls throwing themselves at you."

"They don't love me, m'lord. They look at me like a fine stallion or a pretty bauble,
something to possess and brag about. But Emer... she loves me. She talks to me like a person,
not the loyal hound that is my namesake."

The sorcerer looked pensive for a moment, then sighed. "Cu Chullain, I can tell that your
heart is set, and my daughter has spoken of you fondly. But I cannot simply allow you to marry
my daughter, the difference in station is simply too high. But I have a proposal, if you'll hear me
out young man. Do you think you're up to the challenge of proving yourself worthy of my
daughter?"

I replied, my heart filled with foolish hope, “Anything, m’lord. I’d do anything for Emer to be mine.”

His knife-smile grew wide, as he began to describe my task, “There is an island far to the north, where they say the Warrior Maid keeps court...”

...

A Few Months Later

I stood from where I fell on the ground, breathing hard as my bruised ribs stabbed pain into my breast. But still I raised my spear, as Scathach taught me. It was hard training under the Warrior Maid, but her lessons were well worth it, for when this trial was over, Emer and I would be together at last.

“Come now, Dog” Scathach shouted, her hair ablaze and green eyes flashing, “I know you can do better than that! Strike me just once, and you can rest!”

And so I stumbled forth, my spear clumsy with pain and exhaustion. To my left, I could see Ferdiad struggling with his sword as much as I was with my spear. These past months of torment have turned us into brothers in all but name.

I rushed my teacher, and with a flick of her wrist, my spear’s shaft was cut in twain, and with a kick I was on the ground once more. Moments later, Ferdiad lands with a thud next to me. We groan in mutual pain, but Scathach egged us on. We could stay down if we wanted to, but I have something to prove and Ferdiad has a dream.

Twice more we rise and twice more we fall. This time, our mentor approaches and stands over us, emerald eyes assessing us even as we lay wallowing in our pain.

“Your problem, Dog-boy, is that you never think before you rush in, relying on your battle-rage and strength alone to carry you through. And that works fine, until you meet someone

whose talents match yours, and who trains properly. And you, smoky, you never think for yourself. You have a wonderful talent in blocking and countering, but whenever you see this one” a sharp pain as she delivered a kick to my side. “charge, you just have to be right behind. Now, on your feet. No more sparring for today, but I have some lessons for the two of you.”

Would I survive this?

...

Half a Year and a Day Later

Our blades blurred together as the sound of crashing metal echoed over the shore. Scathach spun between Ferdiad and myself, a sword in each hand. Though neither of us have yet gotten through her defense, neither have her blades tasted our blood.

“Come on you wagons, I know I trained you better than that! Try harder!” cried the Battle Maid. Over her head, Ferdiad and I locked eyes, and put our plan into motion.

Ferdiad took a risk and stepped in close, forcing her to focus on him. He gained a few light cuts, but most of her strikes never got past the arc of his blade or the bulwark of his shield. Meanwhile, I closed my eyes and reached for the rage.

The rage has always been there, just beneath the surface, ready to take hold of me if I let my guard down. If I give in to it too much, I’ll lose control, become a hulking beast. But if I can keep a hold of myself, if I can master my own will, it can be a tool as potent as any sword or spear. I reached for that rage, that boiling sea within me, and it reached back.

I open my eyes and strike, my spear dropping from my grip.

Scathach, warrior that she was, felt my blow coming, and readied herself to dodge or block, but Ferdiad was right there, ready to take advantage of her distraction. I don’t remember which of us got her, but the next moment she was on the ground, laughing.

“By the seas, you lads have grown! The lost little puppy and the wisp of smoke that came to me, begging to become warriors have finally gotten their wish!” As she stood, the joviality bled from her green eyes. “Just remember, you’re good, but you’re not the best. If I’d have been taking this bout seriously, that little trick would never have worked. The two of you better keep training once you’re home. Now, the two of you best be packing up. You have long journeys ahead of you.”

...

A Couple Weeks Later

I should never have trusted a sorcerer's word. A year and a day I spent training with Scathach, a year and a day of not knowing whether I’d survive each day, a year and a day of pain. I arrived at Forgall’s castle at first light, and called out. “Lord Monach, I return! I have trained with Scathac, as you bid me!”

The gates did not swing open. A herald did not come to fetch me, I didn't even get a reply from the battlements. All was silent and still. I settled in to wait. An hour passed, and I called out again: “My lord, please! It is time to settle our agreement. I have waited for Emer, I have proven myself worthy!” Once again there was no response.

I waited. I could do nothing but wait, this was all I ever wanted. Only the dream of seeing sweet Emer’s smile again, of talking away the afternoon with her, of walking beside her the rest of my days kept me going on the Isle of Skye.

The clock struck four more times before Forgall came to me, his foul sorceries allowing him to walk out of my very shadow, tall and dark and sharp like a knife. “Why Cu Chullain,” he sneers, “I did not expect you so soon. Has it already been a year and a day?”

“Aye, Forgall, it has. As we agreed. Do you find me worthy of your daughter yet?”

His smile was a blade in the back. “No.”

I surged to my feet. “What? You promised me-”

“I promised you nothing, mongrel.” His smile contorted with disgust. “I merely suggested that I *might* find you worthy of my Emer if you went and trained with Scathach. Really now, did you think that I’d ever find a common *dog* like you worthy of the blood of my blood? Begone from here, find some other commoner to rut with.”

He faded from in front of my eyes, and I saw red. I stumble into the forest, trying to contain my rage. For rage blinds the mind's eye, and I needed my wits about me.

I promised Emer I’d be back for her.

...

Now

Castle Monach is in flames behind us as we flee into the night. I killed so many getting us out, but there are still so many chasing us. And yet, we have hope.

Legend tells of a crossing in this forest, a place where the walls between fair Éire and the Otherworld, land of the Fair Folk, thins.

My mother always told me stories of my father. I never knew him. To believe her, I was born of her union with Lugh himself, king of the Tuatha who rule under the hill. I always thought she was trying to make me feel better about being born out of wedlock, but...

I have always been stronger than I should, even as a boy I was stronger than most men. None in our village share the particular shade of hair, nor the blue of my eyes. And then there’s the warp-spasm... No, I’ve never exactly been truly mortal. Perhaps... Perhaps my mother wasn’t trying to make me feel better.

Maybe if I make my way under the hill to the Land of Faerie, my father will take us in and shelter us from Forgall Monach's wrath. Maybe I can finally know the other half of my past.

We run, and run, and run, firelight receding while the shouts of angry men grow stronger. Suddenly we are awash in blue light, like a candle shone through water.

A curtain of light hangs in front of us, framed by a cave in the hill in front of us. I look at Emer, and Emer looks at me. We share a kiss, short and sweet, no time for passion, and plunge ahead, under the hill and into the Otherworld.

For but a moment, we see fields of green and flowers in colours not seen in the world I know, and I spot a man with blonde hair and fae-sharp ears coming towards me. And then darkness and exhaustion come for me, and I know nothing more.