

WHISPER IN THE WIND

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Asteriea exists, yet she does not.

She did once, in a village that no longer lives, in memory or word. She was a daughter, a sister, a friend. But, long ago in that village that she alone knows the name of, she made a deal. Or, not a deal exactly, but whatever best describes the moment when there is only one option but it is still presented as though there are two.

Her fate is her fault, though she likes to blame it on a bad bet or divine punishment for her greed. She rages against anyone she can think of as she slips between trees and houses and the spots where this world intersects the next, never quite able to blame herself.

In rare moments of introspection, she can admit she tampered with the lives of her friends, though they got to live. Cormac and Rowan and Moira and Isolde, all as forgotten as the village, were allowed to grow and age and love while she rots, forgotten.

She does not have the worst luck, supposedly. Seamus gave his life.

Then again, is a half-life without need for nourishment or sleep any kind of life at all?

She longs for the nothingness Seamus fell victim to. For she knows, truly, deeply, that there is nothing after this existence except darkness. No loving reunions, no palace in the clouds, no greater punishment for her sins.

There is just endless night.

Once upon a time, as stories go, Seamus found a book.

Out hunting mushrooms or truffles or adventure, as twelve-year-old boys do, Seamus stumbled upon it in the woods. Unassuming and bound with a red cover made of leather, it was easy to see amongst the green of the forest.

It was Asteriea who wrote in it.

He gifted it to her, red-cheeked and nervous until she accepted it with a grateful smile. Seamus was kind and comely, but Asteriea longed for more than their village. He would have been an anchor, burdening her with love and children and labor.

She used the book as a diary, practicing her letters and sketching the flowers that grew between the stones of the street. It never seemed to run out of space, no matter how much she wrote, but even then it took Asteriea until she was six and ten to realize that something—the old gods or the new, the eyes in the forest or the whispers between houses—had enchanted it.

As a child, she had written half-demands, petty boons. She wrote about her father's complaints about a dry season, about the heifer bearing twins on Cormac's farm. They weren't wishes (or prayers, if the gods were to have meddled, though she knows now they didn't) but the book still listened and improved the lives of those around her.

And then, naturally, Seamus asked Asteriea's father for her hand. She did not want to give it, for it was *hers* to give away. She had seen so little of the world. But Seamus was a firstborn son and heir to a prosperous farm.

So, at first, she prayed. To the new God that she was told to believe in; to the old gods that spinsters and witches still worshiped with hand-carved altars. She lit candles and gave up sugared sweets and begged her father to reconsider.

To no avail.

Foolishly, in retrospect, but desperately in the moment, she poured her anger onto the pages of her diary the night before her wedding, leaving scathing indentations and deep black marks on the curve of her hand. Words spilled out, white-hot with anger, slick and freezing with sorrow.

As her eyes grew heavy, her hand seemed to move on its own as she wrote—without meaning, without knowing the weight of words—that she wished that Seamus would die so she would not have to marry him.

And he did.

And she was free.

But one brush of power wasn't enough.

Moira had loved Rowan in secret so Asteriea used the book to nudge them together. Cormac wished to attend university in the capital so she lined his pockets with enough gold. Isolde, sweet gentle Isolde who had carried and lost babes thrice over, wished for her fourth child to live.

Asteriea gave them all they asked for and more. Money, love, knowledge, family—none of it took away the sin of killing Seamus, but soon enough she was able to forget the transgression. She was benevolence, she was power, *she was a god*. Gods do not suffer the emotions of man.

And then, Gregor came.

Asteriea was one and twenty. He looked older, by a bit, with ruddy gold hair and deeply pockmarked skin. He stole into her home—larger now, after listening to her mother bemoan the holes in the thatched roof, her sister complain of sharing a bed—in the dead of night on feather-light feet and smelling of the crisp ocean air.

She did not run or call for help.

His voice was silk, was the night, and crawled down her spine like a thousand ants. “Asteriea Ó Foghladh. You have taken what was not yours to take.”

Her voice did not shake. “I know not what you mean.”

