

Storm Born

Lorelei

Lorelei's early years before meeting the Clan of the Heart...

A storm rumbled in the distance, thrilling the youngster to the core of her being. The storm was exciting. Not only was there rain, but there was all that light and noise, and wind. The wind could be fun, she could ride the currents, letting her wings take her up, until she could no longer draw breath and had to go back down, diving and darting, dodging the updrafts, riding the downdrafts. As she settled to the ground once more, she laughed huskily, she did so love playing in the rain.

Worn out from her exertions, she stretched out on a rocky riverbed to lazily watch the last of the storm fade away. The sun soon came out, warming her. She fanned out her wings, letting the rays of heat spread across the dampness to dry the expanse. A sparkling in the distance caught her eye, something was there. Taking wing, she flew quickly to investigate the curious shine. Water stretched out before her, more water than she had ever seen in her short life. She gasped with pleasure and clapped her hands, spinning on the sandy bank. She darted forward and kicked her bare toes in the chilly water, shrieking with delight at the feel of the coolness on her feet. She explored the riverbank, wandering along the shoreline until she grew tired from the day's exertions; she sank down into the soft sand and gazed out at the water. Ripples on the surface drew her attention, the shape of the miniscule waves, the way the light shimmered, sparkled and danced on the water as it flowed and moved across the earth enchanted her.

And so she found her first love, the river.

Her chin resting on her crossed arms; she leaned out over the bank, trying to see to the bottom. She was startled as she realized a face was looking up at her. She pulled back a bit, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she looked once more. She laughed; the face did too, though silently. She stuck out her tongue, the face did too. She put her fingers to her nose. The face did too. She fluttered her wings. The face did not have wings to flutter. A puzzled expression crossed her face as she pondered this, looking back over at her wings, and thus, she did not see the pair of slim arms emerge from the depths to slide up around her shoulders. She yelped in surprise as the arms tightened and she felt herself dragged forward. Too late, she tried to brace herself, tried to stop her forward motion into the water.

But she was well and truly caught. As much as she loved water, she had never been surrounded by so much of it at one time! She floundered, kicking out with arms and legs, trying to right herself, to get back to the air, to get free of the arms encircling her. Once, she managed to squirm away; she almost reached the top, but a pair of strong hands grasped her ankles and yanked her back down once more to the river's muddy bottom.

"Free!" Her soul cried out; only once she was caught did she know to long for what she had just lost. She struggled to get away, and in her struggles, she cast out, she sent out from herself all the desire she felt to be let loose once more. Unknowingly, she used some of the magic with which she had been created. And in that moment, the captive captivated. The grip loosened, no longer aggressive, merely holding gently; a wrist here, an ankle there, a hank of her hair held in another slim hand. Three pairs of eyes stared at her; three lovely beings circled her, assessing her, taking her measure. Appraisal on their faces, they looked to one another, and their bloodlust faded as they recognized the potential power they held in their hands.

The hands began to sooth, began to stroke and to pet, to calm the frightened and confused fairy. What had begun as a theft turned into a seduction, the three wooed the youngling, coaxed her with gentle touches. Their ruby lips parted and a soothing, comforting sound emerged, lulling her. Her head grew heavy and her thoughts grew muddled and foggy, and she drifted into a deep sleep.

When she woke, a pair of unblinking eyes the color of a stormy sky gazed at her. Her long red hair flowed out around her, drifting on the gentle current, at times rising up like a live thing to fall gently away again. Eventually, the being spoke, her voice lyrical and light. "I am Lyriel. The others do as I say, because I am the eldest, and this is how it has always been. If you do not wish to have trouble with me, then you will do as I say. I teach the Song. If you learn the Song, and you sing it to my satisfaction, then you shall have a reward from me."

This made the fairy worry. "What if I cannot sing the Song?"

"Bah! Then I have no use for you. You will learn it." With that said, and a dismissive wave of her hand, Lyriel gracefully stood from the bed of flowing river grass where the fairy was comfortably reclining and swam away.

