

Snake and Selkie

Everything about her seems otherworldly. Precious gems wrap themselves around her neck, but not even their lustre compares to her radiance. I *know* that if I were to fall into her arms, I would tuck neatly underneath her chin, safe. Her soft hair was tied neatly into a braid. It was impossibly long and impeccably cared for. A large, snowy overcoat was shrugged over her shoulders like armour, protecting her. I can barely manage a coherent thought when she flashes a gentle smile at me.

She is unreal. I would not be surprised if she were a faerie, come to tempt me away from my duties. I have no choice but to oblige, obviously.

Orla laughs under her breath as I hand over my drink to her. I can hardly register her teasing as the sound of crashing waves overpowers everything else in the ballroom. I am supposed to be paying attention, I know. Father has drilled into me how important tonight was, but none of that matters now. I brush off the sycophants attempting to catch my attention, but my eyes remain solely on her.

When I reach her, I flash my best smile and take her hand. I bow low, pressing a chaste kiss to it. I revel in how her cheeks are flushing a gorgeous pink, 'A dance?'

She removes her hand from mine and takes a sip from her glass, 'I don't even know your name, my lady.'

It's utterly ridiculous - it's hard not to know me. She is teasing me. I give her a sweeping bow, almost theatrical, 'Lady Adelaine.'

'You are the one people are celebrating tonight. It's a pleasure,' she says with a slight bow. Her overcoat slips just enough to give me a peek at the shining silver dress underneath. It almost blends into her skin.

'Do you usually attend parties without knowing the host?'

'Always,' I feel my knees growing weak. She pushes a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and it's then that I notice the glitter woven between the strands of her hair, 'Saoirse, my lady.'

My mind is overrun by her—her face, her name, her hands, her everything. I can feel my palms sweat as I extend my hand once again, 'May I have this dance?'

She takes it. Her skin is cold, like a porcelain doll or a marble statue, 'I could not refuse, my Lady Adelaine,' she says.

We walk out onto the floor, mingling with the crowd of people already dancing. We take our positions - I lead. She follows. The music is no longer slow and gentle. Instead, a sultry score takes its place, and we begin. Every move she makes is elegance personified; swift, confident steps, and before I realise it, we have switched positions.

She dips me low, looking down at me with a heated gaze. I cannot bring myself to be upset at the shift.

Gentle hands guide me back up. She smiles. It is darker this time, 'I hope I am satisfactory, my lady.'

'It is. You dance well.'

'You are not used to following, I take it,' she hums. It doesn't feel like an insult. She circles around me, and I feel the ice-cold touch of her hands on my waist through my dress. I cannot hold back a shudder.

'Will you teach me?' I am not as confident as I wish. She spins me around, and we separate, our fingertips barely touching.

'I've had a few dances before,' she pulls me close, chest to chest. I can feel her breath on my lips. Just a little closer—

Her grip tightens on my waist before we separate. There is nothing else in the ballroom aside from Saoirse. I cannot move my eyes away as she leads me through the routine I had thought I had perfected, but as she dips and twirls and tugs me closer and *closer*.

The only sounds I can hear are the orchestra, louder and louder, and our breath every time we get closer to one another, intermingling until it becomes one. She is everything I wish for, everything I have desired. A fae come to tempt me away, a siren tugging me deeper into the murky depths until I can do nothing but drown. A sweet dream.

But she is *real*.

Saoirse dips me again when the music closes, and I can feel the air leave my lungs. The world spins on its axis. All I can focus on is her. Her hands tremble the slightest bit as she gently holds my hand. We become close as she pulls me up, lips almost touching - a hair's breadth away. We step away from each other and walk to the fringes of the dance floor.

She turns to face me, folding her hands over each other demurely. If I hadn't just experienced it, I would not have thought such a gentle creature capable of taking control, 'Many thanks, Lady Adelaine. I have not danced like that in quite a while.' She is breathless, blushing a soft pink. She fans herself, 'It is quite warm for spring, is it not?'

