

It is night. There is a fire in the hearth that is a puncture in the dark. A naked shape is strung in midair.

Valclane tests the bindings for slack. He steps past the thing and drops low to take the poker from the heat. The end of it leaves the coals with their color. "I see it." He circles the shivering thing and spits the panicwide eyes with ones that do not blink or look. "I know." He puts the tip of the poker into the focus of both sightlines. "I know."

From the stopped mouth comes a muted sound that is a plea. That is a whine.

Valclane slashes an arc through the dim with the white point. The streak ends short but so near the skin its heat flushes. A beat of panic leaps up the cords of the thing's neck and rasps out its stopped mouth. Stillness reaches down into the thing and chokes. It rips on a gasp for air. The rib frame stutters going outward.

He watches the thing's fear reach down into the thing and chokes. It rips on a gasp for air. The rib frame stutters going outward.

There is a quick hiss. The thing wrenches.

It floats.

It shapes a sliver moon's reflection.

It slumps.

Valclane considers the withdrawn tip. There is a coat of black melt on one side that cracks with orange lines and then falls off. He heels a stop to the smoke that trickles from the char.

The thing is gently swaying. Valclane brings a hand to one side of the neck and a thumb below the opposite jawcorner. "I see it." He lifts the chin so it is level and the eyes are pointed his direction. "I know."

There is stillness. There is no sway.

He removes the spitted rag and moves a step back.

"Confess."

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Eere.

A crackle from the burning wood casts the huge silence a shadow. The rod hangs in its fireside niche and has cooled to the loss of color. It is no longer needed hot. It is no longer needed.

Valclane is sat before the fire in a chair near enough to catch. He has justified a sweat the chillless night could not. The thing drooped behind confronts him.

He finds each temple a thumb to sink on. He traces the seam that crooks his nose. His face is a patchwork of skin and muscle that has unravelled. He kneads the grimace but it is inlaid. His fingers cannot ply bone.

“one less”

He starts at the cracked speech. It is his thought he has heard said but that was not his voice’s sound. He does not speak that way. He does not hesitate or state in question. He sweeps the room for ears that could have heard.

There is the thing. But its head hangs from a spine rounded like a cane. It cannot be conscious. There is no other in the room.

None witnessed.

Ash blinks one of the fire’s coals. The change flits his look to it and unnerves it away. It is the eye of a hungry thing. It is a mouth.

“or one more” is muttered.

Valclane inhales what is spilled out and straightens. A thumb clears the thick saliva web from lips and palm wipes forehead of sweat. Fingers brush a touch over the belted handle on the way down to the pocket’s gloves. It is there. The knife is not gone.

The chair’s metal feet rake the floor. His heaved steps fall like well drops.

He squats and retrieves the balled rag from beneath the thing. A few tiny spittle bubbles remain in the deeper nooks. He pulls the wad apart and to a stretch he holds to light. The blotched stains go from dark to muddy red.

There are letters embroidered along one side. He turns the square so they are upright. It is a bib. That is a name.

He reads. He mouths each letter’s shape.

“pea” Not the younger boy then.

“oh” The halfgrown one or daughter. “es”

“tee” That letter’s sound is not in Paulus. Not in any spelling.

Postelluna. The daughter.

Its daughter. His pity is replaced. “how could” The rag is crumpled in his fist. He stands and gives it to the fire.

“Why” Valclane is behind the thing and close. He seizes the rope above the knot that binds the wrists and lifts the thing to drop its weight.

Its toes drift across the floor and scratch the quiet. The rope from staked nail to ankles now has slack but not from stretching. The thing’s shoulders have unhinged and pinched to middle.

“how could you”

It makes no sound. It sways.

“Sin and die.” His eyes are lights. “but child...”

It sways.

“why”

It sways.

“Speak. Now.” Valclane lunges a clenched hand through the arms’ narrow gate to seize the backtied hair at root. He pulls. “Why.”

There is no sound. There is no sway.

The head of the thing is behind the arms but the neck is between them. There is a knob in the elbowed throat.

His mouth is nearly touched to ear. “Answer.”

Valclane watches the visible open eye. Red fibers shoot the white and pale the ring to a sickly blue. It was skylike.

It does not close. It does not blink.

“Answer” he says but does not state.

A dark bead is welled in the corner. It rolls across the glassy surface and down cheek.

Valclane’s shut lips spread thin.

His grip loosens. His hand falls.

He looks to sides and then again now over shoulders.

His eyes are round. His eyes are wide.

It is dead.

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Valclane comes from the birchwood to its end and looks out. The arms of trees are overhead but one step away is cloud night. He is looking for a vertical line.

The dark is wide and blank. Its empty breaks only to gray near den Moest’s lit windows.

He squints. There.

That does not wash with the black of night. That does not move with his headtilt. That is it.

He starts forward with his kindling across the soft ground.

A yellow pip winks open at the stake’s top and a second joins at skew. It is watching him.

He shivers and bites down profane words.

The two pips glint out with the flat hush of a beat of wing. He is close but not enough to pick it from the black.

“Go. Tell it back.” Valclane spits the gray’s direction. “For one of yours.”

The nightbird mocks back.

He stops at the ring of wood built to kneeheight around the stake and sets one arm’s load down on the lip in two splits’ v. With the other’s twigs he makes spokes before layering the rest over in crosshatch. The knit hides the ground beneath.

He pushes at the stacked wood with both hands and to side and side. It is stable enough. It will hold more than his weight. He steps up and touches the slanted notch cut in the stake’s top. His paired fingers easily fit. It is deep enough. This all is ready.