A pair of pale hands parted the grasses near the fairy's head, and a face peered through at her. Red lips beneath widened in a smile, eyes the same shade as the muddy river bottom stared at her, appraising her worth. "I teach the Game, the Game is Lithia's and shall always be Lithia's, it is mine to teach or not to teach; know that, little one. But I shall teach it to you, because Lyriel says it must be so." As Lithia flounced off, her ebony black hair swirled and bounced around her.

The fairy thought about swimming after Lithia to ask more, but was unsure what her reception would be like, and so she curled her knees to her chest and floated in the grassy bed.

"You frighten them. They covet what you have, but you frighten them. Take care not to anger my elder sisters; they can be cruel when they are thwarted. They do not forgive. The Song might be Lyriel's and the Game might be Lithia's, but the purpose is mine, it is my will that shaped both, for I saw the evil in man's heart, I brought the knowledge to my sisters, and they create Song and Game to do my will."

"What is it you will?" The fairy asked with a quaking voice.

Sea-green eyes looked at her sadly. "Men must pay for the treachery in their hearts. Women are soft, they love, they care; they are gentle and beautiful. But men are cold, brutal, hard, pitiless and mean. They are also easily led by song, by smile, by glance, by hand. I am Lynessa, and I shall teach you the Call."

The fairy had not met men, and thus had no reason to doubt beautiful Lynessa's words. Men must be horrible things, to have made such gentle beings so angry. The fairy looked at her hair, so drab compared to the golden flowing tresses of Lynessa.

Seeing the looks the fairy was casting between her hair and her own, Lynessa laughed lightly. "A simple magic, if that makes you unhappy. Here, take my hand, feel the spell, learn it, and you may change simple things like hair and garb at will." And so the fairy had her first true lesson from Lynessa's hand; how to change what others see.

She set herself to learning all the lessons the sisters had to teach her. She learned the Song. Her voice joined those of the sisters as they sat the river banks, enjoying the sunshine. Soon she could sing alone, her voice echoing out over the water hauntingly, just as Lyriel wished it.

Until she could master the Song, she was not allowed to play the Game with the sisters, though little by little Lithia showed her the manner in which the game would be played. She learned that children were innocent and would never be taken as part of the Game. She learned to tell men from women, elves from trolls, seelie from unseelie. She learned where the deepest parts of the Tembriel were. She learned where crossings were made, where mounts were watered, where camps were erected. All these were places to find men with which to play the Game.

The lessons of Lynessa were the hardest for the young fairy to understand and master. Lynessa taught her the ways of seduction; how to lure a man and make him follow. She learned to cast her sight down and then look up through the lashes and beckon with her eyes. She learned to sway her hips and walk with purpose to her stride. When she was finally allowed to watch the Game, many moons into her lessons, she saw how Lynessa led the big hairy man right up to the river's edge; and with Lyriel and Lithia, fell upon him and dragged him down to the deepest depths of the Tembriel.

She practiced the Song and the spells of enticement upon the creatures she met in the woods and forests along the banks of the Tembriel. Her burgeoning power amused and thrilled her. She enraptured the creatures she found, called them to her, stroked their fur or scales or feathers, and then released them once more, for they were not part of the Game, merely a tool for her to practice upon.

The day finally came when the sisters declared her ready, and allowed her to venture from the waters to play the Game. She flew, able to venture further than her sister to seek men to play with. She found a town of humans, and floated lightly to the ground, glamoring herself to appear as one of them, should anyone spy her. She heard raised voices and followed the sound. Between two buildings she saw a woman huddled against the wall, cowering in fear from the large man looming over her. He swept out with one hand, striking the woman's head, sending her sprawling in the mucky, smelly mud. He spoke harshly and rapidly in human words at her, then spit upon her and turned to stalk away down the alleyway.

