

*The queen is dead.*

Those were the words Thana woke me with in the hours before dawn. Her face solemn. Eyes damp. I imagine the Night Court to be grief-stricken and in shock at the abrupt end of Enya's peaceful reign.

I couldn't say I shared the sentiment.

No. I did not feel grief.

I knew my queen mother's face only from the tapestry hung in the temple on the hill, but I had never heard her voice, felt her touch—had never *known her*.

Instead of being raised among the gentry of the court, fed by golden spoons, and bathed in perfumed waters, I grew to adulthood among thorn and bramble. Stone and sea. Fed by a wooden spoon and punished by one, too.

Spirited away to the Isle of Mist as an infant, I'd seen nothing outside the boundary of its shoreline. Thana, my appointed handmaiden from the palace, and the seven females who tend to the isle, were the only family I'd ever known.

Thana folded my arm into hers as we mounted the crest of the hill. Below, at the bottom of the gentle slope, a group of shadowed figures gathered beside a small vessel nestled in the smooth pebbles at the shore.

The sea beyond them beckoned, wild and dark, undulating in the crisp moonlight. A larger ship waited further out, staffed with an envoy equipped to carry me away from this lonely isle.

To carry me...home?

The great ship heaved on the back of the midnight tide, a polished black beast with silver sails. I shuddered, warring emotions of panic and elation crashing through me.

I'd hardly dared believe Thana this morning when she relayed the news that not only was my mother dead, but that this very eve, I would return to my birthplace.

"Chin up, Liana," Thana whispered, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. "Never let them think you're weak or they'll eat you up and spit you out. You are their queen, now you must act the part."

I gave her no reply, but attempted to make my eyes harder and my jawline stronger as we traveled the winding path to the water's edge.

"Your Majesty." The male nearest to us stepped forward as we approached, bending at the middle in a small bow. "I am Captain of the Queen's Guard. It is my honor to ferry you home."

Half concealed in shadow as he was, I didn't get a clear picture of his face, but with my Fae eyes I could see his own tired ones, above them a thick unibrow, and as he lifted his head, a face that was unshaven and rounded. The reek of cloves clung to the Captain as assuredly as the stench of his own body odor, mingling with the heady scent of oiled leather and seafoam.

*So, this is a male...*

*How disappointing.*

The other four males remained still behind their Captain, hooded and cloaked.

"Your name?" I asked him, instilling in my voice an authority I did not feel.

"Ronan, Your Majesty. My sword is yours as it was your mother's."

I stepped past his outstretched hand, stifling the urge to snicker at him. A lady of the high court--*a queen*--did not snicker. "A lot of good that did her, Captain," I replied, injecting the full dose of the childish snicker I wanted to give him into that simple string of words instead. "Shall we?"

I didn't wait for him to speak again. Deftly pretending not to feel the weight of Thana's judgmental stare on my back, I stepped past the cloaked sentries and into the small boat, Thana on my heels. The boat swayed as I found a seat in the center, rough wood pulling at the delicate fabric of my finest dress.

Peering into the gloom as one of the Captain's guards pushed us off, a stab of some strange emotion burrowed through my resolve and my eyes stung. I'd bid farewell to The Seven this morning, with a promise I would return when I could, with gifts for each of them. They wouldn't be joining me at court. The isle had been their home for nearly a millennium, they now belonged to it, and it to them.

But Thana, *my* Thana, had only been on the isle since I arrived as a babe, entrusted to watch over me these past twenty-three years. She was the only one able to leave and return, departing at the beginning of each moon cycle to gather supplies, and returning in days with a bounty of grain, cloth, and other necessities. I expected to wait at least a century before I could get off the damned rock, but fate, it seemed, had other plans.

I cringed to think what the courtiers would make of me. I had only just begun my immortal life a year ago.

Thana didn't begin her immortal life until she was twenty-eight. The others on the island all at varying ages from twenty to thirty-three. I supposed I should be grateful I wasn't returning to Meloran with mortal blood. If I were, I doubted I'd last the first night.

For me, the transition was like waking up. As though I'd been underwater all the years of my life time and had only then been able to breach the surface—to truly breathe for the first time.

That part, at least, had made the rest worth it. The biting cold stealing through my veins and curling its icy talons around my heart made me think the awakening of my immortal soul would be the end of me. Some part of me wished it had been. But in the days following, everything became clearer. My senses sharpened, and my reflexes became faster. Even my skin and hair grew softer.

But the people would know. The denizens of the Night Court would balk at my age. I would be the youngest queen to take power since the reign of Morgana two thousand years ago.

