

Genre/Setting: Celtic-myth inspired fantasy. Using Arthurian and Celtic name lists from Story Games Name Project.

Once upon an ancient time, in the tribal village of Penarddun, in a circular stone building with multicolored cloths and furs for a roof, Queen Cinnia of the Penarddun tribe sat in her throne, a wooden chair studded with jewels, many of which were missing - paid tribute to another tribe long ago. Queen Cinnia was considered the most beautiful of the tribe women - with the exception, perhaps, of Siobahn <Character 40>, but that wouldn't matter soon if Gwawl had *his* way. She was not ostentatious, dressed in a simple yellow dress and silver circlet for a crown. Gwawl stood before her, looking surly. A big, swarthy man, at a distance you might have mistaken him for one of the tribe's warriors, he let his ginger hair and beard grow long but they were caked with mud and dirt - and he wore heavy furs. He sweated and stank. Cinnia wished he had more the effete charm of the head druid from their neighboring tribe, but druids, she supposed, came in all shapes and sizes, and this was hers.

Cinnia shook her head. "I refuse to allow it."

Gwawl: "These are tough times, oh Queen. We will lose a lot of people this winter, if our luck in the hunt does not improve."

Cinnia frowned. She dare not speak what she thought - who is this "god", Carnun, who demanded more and more each passing year. Three years ago, the sacrifice of a few animals of the forest contented him. Now, Gwawl recommended a sacrifice of three people. Already, the wicker man <I add Place: Wicker Man 41 to the story deck> was being built in the town center. She was thinking prideful thoughts, thoughts she knew were wrong - *why not send our warriors to Carnun's cave and see just how much of a god he is.*

"Give me a fortnight, Gwawl," she said.

<Let's try a conflict, just to see how it goes. Gwawl tries to convince Cinnia to have the sacrifice as soon as possible.>

"My Queen, the people are upset." He whispers. "Blodwen and Rhain have left the tribe.

And...I've overheard talk of...revolt! We need to set their minds at ease as soon as possible -

and appease Carnun." <Success, 38, "Returned from the dead."> "But I have not even yet told you of the most horrible portent yet; last night I saw the ghost of Bradwr <I add

Character:Bradwr 42 to the deck, but should probably have just noted his name on the Returned from the Dead card> moaning amongst the oaks!"

<38 should be easy to beat: Cinnia draws Detail: The Stars 33>Cinnia: "Bradwr is no doubt as vengeful in death as he was in life. It means nothing to me. What do *the stars* say?"

<Gwawl draws Detail: Mistletoe 15>Gwawl: "Last night I prepared and took mistletoe tea. And I studied the stars. And they agree. A sacrifice must be made."

<Cinnia draws Item: Sword 14>Cinnia: "I've heard enough, Gwawl. I demand a fortnight. Weylyn, escort Gwawl back to his temple."

Weylyn emerged from the shadows. The tallest of Cinnia's people, made even taller by hair limed straight up, covered with henna tattoos, in garments stained red with berry juice, his sword in hand. "Let's go, Gwawl. The Queen is not in the mood to hear more."

<Gwawl draws Event: Birth 28>Gwawl shakes his head as he backs out of the room, his hands up in a placating gesture. "You are making a mistake, my Queen. Why, Annwyl is due to give

birth any day now ... let's pray Carnun does not take the child." <Adding a note to the Birth card - Annwyl is due>

The queen rubs her eyes. "Begone." And Gwawl leaves.
She had a fortnight to end Carnun. Somehow.

<Scene change: Carnun>

In a cave in the hills in the middle of the known land, in the deepest cavern, the moon shone through a large hole above and illuminated the black cauldron that Carnun looked into. In the surface of the water, Carnun watched the conversation between Cinnia and Gwawl and knew not what they said. Carnun, a naked man from the neck down; with the skeletal head of a stag emerging from his ragged bleeding neck. In the black eyesockets of the stag skull glowed red coals. <Detail: Glowing Red Coals 43>

The glowing red eyes were fixated upon Cinnia - the curve of her cheek, the line of her nose, the way the light struck red in her hair like fire, her emerald eyes.<Detail: Emerald 44>

"I will have you, Queen Cinnia," his voice, a harsh whisper. <Detail: harsh whisper 45>

<He's casting a lust spell on the Queen. Draw: character, gryphon.>

"Gryphon's blood," he whispered, and he upended a vial into the cauldron. The surface went red - the vision of the Queen went red.