Between one blink and the next Gregor was at her side, prying open the lowest drawer of the vanity and removing the false bottom.

“It was a gift,” Asteriea insisted.

Something flashed across his face, akin to understanding. “And who gave it to you? Where is Seamus?”

“I—he died,” A half-truth. The words caught in her throat, painfully tight.

Understanding gave way to satisfaction. “Then you must pay.”

“Pay?” she echoed, fingers tightening on the golden comb in her hand. His eyes flit down seemingly amused at the sight of a makeshift weapon, and her grip slackened.

“Seamus agreed to take my place.”

Asteriea knew that Gregor was not lying, but she was loath to admit it. Power had made her headstrong and untouchable. “Seamus was *twelve* when he gave me this. You cannot—”

“And he was seven and ten when you murdered him,” Gregor interrupted, voice laced with the power of a thunderstorm. A greater force than she could understand was at play.

“Why do you need me, then?” Asteriea demanded. “Seamus and his debts, whatever they may be, are buried in the sea. I have no quarrel with you.”

“The book must always have a guardian.”

“What?”

“Magic like this is dangerous, ancient. It is not of this realm, but someplace more sinister. It cannot fall into anyone’s hands with impunity; it is my duty to keep this world in balance.”

Asteriea glanced down at the book, heart pounding, palms slick. “Yet you were tricked by a child.”

“Seamus had ten years before I claimed him. I am not in the business of being cruel or unjust, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. I do not wish to trick others as I was tricked myself. Ten years to arrange his affairs, that was the deal.”

“So you manipulated him, then?” Asteriea said, lip curling.

Gregor laughed, though it was cold and brittle. “I offered him what he wanted. It is not my fault that twelve-year-olds are single-minded.”

“And if I had married him?”

“The affairs of mortals are of little interest to me anymore. With time, they will disinterest you as well.”

“Why is it my debt to bear? Why not his sister or mother or father? They share his blood.”

Gregor dropped his head to the side as if faced with a particularly difficult word problem. His eyes, which she could have sworn were brown, gleamed deep green. The exact shade of Seamus’s. To mock her, Asteriea concluded bitterly.

“You killed him, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. Nature demands balance.”

“Where were you then? When I was—when everything with Seamus happened. Why not intervene and stop me if I’ve disrupted nature?”

Gregor’s mouth thinned in annoyance. He reached out as if to cup her cheek and Asteriea, too slow to dodge, flinched when his hand made contact with her bare skin. Images flooded through her, dark creatures with legs bent the wrong way and eyes that glowed like embers and fangs as long as her forearm.

“This is what you must protect the world from,” Gregor said simply, as if he was discussing the weather. Asteriea’s stomach roiled. “As I said, the affairs of mortals are of little importance when the boundaries of this world are threatened.”

She opened and closed her mouth, words lodged in her throat. They clawed at the soft skin of her esophagus, leaving deep gouges to fill her mouth with copper and iron. “And if I refuse?”

“Do you think your neighbors will take kindly to knowing you manipulated the world around them? Or perhaps you would like Isolde to die in childbirth, Cormac to be killed in an accident at school, Moira and Rowan to be torn apart by infidelity and murdered by grief? I offer you

freedom in oblivion, in eternity. But, I am all too happy to sow discord until you are alone by your own designs. I grow impatient, but I can wait a year or two more.”

Her blood heated, burning from head to toe as rage pulsed through her. How dare he? Who was this man, *this creature*, meant to force her to sign away her life? “You have no right to come into my home, to threaten me, to—”

The walls around her fell away, turning to silt and drifting like dust. “I am not asking Asteriea Ó Foghladh. This has been my burden to bear for nigh on two hundred years. I have grown weary. I crave the escape of death.”

The cool winds of autumn kissed her cheeks, stealing away hot tears. She imagined her sister, away at their aunt’s with her mother, and her father in town visiting the pub with friends. She wondered what they would say if they were to come to a house of ashes and a witch of a daughter. The shame weighed around her neck like a yoke, dragging her off her cushioned stool and to the ground.

