

Nine summers ago, we held a dishonest wedding, a conspicuous event that occupied my backyard for the better part of an hour. I had never really dreamt of being wed, but then I was so engrossed in the idea I might marry him that there was little chance of anything else in my mind. Even now, I can imagine it: I, the bride, with ribbon woven into my plaited hair; Tiernan, my groom, hugging the canary-colored steel of the swing set. By nature, a solitary creature, it was I who often acted in the role of prince in our reveries – he the maiden; his sisters, my sisters-in-law distantly observing us. Waifish things, pallid with skin that appeared almost green in the evening light – the moon having made an esoteric emergence. As much as he loathed to admit it, he was one of them; I only mean I did not understand him the way his sisters did. Their house was hidden in the depths of a great thicket that bordered the better part of the city; I had never seen their house. Often, I imagined it to be a house standing proudly, ornate in detail and captivating in the secret it held. It was just understood it was there, we never spoke about the manor nor the inhabitants that resided in it.

Until recently, the event of my matrimony had eluded me, obsolescent as the days turned into months since I had been home – those months bleeding into years. My past, presented to me in the form of a letter, returns hastily with little to no warning. Eclipsing my trivial life, studying in Dublin at Trinity. I wish I could say I was accomplished in my current studying of history and politics – but there is nothing to show for it. The letter is a simple thing with elaborate penmanship. Likely written in quill plunged in ink, but there are no splotches to be found. Sloping but uniform, the handwriting I would think befitting of a prince. Only no princes would write to me, I have not known one. Initially I was resolute in the idea that the letter could only be a plot. But I cannot imagine my father, a

man so content in his woodworking, to be keen on the idea of writing to his college-age daughter under the pretense of a prince.

*My Sive,*

*I do not know what keeps you from returning to my court. Let it be not verily your preference, but by a wile to vex me. In allowing you your leniency in the mortal world, I did you a favor. It is my greatest wish that you partake in the same benevolence. I urge you to return to Fae, for I am to be betrothed. Only our matrimonial bonds are more secure than one would imagine, that is perhaps my doing. A place such as Faerie is the only place where such bonds, once placed, can be broken. With discretion of a timely essence, I wish you to come in the morning – when most Fae will be long asleep. Come bearing Rowan Berries, being entranced won't be befitting of you. Confidently,*

*Tiernan, King of Elfhame.*

Like I said, it has the telltales of an exceedingly well-planned lie. Only, if it were not for the circlet preceding it. The very same circlet was offered to me at my wedding, nine years ago. Similar to a diadem, *stephanos* – in Latin, with the golden detailing mimics the antlers of a stag. A weighty thing that is cold and familiar to the touch. It is only then that I recall the true dealings foregoing my marriage. Only then do I recall the ways of Tiernan's menage, only then do their inexplicable nocturnal dwellings become explicable. Among other things. I do remember Tiernan carrying a sword at his hip, though it more often than

not — was my own. The leather baldric secured over my childish but wide shoulders; the sword perfectly snug in its scabbard. Truthfully, I do feel some thrill in knowing that the world I had so often dreamt of held some semblance of reality.

The Rowan Berries take themselves a night to procure. To bake them in the communal dormitory oven expertly distanced on a sheet of parchment, then to pierce them by needle only to string with twine. I wear them like a layer of armor, beneath my shirt, strewn across my broad chest. Then, perhaps vainly, I wonder what I would even wear. What does one wear to invade the world of Fae? Certainly not sneakers or jeans. But a lengthy dress, befitting of — well, a princess.

The second letter came shortly after the eventide of the first; interpretably, Tiernan I recalled as being impatient. Only now, he is not the shy boy with his eyes scarcely peeking out from behind a wild fringe but the king of Elfhome. I cannot exactly expect to continuously evade him, even if he cannot see me in the world of Fae. For the only thing the world of the Fae and the mortal world share is the moon.

*To Sive,*

*I cannot wed without our severance. On second thought, mayhap you shall not need to come for me. My mother will simply have to choose one of my sisters to rule. Yes, I like that quite a deal better. Very well, do not come. Stay confined to the world in which you came from, the world of Fae does not miss you.*

*Tiernan.*

He grew up to find me loutish, my husband (husband, the word on my tongue makes me viscerally uneasy). Philistine, compared to the rest of his court. Still, I cannot help peeking past his vanity to see the words of a lost maiden in a great deal of saving. I would take him home, and until his sisters wedded and preceded his title, he would return to the mortal world free from any heraldry inspired politics.