<Queen draws: place, 18, the underworld. Hmm, what can that mean...>The vision disappeared, and instead Carnun found himself gazing into the dark waters of hell itself.

Bradwr's ghostly face appeared. "...my lord...", he whispered.

<Carnun draws: character, fomor, 10>"*Do not interrupt me!*" Carnun's hoarse whisper became a shriek. "*Fomors take you!*"

Bradwr's eyes grew wide with terror. "But my lord-" Ghostly tentacles and misshapen limbs reached around him, pulling him into darkness...

<Queen draws: Wolf 20>And Carnun's view returned to the Queen. She had left her paltry throne room and was travelling to the cliffs, a place he knew from long watchings that she liked to go to be alone, to meditate. As he lowered his head over the cauldron his stag's teeth seemed to smile. A drop of spit fell into the cauldron waters. The Queen looked over her shoulder. She began to run. A wolf was chasing her! She fell! It bit her leg. The wolf, like the stag, was Carnun's creature - his desire would infect her. She was as good as his.

<Scene change: Gwawl. I'm stuck for what he does now ... I suppose he could help build the wicker man? But that's not inspiring. So I ask "What's Gwawl's fate?" And draw Event: Marriage 30. Could go a couple of ways here - Gwawl has a wife...maybe a Lady Macbeth type...or he could need to preside over a wedding...think I'll go for the first one.>

Gwawl stood and watched the progress as a few of the townsfolk worked on the wicker man. They were working diligently and quickly, often cutting corners, trying to get it done as soon as possible - everyone was anxious, their hungry bellies and small size of the stores crying out. But a mistake would not do.

"My friends!" He called out. They stopped and looked at him. "I admire your alacrity but please - Carnun will not be pleased with a slapdash, rushed job. Take your time. Make this the best wicker man we've ever made! We have a while yet before the sacrifice."

Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say. Gwawl's wife was among the workers. She stepped down off her table and came over to him. "You didn't convince her?" she murmured, out of earshot of the other workers.

He shook his head, a slight *no*.

"What are we going to do now?" she hissed.

"She urged us to wait a fortnight?"

"In a fortnight, winter will be upon us!"

Too loud, her voice. The other workers turned and stared, then pretended not to stare. They murmured amongst themselves.

She grabbed his arm. "We must perform the sacrifice without her permission. As soon as the wicker man is complete."

<I stopped and thought for a while, and the "Play!" message popped up. So - scene change. Cinnia. She is now under the thrall of Carnun.>

The wolf's jaws sink deep in the flesh of her calf, she cries out, and Weylyn, who never lets her get too far out of her sight, rushed through the woods with a bellow. The wolf startled and fled, only to be hit by Weylyn's well-aimed spear. <Does he kill it? Aspect: Strong, reversed. No.> But so strong! It shrugged off the blow, the spear fell, and it bolted into the woods.

"My Queen!" Weylyn picked her up and carried her back into the village.

"I know what we must do," she said, eyes closed, voice labored.

"Yes, my Queen?"

"You must bring me to visit Carnun. I must talk to him myself."

"In person?"

"Yes."

"But - but he may slay you, as soon as look at you. No man seeks the audience of a god."

"I am not man, but woman. That is why Queens rule our land, because we may do things men cannot."

"You've been bitten by a wolf - he clearly does not favor you."

"This is my decision, Weylyn. Bring the druid to bind my wound, and gather a team of men to escort me to Carnun's cave."

<Can she walk after the druid does his ministrations? Birth reversed - no.>

Gwawl left the side of Annwyl to make the Queen a poultice and could not help but entreat to her that this was another terrible portent, and sacrifice was surely the best option. <Add to the unanswered question list - Why does Cinnia not want the sacrifice to go forward? Is she in love with Siobahn?>

"Still your tongue, druid."

He quietly finished binding her leg, and then said, "I don't believe you will be able to walk on it for a few days."

