The River of Ash

Her screams are music to their depraved ears, like a sonnet of hedonistic desires, and they revel in her pain and worship her body with bruises and bite marks that will soon become scars. Of the six women stranded on this side of the river, her abuse is far from uncommon, and the others breathe a sigh of relief that the gang is sated for a time. The male residents of the isle pay them no mind because they aren't in the same boats; they have other issues, the impending frost being one. The little girls sit and play with their corncob dolls while their fathers and brothers tend to the farm, and they silently watch, contemplating the moment when they will be considered women with fear and sadness.

Of the nineteen families that live on the isle only two mothers remain with four teenagers and eleven little girls. One day their numbers will decrease again... Perhaps it'll be a sickness or maybe the gang will grow tired of their normal antics and the streets will be awash with blood. Fathers will send out their children and watch from the window as they remember when they did the same thing as young men. The shame and guilt that would normally plague someone in their position is nonexistent in the wake of societal pressure; at least, for all but the last living interpreter of God's words...

In the lowest valley, there's a little church just big enough to hold the population. It's a quaint little building that's built up to protect it from the rain that would flow insistently into the low spot, with a single window above the door to throw the shadow of a cross upon the opposite wall. The inside is just as simple: six wooden pews, an alter at the front, and behind a hidden door, there's a little room where an old priest sleeps. Only the women come in from time to time, pleading for guidance and a reason why, and he tells them honestly; the Devil owns the island and sends out his temptations and demons to keep his hold on the
land. So they come in droves, listen to his message and pray with him and one another for someone to save them, but the old priest sits down in his room, away from prying eyes. He prays for a hero, someone who will burn the town to the ground and let him die in peace, redeemed from his greatest mistake.

A cold wind rolls in one day, sending everyone to their homes as the rain pelts the earth with each breath a newcomer makes. The blonde man lays on the bank of the vast span of water, gasping for air that had been denied to him, and he wonders if he'll survive the ordeal that lay in his past. He's far enough from the raging waters that sank his vessel to watch them without the familiar fear of drowning, and he realizes that he's stranded, not knowing if there are people near him on this side, not that there were any close on the opposite bank. The rain eventually slows, and the sound of footsteps reach his ears before another young man comes into view.

"Wha' a'e ya doin' 'ere?" he asks, a polite, albeit false smile on his face, and the blonde quickly sits up to look at the teenager properly. Underneath a mess of curly brown hair lies a dirty face and sharp, beady eyes that warn of his cunning and power, but his lips, bitten and split from fist fights, make almost sincere moments that try to make up for the nature of his gaze. His underclothes are torn and frayed, a layer of dirt coating them, but his outer coat is only slightly dirty and patched with great care. "I neva' seen ya before... Don' tell me ya washed up with the storm..."

"I did," the blonde man replies, standing up, and he fixes his rumpled pants as best as he can before moving on to his shirt and pulling his cross from the safety of the confines. "Is there a town nearby? If there is, could you point the way?"

For a brief moment, the smile slips at the sight of the silver pendant, but the politeness is back in a flash, leaving the man to wonder if it had left at all. "I can do one betta..."

The town, doused in the storm's tears, looms like a graveyard in the distance as they walk. No one talks or stands out on their porches. It's too early to go to bed, but the rain has driven everyone off. At least, that's what the man thinks until his guide leads him down past the quaint cottages to a ramshackle house where he can just hear the rumbling laughter of
drunken adolescents, and the brunette smirks.

"Things work... differen'ly aroun' 'ere. My gang runs this place, and unfortunately, you're a bit olda than mos' of us... I can tell tha' ya don' share our ideals either..." He points past the house to a valley, eyes gleaming dangerously as he takes in the sight of the cross again. "There's a church. The ol' man will take ya in fo' the night. I'll see ya in the morning..."

The door opens after a few minutes of waiting, and the priest looks shocked and relieved all at once when he takes in the man in front of him. "The storm," he says and breathes a sigh of relief, expelling his worry. "Come in, before the revelry starts."

The confusion that had been growing steadily comes to a head at that sentence and shifts his features from the stoic expression he had dawned before. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand what's going on here. I was told that no one lived on this side of the river, much less a gang."

The old man's lips quirk slightly, and he laughs awkwardly at the newcomer's innocent inquiry. "People probably assume that this place doesn't exist because the river is too wide to see across. We don't leave this place, and no one has come here in centuries... Well, other than me and now you." He gestures for the man to follow him into his quarters after barring the door once more, and he picks up one of the hymn books lying on the table. "This place isn't nice. You came on an awful night... In the morning, the women and girls who survive will come here to seek guidance and to have their fears be resolved. I take it that you were not a priest before coming here?"

"N-no," the blonde replies, concern leaking into his voice with each word. "My aunt was a nun though... What do you mean 'women and children who survive'? What's going to happen?"

