

Hannah Luppe

Swan Song

I will tell you this only once, so, please, listen carefully.

You must walk kindly. Kindly, child. Leave your boots by the door and slip beneath the blackberry bush behind the gate. Go north to the foxes and the cliffs and the fair folk. Lean on the trees or those tall, ancient stones if you wish—they have carried far heavier than you.

Keep going. Walk until the night drips by like molasses from a spoon. Until scents like dreams hang thickly in the air: lavenders, and crimsons, and deep, burnt golds. When you reach the lake, sit by the still water and speak softly. Softly, child. Make it a story about love; the stars will be listening, after all. And maybe—if you tell it well enough—the moon might slip through the mist and the wind might call out a lullaby stolen from the sea: *come home, come home, come home.*

Have patience; she is growing old and her wings are weary. She will land silently—always silent—on that lake made of glass, her ripples twirling the night sky toward your bare feet. The crown atop her brow will call to you with its braided silver and heavy promise, but do not be tempted. Not yet. Let the ripples settle the stars back into their constellations and watch as the swan arches her neck.

Finish your story. Gently, child. If anything, please remember to end it gently. Teardrops—yours or the dew from a willow tree, it does not matter which—will land on your skin. Somewhere, deep in the east, those forgotten gods will begin to whisper their old magic to the sky, the words lost between the thunder.

The swan will sing then. She will not lie to you, this you must know.

She will sing of palace spires and melodies plucked from strings. Of love letters read by candlelight, their truths smudged by inky fingertips. She will tell you of the sweet melodies in the dark; how they could make you *feel*.

A song of love and comfort.

The rhythm will change with the first drops of rain. She will begin again. A song of mountaintops and their crystal silence. Of those deep and mossy woods with secrets hidden beneath their tangled roots. Of the dawn and its promise.

This song, too, is of love, but it will never be of comfort.

The silver on her brow will call out to you again, and you must make your choice. Bravely, child. You must be brave. Here is where I leave you. This is as far as I could manage—I did not have the courage. I still do not.

But you might.