"I cannot wait that long. Prepare me a stretcher," she said to Weylyn, watching anxiously when he should have been gathering men for the journey. "You shall carry me to Carnun's cave."

The Queen wondered at her own motives - just a day ago, she would have liked to visit Carnun's cave to destroy him. Now she did not feel the same - now she simply wished to see him, and then pass judgment. What had happened to her? she wondered. Why did her heart

betray her?

<Carnun's scene. Plot twist: Returned from the dead. Something involving Bradwr, then.>
Carnun feels a chill. He was preparing for the hunt, his blood starting to boil in his veins, the beat of hooves in his heart, when the chill came. He turned from the stag he was grooming - and there was Bradwr.

"I thought the fomors had you," Carnun muttered.

"I must have disagreed with them."

"What do you want?"

<I never made it an unanswered question but should have - Who was Bradwr (the name means traitor) and why has he returned? Time to answer: Bard reversed. Hmm, he must have been a bard - and he must have something important to tell (that's what Bards do, oral tradition). But what is that important thing? Peat Bog. There's something in the peat bog. What? Balor! Jesus Christ. Who would have thought Balor lurked in the peat bog.>

"Don't you want to know *why* the fomors let me go?"

"Pray tell."

"I've been marked, by the greatest of them all."

"Balor? That's ludicrous. He's not been seen for centuries."

"When I was drowned in that peat bog by my so-called kinsmen - I sunk through the muck and emerged in a chamber beneath the earth. Balor rested there, on a stone slab the length of three men. His iron hood was locked over his single eye, and he was chained, hands and feet, to the slab. You know nothing of this?"

"I know. I helped chain him! But he's dead. He could not have marked you."

"He lives. He spoke to me. And I became marked."

Carnun's veins ran with ice. Though he and his brethren defeated the fomors ages hence, it was a bitter war and he lost many a kinsman. And Balor was the worst - whole armies fell under the gaze of his unhooded, terrible eye. <Detail: eye. 50> But they had expected something like this - that was why they chained the beast underground, because even though they had cut out his heart they feared it would somehow grow back, that the land of the dead would not hold him.

"Why do you tell me?"

<I'm really not sure. Because he's a bard and he feels its his responsibility to bring news? Lime pit reversed. No. To save the world? Druid unreversed. Yes.>

"So you can do something! So you and your *sidhe* friends can go down there and cut out his heart again. I may not have loved my tribe but I love this land and would not see it engulfed in flame."

Carnun nodded. "Then tell Nuada. Tell the Morrigan. Tell them to meet me here at midnight tomorrow. We will return to the beast's cell, and slay it again."

<Oh man, now that I've introduced Balor I can't just let him be snuffed out without showing up to do some damage...what excuse can I think of for something freeing him? Gwawl? Gwawl's wife? Yeah, yeah...>

Her name used to be Maelona. Then she married Gwawl. A wise marriage, all her family

agreed. But she lost her name. Now she was simply known as Gwawl's wife. And the bile rose in her, day after day, night after night, the way he treated her - his unspoken assumption, that he could have had any woman of the tribe, the implication that she was lucky to have him. Him - too much of a coward to face the Queen. He disgusted her. These same thoughts circle in her head, behind her eyes, as she tries to sleep. Finally, sleep comes...

And a rainbow <Detail: Rainbow 50> appears in her dreams - arcing through a sky half-clouded, half-illuminated - arcing through a spray of rain, down into the woods to the south of the village. She follows, gliding above the grass and mushrooms and loam, to the peat bog. There, the rainbow strikes the bog - there, where they drowned Bradwr.

She wakes - knowing, somehow, that there is treasure, there, in the middle of the bog. Gwawl snores next to her. She gets up in the night. The moon, nearly full, gives enough light...

<Timer went off. Next scene.>

The sun is nearly setting as Weylyn and the other warriors carry Queen Cinnia in her rudimentary palanquin to the mouth of Carnun's cave. She raises her hand - they halt and lower her.

"Weylyn, escort me."

Holding onto him, she limps with him to the cave mouth.

"I dare not enter, my Queen," he says, just as they are about to step into shadow.

"You will do as I command."

