

about their neighbors or the princess of Sirenia. I thought about the happy families I saw tonight, the lineages they experienced in each other's company, the familiar embraces to which the touch of casual friendship can never compare, the knowing laughter, the cozy bliss I imagined when I saw the mother pressing her sleeping babe to her breast, rocking in the cold breeze, closing her eyes and smiling as if God Himself snuggled close to her skin. I thought about how Nicolai and I still had not conceived after a year of trying (and could that be why he refuses me even more often these days, I wondered, because he thinks it is his fault, and adds that to his heap of shame and sorrow?). I thought about how little I knew myself, compared to the person I once was—how lost I felt from the peaceful diligence of my childhood, how lost from my sense of purpose, how out of touch with the passion and certainty that had brought me here a year ago.

In the end I came home to the castle, for where else could I find myself?—but too restless to sleep, I climbed the long, sad stairs to the old tower. Once upon a time, I could not bear to hear the howl of my beloved, in his agony, arising from this place. Now I could not bear the silence. I could not bear the desolation of the past, the meaningless hiss of this old, bitter wind—and yet I climbed into the window to feel it blow against me, to feel the pain of its ruthless cold, to feel *something*. To cool, I suppose, the fury in me—the fury of missing the darting minnow of his tongue when he used to dip into me, everywhere, with such careless lust. In the beginning. When he was man and beast at once, when he did not yet know himself enough to be ashamed.

Rhiannon appeared to me in the air, like a mirror. Floating outside the tower window where I crouched like a cat in the wind. I fell backward, startled out of a reverie so shameful, I felt as if she could see it. Rhiannon, the Dark Faerie Queen. She floated in the wind, the way a ghost might float but not like a ghost at all—more like a dark, writhing, soaking piece of seaweed with a face like a monster's, or a faerie's, all at once.

She surged closer, leaning in to me, and I couldn't look at her but her skirts rustled in an old, empty way that horrified me, as if I heard the sound of millions of insect husks cascading from an open tomb, and I smelled the roses so suddenly up close, suffocating me.

"Mina Fox," she said. Her voice was impersonal at first, as if she'd come to deliver a message. It was full of air, like the sound of the sea.

"Who are you?" I gasped.

"I am Rhiannon. I made your husband a beast, and you turned him back again. Good work, my daughter."

“Why do you call me daughter?” I gasped, wrapping my arms around my body, huddled now on the floor and no longer hot. “You are not my mother.”

I felt her smile, and her voice changed. “But you wish that I were.”

I thought, *I wish no such thing*, but even as I thought it, I felt some vague yearning in my belly, I looked into the lapping layers of her robes, I wanted to lose myself there, I wanted to forget myself in that nurturing darkness, like a seed falling into the earth—knowing it could rest there all winter long, and nothing would be asked of it until spring.

“I wish only that Nicolai were happy,” I said.

“Bah!” she barked, like a dog. “Nicolai, bah. It’s you I’m interested in, Mina Fox. I did it all for you.”

“Did—what do you mean? Did what?” I spoke into her rustling skirts, my mouth stiff with horror, my throat so dry I kept coughing.

“Your troubles are only just beginning, Mina Fox,” she said over me. “You will feel lonelier than you have ever felt. You will feel empty, dead inside. You will feel disconnected from your husband, your people, even from yourself! You will lose everything, and then you will be given hope again, only to have it taken away.”

I think I actually cried out then, every part of my being rising up in protest. “But—why—” I began stupidly.

“And you will never bear children,” she said.

“No,” I murmured, weeping, for I believed her. It was the first time I knew that she was telling the truth. I felt, as soon as she said it, that I had always known this. And I wept for a long time. I felt so desolate, so undone in the nightmare that enfolded me, that at one point I reached for the hem of her robes and held it against my eyes to absorb my tears. She did not move. She stood as solid in the air as a person stands on the ground.

“Why?” I asked at last. “What have I done? Why do you curse me thus?”

A wind came down upon my head then, and I did not know if it was her breath, only it was cold. “Fool!” she cried, and her cry held the violence and high pain of a hawk’s cry in a far, far sky, but it swirled in echoing crescendo around the little high tower room. “This is human, this talk of curses.” Then she said, “I tell you, I love you. I love by darkness. The darkness is necessary. It is half of the world’s turning. Without it, nothing would transform. You know this.”