“What am I to do?”

The anger and urgency on Gregor’s face gave way to sorrow. “Merely sign the book in your blood. Scratch out my name, and free me from my servitude, Asteriea.”

Her name was a whisper on his lips, a promise of adventure and life to come. Her stomach twisted. Her skin chilled.

What could she do in two hundred years?

What could she do with *more*?

So she took the book from the drawer, and the quill he had procured from everything and nothing, holding both in her lap. “I have never seen any other names in the book. Nothing except my writing.”

“Open it.”

(When she tells this story, Asteriea says she had a choice. She says that she offered to trade places out of the kindness of her heart. She never mentions the fact that, once again, she had no other choice but the one thrust upon her.)

Asteriea opened the book. Written in thick dark ink—blood her mind supplied, and she suppressed a shudder—was the man’s full name: Gregor Yarwood. There were three above it, faded and flaked with age. Her head hurt trying to read them. Gregor handed her a narrow blade, and for a moment she wondered what would happen if she simply thrust it into his stomach.

Would the rest of her world unravel until her life was a husk of the fantasy she had created?

So, Asteriea pressed the tip of the blade into her thumb and wrote her name neatly under Gregor’s. The wind whipped her face and Gregor let out a sound between a sigh of relief and a scream of agony. Holes punched through his skin like he was a pincushion, and then he was simply gone.

Asteriea has guarded the book for four hundred and seven years. She has watched the world unfold and refold, shaping itself as empires fell and the common folk rebelled. She has seen nearly every inch of the earth, as far as she knows: mountains capped in snow and deserts with sand as far as the eye can see.

Sometimes, she is summoned by children at sleepovers playing with forces they do not understand. Sometimes, wayward souls beg her for the book, wanting to cheat to improve their lives. They offer themselves in her place, pretending to know the cost of immortality, but she refuses.

Asteriea does not regret what she did to Seamus, not entirely, but after four hundred years, she does not wish the cost on anyone.

She has become all too aware of the thinness of the barriers that seal off this world from the next. Of the creatures strong enough to break through to barter and mislead the foolish. She spends a century keeping them at bay before relenting and policing the ones that do come through. There is little else to do as immortality takes root within her.

The cost for such a fight is her human appearance. Her once brown hair turns mossy, like the grass beneath her feet. Her fingers and toes grow, gaining an extra joint. Her eyes become too wide, her teeth become too sharp, and her voice is a whisper in the wind, no matter what language she speaks. She never notes losing her humanity.

Eventually, she realizes it died with Seamus.

Like Gregor, she tires. It takes twice as long, but her feet grow heavy, her breath labored. When she meets Salem, sweet Salem, he is unlike those who have plied her for the book before. He finds her in the woods and does not make demands. Instead, he peels away four centuries of caution with kind words and sad eyes, until she finds herself giving him the book as a gift.

He misses his friends, she tells herself. They have abandoned him, as she once abandoned Comac and Moira and Rowan and Isolde. He has no one, as she does now.

Perhaps she is foolish or perhaps Salem is more conniving than he seems to be.

~~Perhaps it is the fact that he has Seamus's green eyes and black hair and strong nose. Perhaps he is Seamus, sent by the old gods or the monsters in liminal spaces to punish her for what she did.~~

But she gives him the book and makes him promise to visit her once in a while. She does not tell him the nature of the curse, knowing deeply, instinctively, that he will abandon her if she does. She resolves to tell him of the life he has condemned himself to when he returns, about the eventual isolation that will envelop him.

Asteriea will be benevolent, she decides as she folds his hands around the book and whispers instructions in his ear. She will give him twenty years, or perhaps thirty, before she collects his soul.

Salem does not come back.

He tears apart the fabric of the world at the seams, more greedy than she ever dared to be. Than she ever imagined she could be.

He wards himself from her with words, creating walls of steel and tungsten and pure magic to keep her out.

And Asteriea rages, heartbroken and all too aware of her faults, condemned to walk between the trees and houses and spots where this world intersects with the next forever.