He steps down.

That is all there is to ready.

He stares down the structure he has labored up.

It is ready.

There is a thing behind him and a scratch of whisper but Valclane does not look. It is nothing that is there. It is a lie stitched into the air made of weakness.

It is his doubt. And there is no doubt.

“I knew.” His jaw stops from work. His eyes focus. “I know.”

He takes the leaned hatchet and walks toward the house.

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Valclane stands in the doorway. The go from dark to bright makes shapes of the points that whorl and ripple. He blinks.

The boy Paulus’s bright watery eyes at level. The footstool. The blanket shroud that hangs in midair. The uncovered arms straddled upward.

The boy was told to bed and stay. He has not.

This idiot child.

This crude disobedience.

Valclane is dumb with rage. He is without the shape to move in. He demands from memory his command of the boy to interrogate for ambiguity.

You will stay here until I come back. You will watch them. Say it. Paulus. What you will do. Out. Say it. Now.

There is no excuse. His words were clear.

Valclane blinks and comes to be where he is.

The boy does not meet his eye. Something low has his attention. The metal wedge at the hatchet's end. It is not by Valclane's ankle now. Now it floats out above hip and slowly turns circles in his hand rolled by its fingers.

"mom won't"

"It."

"mom's not answering when I"

A waul from over Valclane's shoulder tears into the room. It cuts out lilted up in pain. The boy flinches. He moves to an angle with the frame that puts its slanted open the cry's direction.

A child. The boy was not to see. He was not to be here.

Valclane turns his back to shut the door and looks out. The night is a black cover that the wild lays under and those tracks the light shows are his. Whatever cried cannot be made out.

But the boy is here though.

Valclane cannot put a sort to the crying mouth. The sound was odd. Birdlike but too long and with too much low. A larger stomach guttered it out. Some wild bitch or a young bear. What caught.

And the boy is here because he chose to be. He chose to look.

"mom's not"

"Boy." He slams the door shut. "It." A different quiet settles over. His hand stays on the knob.

There is no real choice. The boy chose to look and so he will see. It is consequent.

Childhood ends. And there are worse than to man early. He himself was younger.

Valclane turns to the boy.

"s, not," the boy's voice cracks. "Mom's not"

"It." He sinks the hatchet in the floor and bears down on the boy with a stare as hard. "That. Thing." The board strains to keep the edge in. It splinters but gives up. "A thing. It is not a mother."

"Wha"

"That." The blanket wrapped around the backdropping thing gets Valclane's attention. The boy has done more trespass than disobedience. "You put that on it." The pointed hatchet asks the question.

Say fear. It could have been done from nerves. It is a corpse. Say fear. Fear could be blamed to age. Some allowance can be made for that.

“You did that.” Valclane’s speech has fallen low and his words have deepened from their sharp. His face is a mask of blank. “You put that on it.” His wanted answer is not like to be the one the boy gives. “Why.”

Say fear.

“Because, because she looked cold.”

Not fear. Its comfort. To ease. To interfere with a punishment meted by judgement.

“It was cold.” Valclane steps and tears the blanket to the ground. The boy yelps. He leans and reaches out to catch it. “Good.”

That it is dead does not bear. Frustration does not absolve malintent of sin. The boy thought it was alive. Thinks.

He points at the thing’s bound ankles. “Untie it.”

The boy does.

“It is deserved.” The flat of Valclane’s hand lands against the back of the boy’s head and sprawls him on the floor. He is lifted by the collar and stood. “Look at me. You will look at me. It deserves more.” Valclane has come down to the level. “Look at me. We will give it.”

“but” the boy sniffles. “but, why?” His touch to head brings a wince and quiet sob.

“Quit that whine. There is no blood.” The boy is a mirror of shames Valclane would not remember. “A welt.” He turns away and steps onto the footstool.

“why does she”

“It.” Valclane signs for the boy to move by vaguely kicking his direction.

“then why?”

Valclane looks up past the limp splayed hands to the thin rope that stretches to the ceiling. “Why.” He brings an elbow through the gate of arms and down on a shoulder alongside the neck. The boy has not moved. “Get.” This kick gets aimed and barely dodged. He pressures downward on the collar with his weight. “Why give what is deserved.”

Valclane swipes the hatchet through the rope.

The shins of it clat to the wood floor and stay. The rest above crumples backward.

Valclane stumbles down off the footstool.

The boy’s mouth drops open.

It is creaking. Something within is under strain. There is a chew of gristle before a sharp crack. The sternum that peaks the torso’s arch eases nearer to its hips. The head goes loosely to one side.

The boy steps back until stopped by wall. He is in loud tears. He is panting.

“Because we do not suffer them to live. That is why.” Valclane toes the face of the head away from the boy. “Quiet. Shut.” He goes to the fire and pincers one of the orange coals with a pair of tongs. He clamps the boy’s shaking hands around the grips. “Hold this. Go.” He opens the door. “Out.”

The boy does not move. He tries to speak a word but cannot through the choke of spit.

“Out.” Valclane points a finger off toward the stake’s direction. He knows the word. The word is who. “Say it straight.”

The boy tries.

The boy tries and cannot.

Pity. On.

“Go.” Valclane turns away toward the broken thing. With a hand he grabs the loop of rope that binds its wrists with one hand and heaves the thing onto shoulder.

“suffer who?” comes stammered. The boy has not moved.

Valclane takes a fist of hair and moves the fist toward the door. The boy follows.

“The awayward.” Valclane shuts the door. “Heretic. Idolater. Witch.”