They still sang songs about her greatness. Perhaps one day, they would have songs to remember me. If I survived long enough.

Thana was told Enya had been assassinated. They found her in her chambers, fingers curled inwards, eyes bloodshot, her skin a pallid blue. Poison, they said. But how it got past her food tasters was a mystery. From the symptoms, they suspected it to be verbane berries.

I *dared* someone to try the same poison on me. Verbane berries grew wild all over the Isle of Mist and I'd been eating them since I was a child. They almost killed me a few times before The Seven realized why I was constantly taking ill and warned me away from them.

But I hadn't died, and I liked the taste, so I ate one a day until my stomach didn't turn anymore, and then a few a day after that. Eventually, I could eat as many as a handful without the painful side-effects.

"What was that?" Thana all but shrieked as the small boat bobbed and rocked on the water as the four hooded males paddled us out, bringing me back to the present.

"Did ye see somethin', miss?" A guard asked her, scanning the black waters.

"Just there," Thana pointed, but I felt her rigid bones settle next to me again a moment later. "It's gone."

The guard grunted and dropped his head, continuing to row with the others.

I watched as the Isle of Mist became smaller, the only sign of life a flickering light where the temple stood at the crest of the tallest hill. I wouldn't miss it, I told myself. It was a cage, the kind meant to keep you safe, not hold you prisoner, but some days—*most days*, it felt more like the latter.

Movement in the water caught my eye and I stiffened.

There was never much more than minnows in the waters off the coast of the isle, but then again, I'd never been quite this far from it before.

A flicker of glowing blue darted under the boat, another chasing it through the inky depths. I leaned over the side, watching the wraiths below. A grin tugged at my lips as I squinted to see better. My heart thudded wildly, a giddy sense of wonder rushing through me when another flicker of bluish skin caught the moonlight.

A wraith. It had to be.

Devious creatures, bound to no court, they served only themselves. I'd never seen one before, not in the flesh. Only in the faded scribblings of the texts Thana brought back from the palace for my lessons. My brows wrinkled and I scanned the waters in all directions, searching for land other than the Isle, which they could not near. Found nothing.

*They shouldn't be this far out to sea.*

"Don't get too close to the edge, Your Majesty," the sentry sitting next to me said, peeking up from under his hood. His eyes found mine and for a moment I was held captive by them; a shade of blue with the silvery glint of forged steel, in a face that seemed chiseled from stone. I was so busy admiring him, I didn't have time to react when a tendril of cold, wet tentacle wrapped around my wrist.

The last thing I heard was Thana's shout as my body was torn from the side of the boat, and I crashed into the sea. My lungs constricted at the onslaught of cold, salty sea trying to penetrate them. I yanked and scratched at the tentacle around my wrist, a flurry of bubbles making it impossible see a thing beyond the silver studded blackness.

The wraith pulled, and pulled, unperturbed by attempts to injure it. I doubted it was even exerting much effort save for holding me in its slimy grip. My sodden skirts and corset and gown were enough to send me plummeting all the way to a watery grave without any damned help from the creature.

This would *not* be my end. The pressure was nearly enough to squeeze the air from my lungs and I let what little remained out to quell the aching as the water grew colder. I gave up on the tentacle, remembered the dagger at my thigh. With oxygen starved and half-frozen fingers, I tried to yank it free, batting heavy swaths of fabric out of the way.

*Got it!*

The tentacle released me and I whirled, dagger in hand, ready to strike.

The water became alive with shimmering blue and silver and icy fear in my blood turned to dread. They surrounded me. Their sharp-angled ethereal faces contorted, mouths open to bare long teeth at me in warning growls. Their white eyes watched me warily as their bodies swayed, tentacles curling and flexing.

*Come with us...* A raspy voice gated inside my mind and I gasped, little bubbles set free from my lips. *Come...*

A tentacle whipped out to snatch the dagger from my fingertips, but the water shifted and with a flash of silver, it was severed. The wraith emitted a watery shriek that I could somehow hear inside my mind and outside it as a muffled cry.

Strong arms wrapped around me and I jabbed backward with my dagger. I caught sight of the guard's longsword a moment too late and withdrew my blade from his thigh.

The wraith with the severed tentacle lunged forward, mouth agape in a silent cry.

His arm around me tightened and with one long stroke, the head fell from the advancing wraith, her glowing blue light flickering, and then fading.

The remaining wraiths scattered further into the deep as we rose, the guard's hauling me toward the rippling surface.

We broke through, me sputtering and coughing as the warm night air rushed to fill my emptied lungs. at least three sets of hands nudged and grabbed me, heaving me back into the boat.