"Revelry. The beasts are bored of their usual endeavors, and tonight the population will shrink. Children will be orphaned tonight, if they do not fall prey themselves." A scream rings out in the air, and just at the threshold of being unheard at that distance, glass shatters. "And with that, the revelry has begun."

The rainbow glow of the rising sun seems to have taken an eternity for the two men that are holed up in the safety of the church, and it isn't long before the priest is opening the
doors to the frightened female survivors. The newcomer stands at the back and surveys the damage the girls sustained, not understanding how there can be so few adults at first. 'They must have died...' he thinks, only to be brought out of his thoughts by an accented voice calling out to him.

"Com'on, newbie... I 'ave somethin' I wanna show ya." The brunette from the day before offers his best winning smile, but the blood splashed on his face does little to inspire trust. He knows that, between his appearance and the girls who hide behind their equally frightened mothers, he has nothing to make the blonde come with him, so he starts to walk out. “I swear on my own life that I won't kill you if you go on a walk with me.”

“And if I don’t?”

He chuckles coldly and rubs at some of the dried blood on his arm to remove it. “I don’t know… But I don’t think you want to find out.”

“Alright.” The gang leader offers up his arm as the walk out of the door, and the blonde, fearing the consequences of angering him, takes it. “Where are you taking me?”

The teenager points to the crest where the village is located and says, “I wan’ ya to understand wha’ I live fo’.” His grip on the other increases, and he drags him up the incline, nearly buzzing with excitement. “Las’ night was mo’ fun than I ‘ave ‘ad in days... The boys wan’ed to kill you, bu’ I though’ you migh’ be a bit more fun than the old priest. Ya see, he serves a very good purpose for us... He gives them hope.”

“Hope for what?”

A horrified expression crosses his face, making the brunette laugh, when they end up in the middle of the only street to see bodies scattered about on the ground. “Tha’ we won’t be able to do this anymor’.”

“How is this funny?!”

His laughter only grows at the blonde man’s response, and he increases his grip so that his prey can’t run away until he’s done. “It’s no differen’ than when we see an animal tha’ died in a humiliating fashion. Ya laugh. I know tha’ ya do, because we all do. It’s no differen’, and so we laugh. It’s jus’ the way the world works... And now, it’ll be your world.”

“How can they be so cruel?” Slumped over in one of the pews, he clutches his
head and tries to forget what he has seen to no avail.

“It is all they know… Ten generations have lived under this convention. They have never known how the rest of the world sees their behavior…”

The nonchalant way the priest replies is enough to make him look up from his lap again to frown at the man. “And you? Are you innocent of this crime riddled place?”

“No one can be innocent when they run into this situation! I did not, am not guilty of the crimes that the gang commits every moment until they fall out of favor and a new group takes their place! But I am far from innocent…” Green eyes are filled with remorse that for a brief moment close to black out imagined horrors. “I have stood by and watched, never taking a stand against their cruelty. And if I fought this injustice, if I cured this land of its disease, I would be guilty of many things that are just as bad as what I’ve seen them doing… Do you think that you can withstand the guilt either way?”

“Well I can’t sit here and do nothing!” He looks up at the shadow cast on the wall and wonders what God would say about the decision on his mind. “Do you think that you can get the children and the women here one night?”

“Yes, why?”

“I… I don’t want to be a pawn in their games.”

The moon, eclipsed by clouds, would be a welcome sight as the blonde man walks down to the little town in darkness. His pocket feels heavy, overburdened by the weight of a box of matches, and for a moment, he contemplates abandoning his conquest, dropping them on the ground and returning to the church. He reaches into his pocket and wraps his fingers around them. ‘Drop it and return,’ the little coward on his shoulder whispers. ‘We can’t do this!’ He casts that voice away and wonders where the little angel and devil are when they should be guiding him through his decision, but then he thinks that they must both be satisfied because they cannot lose no matter what he tries now.

His footsteps crunch on the rocks along the road, but no one’s awake at such a late hour to hear. The women and children had taken great care to leave and barricade the exits without alerting anyone, and so when he sets the first fire, no one’s any wiser.

“Come inside… You’ll catch a cold.”
“No… I have to watch until the fires go out.” He rubs at the ashes on his arms like the rain will take it off, but it sticks in the nooks and crannies, branding him with what he has done. The screaming had stopped a few hours earlier, but the houses still burn, despite the rain that’s steadily getting heavier. So he stands and watches the glow of the smoldering remains that glow vibrantly in the darkness.

“It’s done though…”

“It'll never be done. At least not for me.”

In the morning, he and the old priest will inspect the damage, but there will be nothing left. There will be burned plots lining the road where the ashes have run, mixing the rainwater in the divot made by feet pounding on the ground. They will notice how it looks like a river flowing to the beach where the blonde was found, where storms will kick up the remains for years and let it flow down the river of ash.