Arguably, there are many different means to enter Faerie. My favorite it seems, having recently returned to me in the form of a clever idea. Is to enter through the mirrors. Preferably through mirrors of a decent size, otherwise it becomes terribly awkward trying to slip through one's vanity without stirring one's roommate. In the hall, before the communal showers, is a mirror that can fit a human capacity. By pressing my hand to the glass, I feel around for any sort of wavering solidity. Usually, it is found in the corners. My fingers catch on to it after fifteen minutes of groping around in the dark. To open the doorway, I pull away an invisible film. You might have missed the sensation, that of a folded corner of a piece of paper, I can assure you it is there. It is always there. Admittedly, it's easy to miss. But once you know what you're looking for, it becomes quite difficult to ignore. A lot of things from Faerie are like that.

In all the years that the earth has existed, so has Faerie. But not in any of those centuries has a map been invented. I expect it's the size of the European continent, but it's really an assembly of islands. Each with the prefix of 'Inis' meaning island. Usually, the suffix is

something of an animal or a plant most useful to the Fae. Think foxglove, bluebells, hollyhock. Botany is the sustenance of Fae.

At the center of Faerie, the capital of it all, is the maple tree. An oversized maple tree, perennially looming over the world of Fae. It is a castle. The place where kings and queens have been killed in their bed-chambers, and princesses and princes are made all-mighty sovereigns. I imagine it is all very daunting, all this. Even as I approach, bearing the circlet in hand, it feels ominous. Imaginable is the world used to describing it, in my opinion: to grow up in these wooden halls knowing that someday all this has to be yours. To know the fate of Faerie is in his hands must be a cruel notion, I don't expect his sisters to make this any easier. I can imagine why he might marry a mortal girl to postpone it as much as possible, then again, I can't imagine the reticent boy I once knew to be knowledgeable in scheming.

Passing beneath a parabolic arch, formed from the twisted branches of the maple tree, I can adeptly move into the castle – hidden by shrubs. In Faerie, they use any means possible as an excuse for revelries (I'm quite sure they have a Master of Revelries as an official title).

Within the castle is an assortment of flowers acting as chandeliers, clusters of corollas lit from the inside – their pistils acting as a lightbulb of sorts. It's nothing like I could have imagined, even my wildest dreams could have never procured something of this magnitude. I find him among a myriad of Fae: all of them distinctly different. Pixie's the size of nails, goblins green as shrubbery. Sometimes with serpentine horns reminiscent of those of gazelles or impalas, or sometimes monochrome eyes without pupils or irises. Tiernan is blond of hair – with eyes as black as charcoal, wearing padded doublet and

pointed shoes. His impish grin riddled with lies. The first of which is that he is enjoying the many Faeries in his company. His eyes are constantly drooping; the second lie is that he is placid. I can see his taloned fingernail tapping the armrest of his throne aimlessly. I wonder where his sisters are.

Tiernan glances at me, seemingly after the entire room has noticed me. But not before I'm standing a few paces in front of him. I toss him the circlet; he wears one that is wholly equivalent. He catches it, albeit barely, and clutches the crown to his chest with two hands.

"You came," he says. His voice is low, perhaps a bit guttural. It is completely unlike the brittle and animated voice of the boy I knew long ago. He is without inflection; thus I cannot infer if my welcome was a fully disposed one.

"You called," embarrassingly, my voice wavers.

To be so close to the heir is to be scrutinized. It is to be held at swordpoint by the royal guard. The room around me is abuzz with the sound of anxious wings, gossamer fluttering incessantly.

"Will you annul our matrimony," his head shifts slightly, so that he can cast his gaze on the unakin assembly of a court different from that of his own. Among them, I expect, is his new bride.

"I won't. Not if you don't want me to."

Fae cannot lie, I should like to mention that. So, what Tiernan says next may very well alter the way I've been living. Should I allow it too?

“What then? If I were to say no – deny myself the crown,” said Tiernan. “I could not join you in the mortal plane. Are you willing to deny everything you know, live in a world where there is not a second where you would be at peace.”

“You called me here. Why concern yourself with hassling for my presence, if you do not expect me to be of some aid...”

“I thought I might remind you of all that you could have,” Tiernan tosses the circlet into my hand. He nods to his sentinels.

The circlet is weighty in my hand, I imagine putting it on my head. Princesses for ages before me have worn it, sworn allegiance to the glorious realm of Faerie. Could I do the very same?

“Fight me for it.”

“Pardon?”

“If I win, you and I return to the mortal world. If not, I’ll do as you please – consort or knight. Either way, I would be at your side.” There is a moment where he briefly observes my hands, the same hands that have not wielded a proper weapon in ages. While deliberating, he spotted the silver band on my annularly. I will not allow myself to lose, I will return with him – or nothing. My fiancé will not allow it.