"You stupid, *stupid* girl. What were you thinking?" Thana shrieked, wrapping her own thin cloak around me as the male who saved me swung himself back into the boat, spraying the guard with an arc of bloodstained water.

"That is no way to speak to your queen!" Captain Ronan shouted, and I turned to find him seated and dry, his sword still in its scabbard.

“*Silence,*” I commanded him, earning myself a pained scowl. It was the male struggling to catch his breath who drew my attention.

When our eyes met, he unclasped his cloak, letting it fall into a wet heap around him. “Are you alright, Your Majesty?” His voice was a husky, breathless sound that made something tighten in my belly.

“The wraiths wouldn’t dare disrupt a royal vessel, much less attack...” another of the guards whispered to his companion,

“Something isn’t right. The wraiths are peaceful creatures.”

“We must make haste, lest the beasts return,” the captain commanded, effectively quieting all the remaining whispers of his guard.

The male with eyes of steel resumed his position next to me, dripping wet. He met my gaze for only an instant before taking up his oar and beginning to paddle with the other three.

I tore my gaze away, feeling a rush of heat in my cheeks.

“*Damn,*” I cursed, gritting my teeth as I searched the area around my seat and peered back into the water. “That was my favorite dagger.”

A short, hollow laugh tugged my attention back to the wounded guard. A wicked grin pulled at one corner of his lips. “Sorry, Majesty,” he said, eyes coy as he watched me from beneath a set of wet black lashes. “Would you have me retrieve it for you?”

Was he...was he having a go at me?

“I can’t say *I* was very fond of it, myself, but...” he shrugged, and I saw the pained wince as he shifted his weight, keeping up a steady pace with the oar.

“I--I’m sorry,” I blurted. “I didn’t realize it was--”

“Hush now,” Thana chastised before I could finish, eyeing the guard with a withering stare and I sighed.

“Thank you. Sir...?” I hedged, ignoring Thana’s tut of dismay.

The guard’s water dampened skin rippled with flexed muscle at each stroke of his oar. He offered me a terse nod, his dark hair falling into his face. “Alaric, majesty. You may call me Alaric.”

As we climbed the ladder onto the larger vessel and set sail, the mist shrouding the island from the rest of Meloran swallowed us up and spat us back out on the other side.

The island evaporated as though it was a figment of my imagination.

They say the Isle of Mist could only be found by those who knew exactly where to look. And until her assassination, the souls outside of it who knew its whereabouts were my mother and Thana. Its location had been marked on a map, sealed by Queen Enya herself, only to be opened in the event of her death. To ferry me home.

A tightness in my chest relaxed once it was lost from sight. There was no going back now. Only forward.

It would be two days before we saw the shores of Meloran and I took my place at the Night Court. Three more days from then I would complete the Blessing Ceremony and receive my Grace from the Fae who came before us.

Thana was Graced with air, and it was her who coaxed the wind into our sails in the absence of a true breeze. She always thought mine would be tied to water, for the stormy blue of my eyes, or light—for the shining silver of my long hair, but I believed my Grace would be drawn of shadow, for the darkness surrounding my heart.

I didn't much care what it would be, only that I received one. A queen without a Grace was not one fit to rule.

I stood at the stern of the ship, keeping my eyes fixed to the horizon, searching for the first signs of land. From a cage of stones and mist to one of gold and guards. At least it would be a change.

Nervously, I bit my lower lip, peering from behind the curtain of my hair to where Alaric was bandaging his small stab wound. Deft hands working a long bolt of thing cloth like he'd done it a thousand times before. With his pants rolled up to mid-thigh, I got an unobstructed view of his powerful legs. If only I'd stabbed him just a little higher...

"Ow," I whispered harshly at Thana, rubbing the spot where she'd pinched me on the arm. I hadn't even heard her walk over.

"If you aren't careful, he'll catch you drooling," she said, face entirely placid save for the gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

As though he'd heard us, Alaric glanced up, staring curiously between my furious blush and Thana's no-doubt serene expression. Grumbling, I cast Thana a wicked glare and lifted my skirts, leaving before I could do or say something *very* unbecoming of a new queen.

I shouldered my way into the dim chamber below deck feeling like I might burst into flames if my blood boiled any hotter. There was no telling anymore if it was from fury or desire

but either way I'd be rid of it. I filled a brass bowl with icy water from the drinking pitcher and plunged my face into it then tipped my head back and fell heavily onto the bed, letting the cool water trickle down my neck like phantom fingers.