

“OF SUNSETS AND SEA MAIDENS ”

Lopsided and wildly overgrown, the old cottage resembled a rubbish pile more so than it did a home. Built from heavy stones and blackened wood, the mortar that held it in place was green with moss and every crack, crevice, and chasm was stuffed with spindly ivy tendrils.

Though some might see the structure as a dilapidated burden, to Ophelia, it had charm. Most might have first noticed the roof seemed to be sliding off of its walls. However, Ophelia forced herself to look instead at the blossoming bouquet of wildflowers that claimed authority over the land. Sure, the glass on all the windows was either cracked or missing, but the young woman chose to think only about how the sun was hung so perfectly, as if in her favor, that when evening came it would settle behind the hills exactly opposite to the back of her home. She pictured herself sitting by the window with a sketch in her lap and a piping cup of tea in her hand, watching the sky turn magnificent shades of reds and purples.

Following a bit of demanding labor, the sideways little cottage would be her paradise. Finally, after suffering for so long in a world too busy and crowded, Ophelia had found her home alone on the hillside. For one person, the task was more onerous than Ophelia cared to admit but she had confidence in herself. It wasn't as though she had many other options.

She had caused such a scene when she left home, digging her heels into the ground and refusing to return to populated society. The people she had been surrounded with for so many years were nothing but wretched and cruel. Ophelia merely wanted to escape it all and become a free spirit, living happily in the country. She forced herself to push back the sickening loneliness

that had clung to her heart since the moment she stormed out of her home. She had convinced herself that isolation would bring peace and clarity. So far, it had yet to do so.

Perhaps, Ophelia thought, I might feel better relaxed once I can bring this monstrosity back to its former glory.

Before venturing inside, knowing it was destined to be a graveyard of dust and woodchips, Ophelia decided her mood would do better if she allowed herself a stroll around the property. It really was a lovely piece of land, as if ripped straight from the fantastical stories she would hear from the sailors in town as they returned from their ventures. Growing up, Ophelia had learned most of what she knew about the world outside her city from the men that stumbled off of giant merchant ships, rambling drunkenly about sirens and monsters. Occasionally, these men would speak of paradises scattered across the world, warning others of their growing scarcity.

“If you find yourself a patch of heaven,” an old, scruffy-faced captain had once told Ophelia, “You hold onto it as if the land itself is the only thing that gives you breath.”

Since then, Ophelia had become determined to locate herself one of these fabled lands. Slipping around the corner towards the back of the house, Ophelia knew in her heart that she had finally found what she had been looking for.

A small, dainty pond sat hardly a stone’s throw from her kitchen window. Encircled by rocks and tall, swaying grass, the water devoured the sun’s rays, giving its surface an incandescent, glassy look. It was the most beautiful scene Ophelia had ever set eyes upon. Amusement overtook her as began to laugh gleefully. Oh, how perfect everything was at that moment.

Just that moment, though. Not two seconds after Ophelia had begun her blissful celebration, the grass began trembling. It shook with too much force to be blamed on the wind. A smack hit the water, firing ripples against its surface with wild direction.

Ophelia froze, locked in place as she attempted to compose her startled breath. Whatever creature that was lurking through the greenery in her pond sounded big. Too big to be a fish. That, of course, was the risk she accepted when she acquired the house. It had been sitting on that hill for so long, it was destined to have been claimed by the creatures of the earth. But she was expecting field mice and snakes, not something seemingly the size of herself.

With nothing around to protect herself with, Ophelia watched helplessly as the reeds began to part. Her body trembled in fear but her legs refused to move, as though her shoes had sprung roots deep into the ground. A figure, distorted by the waves of the water, began surfacing along the edge of the reeds. Slowly, a head rose from the center of the ripples. A human head, shockingly. Not just that, but a woman. A surprisingly beautiful woman.

Ophelia's shoulders dropped, almost disappointedly, and she let out a curt huff. Of course, she thought. The very moment that she, for the first time in her life, was finally alone, the universe thought itself clever to send her a trespasser.