'Perhaps you should remove your coat. You would fare well handing it over to one of the servants.'

She takes a step away from me, gripping the edge of her coat. The heavy desire in her eyes has vanished, and it feels as though a deep chasm has begun to form between us. 'No need. I will get some air in the gardens.'

'Are you sure?'

'Certain. Besides,' she angles her head to look behind me, 'Your handmaid seems to be looking for you.'

I turn around and see Orla motioning for me to come back. I turn back around to excuse myself—to apologise and ask for dinner—but when I look, Saoirse has vanished completely, like she was never there.

We meet again, of course. About a month later.

Something angry settles into my gut, but it melts away into oblivion as I watch her stare at the sunset. I didn't know anyone else knew of this place, a small beach tucked away behind towering rocks. A hideaway - somewhere to run from my Father, from my duties as a lady, from the world. I want to scream at her. To tell her to get out, but it dies on my tongue as she turns to face me.

Saoirse flinches in surprise. Despite the hot weather, she still has her coat wrapped around her like a blanket, uncaring of the sand getting picked up between the delicate furs. She looks less elegant than when we first met—bereft of the glitter and the jewels—but she still unearthly, and I feel as though I am trespassing on my own beach.

I take a step back and give a bow, 'Sorry for disturbing you, Miss Saoirse. I didn't know anyone else was here.'

'It's fine, ' she says, her voice soft as ever. 'I didn't think I'd see you again.'

'You did flee rather suddenly. I was hoping to spend more time together.' I want to walk towards her, but it's as though heavy irons have been placed around my ankles.

She looks pained. 'My lady, I—'

It's a gentle silence that falls. Saorise still seems nervous as she shifts her position, and it's then that I notice her bare legs. The coat covers her in her entirety, but there are flashes of skin that make my face flush.

I sit down beside her, shoulder to shoulder, the warmth of her coat seeping through my thin shirt. I haven't laced it up properly. I can see her sneaking glances every now and then, and I take advantage of it, leaning back on my hands so it falls away and reveals more. Her breath stutters. I laugh.

My heart is screaming, rattling against my ribcage. I tug at my collar, loosening it further and delighting in the strangled noise that comes from her throat. I look at her - her flushed cheeks, her bitten lips, her sparkling eyes - and smile.

'Were you swimming?' I ask.

'Pardon?'

'Or do you normally go without clothes?'

She swats at my shoulder and moves away. I want to chase her, but I stop myself. It's far more amusing to watch the tips of her ears burn with embarrassment and how she curls up towards herself to regain her sense of modesty. It is strange, though, as I look around the beach. There is no trace of a bag or even any clothes.

I shake my head and turn to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. I almost falter at how soft her coat is, 'Want to take a dip?' I ask.

She eyes me up and down, 'Did you bring a bathing suit?'

'Of course not,' I laugh and begin removing my clothes. I can feel her eyes on my back as I turn, shifting out of my shirt. Her gaze traces my back so heavily I can imagine her breath on my skin. What I would give to have her slowly trace gentle kisses down my spine.

Once undressed, I grab her hand. Not harshly - just gently cradling her wrist in my palm. She looks away from me, scowling, 'You are supposed to be noble, Lady Adelaine. This is the second time you have disregarded etiquette in front of me.'

'Oh? I hadn't noticed.' I brush a strand of my hair behind my ear with my free hand, the sea-salt breeze becoming more apparent the longer I stand here. 'Well? Would you like to swim?'

She is hesitant, her eyes looking between my hand and the sand. She grips the coat closer to her, and I cannot stop a stinging jealousy rising in my gut. It seems utterly ridiculous that it's a coat stopping me from getting closer to her. I want to get rid of it, if only so I can have her eyes focus solely on me.

And just as I thought—as she gave me a smile steeped in sadness—Saorise shook her head, 'I'm sorry, my Lady.'