She had found her mark. The sisters would be pleased. The fairy paused briefly as she strode past the prone woman, lying in a puddle of smelly sludge. Not knowing exactly why she did it, the fairy reached down and grasped the woman under the arms, pulling her up until she was sitting. Perhaps it was the stench of the filth covering the shivering, bleeding woman that bothered her, she wrinkled her nose and cast out with her magic at the puddle around the woman. The water cleared, cleansed by fairy magic. She dipped the end of the woman's scarf in the clean water and wiped the worst of the muck off her face. With a nod of satisfaction the fairy stood, and said to the woman in slow, careful human speech taught to her by Lyriel, "Choose your companions more carefully in future."

It was easy to find the big man again, and work the spells of beguilement upon him and lead him to the sisters waiting at the water's edge. The sisters gleefully pounced upon the man, dragging him away. When they resurfaced, they looked upon the young fairy with pride and pleasure and beckoned her to join them in the water.

"Well sung, little sister," hummed Lyriel, circling around her and smiling.

Not to be outdone, Lithia danced around her as well, saying, "Well played, little sister."

Amusement in her eyes as she joined the river dance, Lynessa purred, "Well called, little sister."

"You have earned your place with us, as well as your name. From today, we shall call you Lorelei."

Lyriel said, touching her forehead to the newly named fairy's.

"Lorelei," chanted Lithia, and kissed the fairy's cheek.

"Lorelei; it is a good name, befitting one who dwells in the river, and plays our game." Lynessa proclaimed as she hugged the happily overwhelmed fairy to her bosom.

So it went, for many, many turns of the season, Lorelei played the Game, grew proficient at it, excelled in the Call and mastered the Song. And for a long time, she was happy. Then, for a time, she was merely content. Then, eventually, came the time when she began to wonder if this was all there was; living in the river and playing the Game with her sisters.

And then came the day when a weeping elf wandered along the bank of the Tembriel, her wretched sobs echoing out along the water, drawing Lorelei's attention. She poked her head from the water and watched. Sometimes, women were fair prey for the Game, if there had not been a taking in a long time. So, the fairy watched.

The elf slumped to the grassy riverside, very close to one of the deep pools, one where Lithia liked to float and rest on the hottest of days, such as today.

“Oh river goddesses, hear me. Please, please hear me.” The elf sobbed out as she unfolded a colorful cloth that she drew out of a bag she had been carrying. She set out a fire pillar, something Lorelei had only seen from afar in the past. The elf made a fire on the pillar by striking a stone and then drew some shiny things from the bag, setting them aside. Curiosity drew Lorelei closer. The elf pulled flowers from the bag, tore them and cast the petals out over the river. She held something over the fire pillar, and it flared up, and smelled, and then threw that into the river too, as she spoke words beneath her breath.

Lorelei moved closer, wishing to hear the words. The elf picked up the shiny things and slipped them over her fingers, then lightly clapped her fingers together, creating a lovely chiming noise that charmed Lorelei, making her smile.

“Please, return my love to me. See him safely home from the sea, goddesses of water.”

Oh, this was not good. The sisters did not like when this sort of thing happened; they declared these kind of lovesick, heartbroken women to be weak, useless and silly creatures, and therefore, prey.

“Go away.” Lorelei called, drawing the elf’s attention. “Silly, silly girl. Go away. Run. Stop wasting your time on spells to draw men. You have no aptitude for the Calling, so just stop. Go away!”

The warning came too late. The elf saw her and started to stand, but was too late. Lithia rose up from the rippling river, caught the elf in her arms, and threw herself backwards once more into the water’s embrace.

“No!” Lorelei called. Something about the sobbing elf had given her pause, made her question her part in the Game. She swam to intercept Lithia, now joined by Lynessa, as they dragged the struggling elf into the depths.

For the first time in her life, Lorelei defied her sisters, she broke the rules of the Game. She swam over and grabbed at Lithia’s hands, kicked at Lynessa’s fingers, breaking her sister’s hold on the elf. Too surprised by Lorelei’s interference, Lithia and Lynessa did not attempt to recapture the elf as she swam upwards to freedom. Lorelei followed her, catching her up under the arms and dragging her up and out of the water.