<Will he? (Stag.) Yes, but (circle of megaliths reversed)...>"Very well. Let the rest of the men get to safety." He points to a circle of standing stones. "Go set up camp over there - *next* to the stones, *not* amongst them!"

The other warriors strike off. And he steps into the shadowed ground. After a dozen steps, it is too dark to see much further. Cinnia still holding onto him - he lights a torch.

And there is Carnun, his god, standing before them, a full head taller than he even without the antlers. He is paralyzed with fear.

Queen Cinnia speaks. "My lord Carnun. I have come."

Carnun says nothing. His eyes glow.

What was she going to say? She shakes her head, tries to remember.

"I have come to beg. To beg that you spare my village. Stop demanding these sacrifices. My people have done nothing against you."

Carnun's harsh whisper. "There is another sacrifice you could make for your people."

Despite the fact that Carnun is Weylyn's diety, despite the fact that Weylyn is sworn to this god, he is still revulsed at the thought. His Queen - with this skull-headed *thing*?

"Myself?" Breathes Cinnia.

Carnun nods. "Give me yourself, and your tribe will have bountiful hunts for many years to come."

"So it shall be," Cinnia says - she releases Weylyn and limps forward to the arms of her new lover.

Weylyn cannot stand it - he throws a spear at Carnun's eye.

<Carnun draws 8: Queen of the tribe - Carnun uses the queen to defend himself? Yikes, there goes my protagonist?>Carnun sees the spear coming and lifts Queen Cinnia up to take the blow

- the spear pierces her chest.

<Weylyn draws 40: Siobahn>Carnun pulls the spear from Cinnia's chest and throws it back through Weylyn's heart. Weylyn's last thought is of Siobahn...

Deep in his cave, in the recesses only he knows how to get to, Carnun rocks Queen Cinnia's body and his red coal eyes weep blood. The blood splashes on Cinnia's wound, but this is no fairy tale, the wound does not heal...

Outside the cave, the Morrigan and Nuada meet. "Where is Carnun?"

Bradwyr, even though he is already dead, is afraid of angering the Morrigan - three hag-goddesses, currently in the form of crows, circling, cawing.

"He said he'd be here."

Then Bradwyr spies the Penarddun warriors. <Timer goes off. Let's sic the gods on them.>

Two of the warriors helped throw him in the peat bog, the last day he lived. "Maybe those men know," Bradwyr says - aware that they undoubtedly know nothing, but eager to see them squirm before gods.

The crows circle the standing stones, and Nuada walks amongst them. "Greetings, short-lived ones."

The crows change form - a maiden, a matron, and a hag. "Yes, Greetings."

The warriors of Penarddun, painted blue and with limed hair, are used to others being afraid of them. Suddenly they are aware how it feels...

"Where is Carnun?" asked Nuada. "Where is the Lord of the Hunt?"

They shake their heads. "Don't - don't know."

The Morrigan laugh. "Can we eat them?"

Nuada shrugs and sits amongst the stones. The Morrigan feed.

Nuada looks to the cave mouth. "If Carnun cannot be bothered to face Balor again, then neither can I. Surely those manacles will hold him."

The Morrigan are too busy eating to respond.

Bradwyr is tired - it takes a great deal of effort, remaining on the mortal plane. He sighs, and allows himself to be pulled back to the land of the dead.

<Time to end this. Cinnia's drive is answered - she's dead and failed to stop Carnun. Carnun's drive is answered - Cinnia is dead. What about Gwawl's drive?>

Siobahn looks out from between wicker slats, tears streaking down her face, making lines in the dirt that has been smeared there from when she was pulled from her hut and dragged to the wicker man. "Why?" she asks, sobbing. "Why?"

"Light the fire," Gwawl says.

The screams are horrible.

Under the earth, Gwawl's wife is covered with mud and slime. She crawls up to a stone slab where a giant lies chained. She somehow knows, though she doesn't know where this knowledge comes from, that if she can free the giant, she will be well rewarded...

She takes a boulder between two hands, and smashes at the giant's chain.

<I decide not to unleash Balor in the narration after all. It's pretty cool this way, I think. And I never did officially answer the question about whether the Queen was into Siobahn, but I guess the answer at this point is no.>