

There is a place set beside the river Rhine, an inlet hidden in dense light, sheltered by a forest of weeping Poplar and pine. I knew it well; a childhood of stolen moments seared the edge of my memory. As the horses drew near, I laid a hand against the slick cords of my Oldenburg's neck and leaned in close. "Soon your burden will be lifted, as will mine."

Where they thought they led, my three appointed knights followed. The youngest snuck glances, but never at me; his eyes roamed the rolling land and sought the split bark of the trees. Compelled by his horse's gait, he moved like the rush of a gentle, fickle tide.

"Excuse me," I called. The Bishop had given me no names. I thought I might not need them with a voice like mine, a voice that had arrested a Bishop's pride. "May we stop just here? For a moment?"

"It's getting dark," said one. But the young one, he said, "The cloister will wait."

Sliding from the horses' backs, the knights tied their rough-hewed reins to thick, bowing branches. I did the same and my loose knot swiftly lost its hold. A breeze of cool fingertips across the bay's hind and I released him, walking towards the water's edge.

"Lorelei." From the young knight's lips, my name became an oath that soothed and flamed. A quick, quiet shiver sped my heart; I turned to him with a smile his downcast eyes would not see. But then the other said, "Do not stray far," and my smile slipped like the horse's reins. Though I did not stumble over the gnarled limbs that tracked the forest floor, each step to the river was hard won.

In reflection my face had never been kind; the swell of my mouth, the blush of my cheeks, and my eyes, burning blue like Hell's own flames, taunted me with desire. But the promise of cleansing water gave me courage; I slipped my dress from my shoulders,

and tipped my bare toes into the shallows. The God-struck knights would not intrude, though I wished, if only briefly, that the young one would bring his heated words to the bank and sit beside me.

When the Bishop had bid us gone, I knew they whispered, my two wardens; I heard what they said, and the words fell on my ears with a familiar hiss and a crackle like a funeral pyre just lit. They, at least, had not absolved me of my supposed sins.

“She is a witch,” one had said, but the other had insisted, “She is a siren.”

Tugging the cord from my hair, the golden length tumbled to the ground and floated in the current. I was neither of those things, witch or siren, but I had power: a scent like vanilla and honey, warm, pliant skin, and softly rounded hips. For what they could not have, for what I would not give them, I was condemned.

“We must get moving.”

“There’s no harm to be found in another moment,” the young one said.

And for the first time since our path had led away from the village, the third knight spoke, sharply. “You’ve not been looking at her, have you?”

“And if I have?”

“Did you not understand the Bishop? She will seduce you, bind you to her; you’ll never be free of her if you look at her even once.”

“My freedom is not at question. But hers is,” the young one said. “We’ll stay for a moment or two more.”

I heard his footfalls then, brining him closer; when they stopped I thought it must be at the sight of my bare back. When I could take it no more, I said softly, “Please. Sit with me. I will not look at you.”

“Lorelei.” I closed my eyes against the urge to arch into the touch of that rough and tender sound. The air at my back pushed and I swayed; he stopped beside me as I opened my eyes to the water. In reflection he was beautiful; carved angles and long lashes. The brief scar that parted his brow tempted my tongue. But his eyes, green as a bed of moss, betrayed anguish. “You asked to die.”

“I did,” I said, and nodded. With a finger I flicked the surface of the water; the ripple tore us apart.

“Why?”

“When we were children I would come here often,” I said, looking up the length of the trees to the sky. A hawk circled as the clouds broke and trailed off in separate directions.

“I know,” he said, and the deep breath he took lit on my flushed skin, igniting every nerve. It would be easy to forget my promise, to drink in the crescent curves around his lips, to ease my eyes over the stubbled shadow that hid the dimple on his cheek. But I didn’t, and if my stomach tightened, coiling in knots, it was a pain I could bear.

“You shouldn’t have followed me,” I said.

“You would have me leave you alone?” he asked.

A flood of words built in my throat; I bit my tongue against them. In the silence that followed, I tilted my face to his and looked at him like I had so many nights before. Knowledge burned bright in his eyes; the taste of our sweat on my skin, his hands on my wrists, my calves a demanding pressure on his back.

I thought his desire had died the day he stopped following. I knew he loved me the day he pledged his vow to another. The ache his absence left in its stead was strong

enough to deafen my ears to the whispers for a while. But the pain grew as the rumors spread, and when the Bishop summoned me, I knew what must be done.

“I heard you beg him, Lorelei,” he said, the words catching in his throat.

“You made your choice.” The words were not unkind and my fingers, brushing the dark hair from his temple, were gentle. “It was time for me to make mine.”

Unfolding my legs, I stood; the first step into the water was fortifying, and I didn't look back as I took another. When the water rushed my hips, I smiled. And as he called my name from the shoreline, the first tear broke and fell.

“Lorelei,” he called, and the others took up his chorus. “Lorelei.”

When the water brushed my shoulders, my hair tangled around me, a solid, comforting weight. I did not know where I would go, but, I thought, I would enjoy the starlit journey. The third time, it was a cry, “Lorelei.”

And when the splash came, I was beyond his reach.

I wondered how far he would follow.