I drop her hand and look towards the sea. From behind me, I hear her shifting in the sand until her hands wrap themselves around my waist. I shiver as she rests her chin on my shoulder, her chest pressing into my back. The impossibly soft furs of her coat clashing with her ice-cold skin. Gentle lips press a chaste kiss to my skin, and I feel as though I will die. Slowly, her hands trace up to my chest, resting just underneath my breasts, 'I'm sorry, Adelaine.'

Sighing, I lean back against her. After a couple of seconds that seem to stretch on for an eternity, I turn around. She looks at me, yearning. I cannot resist. I snake a hand around her waist and rest my head on her sternum. 'Come home with me,' I sweetly whisper.

There is hesitation, but Saorise nods her head.

We dress and take the scenic route back to my home. I can barely remember what we spoke about, but it hardly matters when I'm underneath her. I can barely feel anything at all aside from her hands on my skin, tracing shapes and letters with her nails. As I lie there, cradled in her arms, I catch sight of the coat draped over an armchair. It fills me with an anger I cannot understand, and before I am fully aware, I am slipping away from Saoirse's arms. She's too deep in slumber to notice my absence, and I pray that it stays that way. Shrugging on a light robe, I grip the coat with a jealous rage. I want to keep her with me. I *need* to keep her with me. It's petty. It's childish - I *know*.

I do it anyway.

I was kept inside the manor house for as long as I can remember, under the thumb of my Father and what he wanted for my future. A child, under those conditions especially, learns where to hide - the best places to hide - unseen from both the help and their parents. There is one place that I remember well, tucked away in one of the supply cupboards. I don't fit inside it anymore - much too small for an adult - but as a child, I'd hide away in the crawl space and wait till my heart rate went down and the tears stopped flowing.

It's the perfect size for a large fluffy coat.

It will only be for a while. Just a little while.

I walk back to my room, the shadows on the wall growing higher and higher with every step. The fervour has faded from my bones, and all I feel is a deep urge to attach myself to Saorise until she accepts me. Until she lets me drown in her.

She has not noticed that I have vanished from the room. She looks so precious like this, curled up in my sheets. I want to keep her there forever, wrapped up for me like a doll. Sitting down on the mattress, I press my head close to hers, relishing in the cool temperature. I brush a hand through her hair, spilling it over the sheets. I am so lucky that I met her before anyone else had the chance.

Slowly, so I don't wake her, I slip underneath the covers and bury my head in her chest.

I wake up late the next morning to the sound of frantic rummaging. When I open my eyes, I find that Saorise has all but torn apart my room. She's looking for her coat. I know she is. A tinge of guilt settles itself in my gut, but I ignore it. Dragging myself out of bed, I rest a hand on her shoulder. She flinches and shoves me away.

She's on her knees, tears in her eyes. She has never looked more beautiful. Her voice is hoarse, 'Where is it?'

I stare down at her before kneeling and cupping her cheek. She leans into the touch and sobs. Her skin is impossibly cold. 'I'll ask the servants. Perhaps they moved it in the night? You are welcome to stay until it is found.'

'You don't understand. I need to *go*. I need to go *now!*' She's irrational. I want to squeeze her tight. I want to whisper sweet lies into her ears, that everything will be ok and her coat will be found, 'I am begging you, my Lady. I need my coat. I cannot see my family without it.'

It doesn't make sense. I don't care, 'I will ask. Rest, my pearl. You'll wrinkle your pretty face.' I take her hand and guide her back to the bed. She looks perfect amidst my sheets. 'Someone must have seen it,' I say.

She doesn't respond, crying into my pillows. I get dressed and leave my room, glancing back at Saorise as I do. She's gripping the sheets, her knuckles a bright red, and the sheets are growing damp from her tears. I want to kiss her all over, gently pressing my mark onto her skin. When I close the door, I lock it quietly. She hasn't noticed, too engrossed with grief. It's utterly ridiculous, but it doesn't matter. She's here, and I have no intention of letting her go.