“Then,” I ventured, my desperation making me daring—for I already felt some of the loneliness she predicted, or so I thought—“will there be

an end to it? Will this darkness, eventually, give way to light? Will there be some purpose for all—?”

But she interrupted me again in seeming fury. “I don’t care!” she said. “That isn’t my domain. I do not bring darkness in order for there to be light. I only bring darkness. If you are always thinking of the damned light, you will not be able to see in the dark, and it will get you—it will imprison you, it will eat you while you aren’t looking!”

“But I need the hope,” I cried. “I need it to keep me going!”

“No you do not,” she said. “The darkness is a river. It goes down. Surrender, and you do not need anything. It is already going. You need do nothing.”

“But is there no meaning in all of this? Why am I here? What is it for?”

I expected her fury again, but this time she only sighed. She was almost gentle. I almost wanted to look up into her eyes again, but I was too afraid. “I cannot answer you,” she said. “If I answered you, I would transplant a flower into a pile of stones. Perhaps when your soil is black and rich, one day, in the darkness, the answer will grow there on its own.”

Seeing I could not get the answer I wanted now, somehow I calmed myself, and sat back, and brushed the dirt off my clothes, and tried to regain some of my dignity.

“Good,” she said.

“What is Nicolai’s path, then?” I asked. “What is he meant to become?”

“Not your question to ask, Mina Fox.”

“Will you come to him, too, then, and tell him his fate?”

“I already came to him, fifty years ago. If being a beast for fifty years wasn’t clear enough...” And she gave a kind of snort.

“What of my sisters?” I asked. I suppose I thought now that she might know anything.

“What of them?” she growled.

“Are they alright?”

“Of course they are alright. Everyone is alright.”

“No, I mean, are they alive and well? Are they happy?”

“Yes, enough. They are well. They do not need you as much as you think.”

I thought on this. I suppose I felt some relief. I had not realized how much of my missing them was guilt.

“And Nicolai? Does he need me as much as I think he does?”

“Not as much as you need yourself,” was her cryptic answer.

An owl called from somewhere far. I wondered why she stood before me so long. I felt there was perhaps some kindness in her staying with

me, though I probably imagined that, in my loneliness. I thought about the river she spoke of. For a moment it seemed I could feel the pull of that river, that flowing downward into infinite darkness, and the peace of it, and the violent release of it, the seduction of it. I wanted to follow it. But I felt pulled back away from it, at the same time. It was as if Nicolai pulled me. My commitment to him. My love for him. I thought, *If I ever died, he couldn't survive. I must make sure not to die before him.*

As if she could read my thoughts, Rhiannon said suddenly, "Do not tell Nicolai. Do not tell him of our talk. Never. He will not understand."

I shook my head. "Neither do I," I murmured, with unutterable sorrow. "Ah," she said, "but you do."

Then she was gone.

Why did she come to me? Why tell me of such horror? Did she lay that destiny upon me, or only warn me, so I should know?

I came back to our room, but did not return to bed. I have taken this journal out to a ledge to write. I have been writing all night. I could not sleep. I could hear the mermaids wailing, all night, but now they have stopped.

You would think I would feel despair, hearing all that she said to me, but strangely I do not. Or if I do, I do not know it. I do not know what I feel.

Though she did not threaten any consequence, I know I will never tell Nicolai. I know she was right. He would lose his mind, to know I even saw her. She is his worst nightmare. Ah, but how can I keep it from him? How can I not tell him, that we will never have children? How can I allow him to keep hoping?

I think how I have always loved the night. When I was a little girl, I used to say black was my favorite color—an idea my sisters teased me for and could not believe. I used to think of a shiny black, like the night sky. It gives me a little peace now, when nothing else can.

I remember now, one more thing Rhiannon said. How strange that I should have forgotten it. Perhaps I forgot many other things she said, as well, and will only remember them years from now, if ever.

She said, "Every year on the winter solstice, you may call for me, if you wish. If you have any question at that time, I will answer it."

Yet I can hardly imagine wishing to call upon such a deity as her. Her dark news of last night was enough to fill a lifetime.

Now the dawn comes bleak and unknown from across the water. Once I called this kingdom the end of the world, but really it is the beginning. It is the first place the sun rises. Everything is so fresh and clear and cold here, it almost hurts to live.