"You can't be here," Ophelia said, her words lashing out like an angry dog.

"I'm afraid it is you who can't be here," the woman replied.

Even her voice is perfect, Ophelia mused. Like the echoes of a choir in a grandiose cathedral. She suddenly felt very homely in the presence of such radiance.

Pull yourself together, Ophelia thought. She hadn't come all the way out just to be turned away at the door.

"I am the owner of this property. I have the deed to prove it."

"Oh, the deed? Of course, my apologies!" The woman spoke with vapid interest, mocking Ophelia.

She rose to her feet, prompting a startled gasp to rip free from Ophelia's chest. Desperately, Ophelia turned away, her cheeks hot with embarrassment.

"Where are your clothes?" Ophelia asked, aghast.

The woman began wringing the water from her thigh-length hair. Shrugging, she asked, "What would I need clothes for? Until most recently, the only people who came out this far were scavengers or soldiers."

"You don't dress yourself for them?"

"Why would I? Much easier to lure them closer if they like what they see."

Lure closer? Ophelia shot the woman a perplexed glance. It was only then that she realized what she had stumbled into. The woman flashed her teeth, each sharpened into rows of pearly white daggers. Her skin, though pale and fair like the petals of a daisy, shimmered under the sunlight, illuminating a pattern of flat, shimmery scales.

"A water naiad."

The words fell from Ophelia's lips in startled cognizance. She had heard all kinds of stories from the sailors in the city about the cruelty of the naiads. They were marvels to behold in

person up until they pulled you into the water and ripped your throat right out of your neck. Based on the stories told, they were fierce carnivorous beasts and there had yet to be a man who escaped one alive.

The naiad cocked her head to the side, wearing a curious smile.

“You aren’t going to run?”

“Run?” Ophelia nearly laughed. “I’d rather fight the devil than abandon this place. I’ve fought for this life for years, I won’t have some naked woman in my pond ruin it!”

The naiad’s smile faded as her brow furrowed in confusion. She stared back at Ophelia, trying to decipher if the woman was mad or just stupid.

“I’m sorry, but-”

“Get off of my property!” Ophelia said, bitterly cutting her off.

The naiad suddenly felt awkward. Being stared down by a strange, angry woman was not something she was accustomed to. She began to feel her heart flutter in her chest, making breathing a difficult chore. The feeling sickened her for a moment but as she settled into the rhythm of her heartbeat, she found it exhilarating. Something about this odd woman pulsed new life into her veins.

“My name is Willow,” the naiad found herself saying. She had never introduced herself before, especially not to a human. Any sort of conversation never typically lasted long enough

for pleasantries. Yet Willow found herself wishing nothing more than to have a refreshingly idle chat with this estranged, absurd woman.

“I don’t care. Go away.”

“Um...” Willow glanced around at the pond. She was the strongest of the two women, no doubt. And she was in her natural habitat. If this woman was looking for a fight, she’d surely lose. “No?”

Ophelia scoffed angrily. “What do you mean, ‘no?’ This is unprecedented! I won’t stand for this!”

“What will you do?”

“Well, I’ll- um...”

Ophelia stood with her mouth agape, desperately trying to find the right words. Though unfrightened by the naiad, she was no fool. She couldn’t pick a fight with a maneater. She was frail, short, and an awfully poor swimmer. Yet she refused to give up her perfect, peaceful future for something as trivial as a mythical squatter.

“You can’t outrun me,” Willow began. “And I doubt you could outwit me. So what is your plan?”

“My plan? My plan is...”

Ophelia’s hands trembled with fury. She wasn’t about to give in, not now. She had come too far. Luckily enough, it seemed as though the naiad didn’t want her dead, or else she would

have killed her long ago. Perhaps she could wait Willow out. She had lived there seemingly alone for so long, perhaps she'd grow annoyed with Ophelia's presence and choose to leave. It was a fool's plan but Ophelia couldn't think of any other.

"My plan is to clean! I will make this place into an isolated haven for myself or I will die trying!" Ophelia passionately declared. "And when I'm done you'd better be gone!"

Watching Ophelia storm off, Willow cracked a grin and asked, "What will you do if I'm still here?"

"I don't know!"

Ophelia slammed the front door shut behind her, rattling the entire structure of the home. Releasing an exhausted breath from her lungs, she opened her eyes to explore the space around her. If the naiad wasn't bad enough, she discovered the home to be in the exact kind of shape on the inside as it was on the outside. The roots and weeds had found their way into the floorboards, ripping any semblance of a modest home to shreds. The entire house was one big room with not a single piece of furniture or utilities left behind by any previous owner. Not a bed nor table nor stovetop awaited Ophelia inside. Truly, the only items she had to call her own were stuffed into a bag she left in the front garden.

Her gaze snagged onto Willow through the gap in the wall where a window ought to be. Willow grinned and waved back at her but Ophelia only huffed, choosing to ignore the naiad in hopes she might just go away.

"It's a mess in there, isn't it?" Willow asked from outside.

"Shut up! And go away! I came here to be alone!"

“That’s why I live in this pond, you know.”

“There’s probably a hundred other crummy ponds around here! Why do you need that one?”

“There’s probably a hundred other broken heaps of stone around here, too. Why don’t you go make a home out of one of them?”

Ophelia let out a whimper at the jab. She had fought so hard to not see the house’s flaws, even if they were so awful and blatant that even a child couldn’t ignore them. She had spent her whole life seeing all the negativity in the world, just as those around her did. All she merely wanted was this one thing to be positive. But of course she would find herself trapped in a situation so atrocious and unsightly that there could be no positivity to find.

Sure, the flowers outside were lovely and the sun would soon set in a magnificent show of splendor but neither thing would put a steady roof over her head. Nor would they help cook her meals or warm her at night.

Defeated, Ophelia sank to the floor, shamefully burying her face in her hands. She had no other choice. Such an unpleasantly barren shack was no place to call home. She’d have to swallow her pride and hope her family would accept her back. They were probably all together in the parlor at that moment, jesting with one another and placing bets to see how quickly Ophelia would come crawling back home. The thought twisted her stomach into knots. No one expected she’d make it. No one but herself.

Willow, too curious for her own good, crawled up out of the water to perch her chin on the window ledge.

“You look sad. That can’t be right. Aren’t you supposed to be cleaning your new home? Preparing your haven?”

Face hidden, Ophelia huffed. “Go away.”

“I told you this place was a dump. I would know, I built it.”

Ophelia lifted her head, unsure if she heard correctly.

“You built this?”

Willow nodded. “I tried. Thought I’d make a life for myself out here. But it was too hard and I gave up. I’ve lived in the pond ever since. The cottage is just an eyesore nowadays but it’ll occasionally attract a meal or two into my lap.”

A shiver raced up Ophelia’s arms but she paid it no mind. Willow wasn’t a creature to be feared. Not anymore, so it would seem.

“That sounds awfully familiar,” Ophelia said, laughing dryly. Her smile soon faded as a sense of impending doom churned her insides into swirls. “So, that’s it? You just gave up?”

“I had set out to live my life alone. It’s hard to find help when there’s no one around.”

The words sunk like briars into Ophelia’s skin. She never much cared for company but there was something about Willow that intrigued her. Never had she thought that she’d meet a water naiad before, especially not one who was so conversational and friendly.

“Would you like my help?” Ophelia asked, pulling together the strength to rise back up to her feet. “Perhaps we could turn this pile of rocks into something special.”

Willow pursed her lips together to hide the grin beginning to infect her face. Ophelia was a bit of a nuisance but she was awfully cute. Willow had tried living alone out on the hills and it left her with nothing but boredom and a growing appetite. Perhaps it was time to try something new. Perhaps it was finally time to finish what she had started.

“Maybe,” Willow began. “Perhaps we might live out here alone... together?”