“Run. Run, you silly, stupid girl.” Lorelei hissed at her. The elfin girl ran.

It was advice Lorelei realized she would need to take for herself. Lyriel would be absolutely furious with her, when she learned of this day’s happening. With one sorrowful glance back over her shoulder towards the only home and family she had ever known, Lorelei flew away from the Tembriel River.

She flew in no direction, letting the winds take her far from her sister’s sphere of influence, to lands where they could not sense her, could not find her and make her return to play the Game some more, or extract revenge for her spoiling of it.

Finally, when it grew too dark to see, and she was too weary to go any further, she landed in a forest, one with large, oddly shaped trees. The roots grew up from the ground in wild bald shapes, forming little burrows beneath the trees. She found one with only a smattering of dried leaves in it and curled up there to sleep. It had been so very long since she had slept out in the air, the sounds of the night disturbed her, and she rested fitfully in the strange wood.

A noise woke her; she came to realize that it was the sound of many feet. She opened her eyes to see a pair of legs near her head, and the folds of a shimmering gown beside the legs. She huddled in on herself, trying to be as small as possible, not knowing she had already been found.

“Oh, Haulflin, what have you found for me?!” A high pitched, grating voice cried out and the gowned figure bounced up and down in place.

A male voice answered, “We have yet to see fully, Highness.” A big hand reached into Lorelei’s nook and grasped her by the neck, then yanked her up, as easily as her sisters had once dragged men down to the

river bottom. Lorelei wriggled and squirmed, kicking out with her feet and digging her nails into the hands that held her dangling in the air as she fought to get free.

“A little trespassing fairy! How darling! Pluck its wings and let it loose Haulflin, it will give us a merry chase tonight. The dratted hounds have already finished off the last of the spriggans you caught last moon. Here I thought I would be bored tonight, and you have found us fair sport!”

Pluck her wings? Lorelei let out a bellow of outrage. Then the lessons her sisters had taught her came to mind and she began to sing, a song of coaxing, a song meant to persuade, to make these nasty would-be wing thieves desire to do her bidding. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the spell, trying to ignore the fact that she still hung limply from a vile man’s hand.

A sharp slap against her cheek stopped her song. She opened her eyes and looked down into the annoyed face of the gowned fey woman. “There will be none of that! Naughty thing! How comes a fairy to know a nixie song, I wonder?” The woman walked a slow circle, then again walked it widdersshins. The beings gathered around watching all jumped back as she neared them in her pacing. Fear? Most likely.

The man holding her aloft turned to watch, carelessly swinging Lorelei by the throat as he did so. Her limp limbs swaying like twigs and leaves on a broken branch. This was quite unpleasant, Lorelei decided.

“Not our nixie’s song.” One of the watchers ventured timidly, there were nods all around.

A squeaky voice piped from the back of the crowd, “Never heard one like that.”

A man clad in shining pieces of bronze armor sat astride a tall black mare. He nodded in agreement and added, “Southern nixies, I hazard. Disorganized, lazy, too caught up in their own selfish games down that way to pay any attention to Courtly manners and pay their proper respects.”

At the horseman’s words the gowned woman stopped her progress and looked over at him. “They have been a bane to the Court in the past.” She waved her hand at the big man. “Drop it Haulflin, I want to talk to it, and I can hardly do that if you’re slinging it about to and fro like a prize fowl ready for plucking.”

Lorelei found herself cast into the dirt at the cold fey woman’s feet. There was no denying that she was beautiful of face, but Lorelei well knew the power of a good glamour, it could all be smoke and wishes. A small slippered foot kicked out, catching Lorelei under the chin, and forcing her face up.

In that moment, Lorelei learned a new lesson; she learned how to hate. She had thought she had learned, that she understood how to hate men over the years of serving her sisters, but now, now she knew true hatred. This was a being of purely selfish soul, one that could order the deaths of so many creatures just to amuse herself and the members of her court. The tiny little turned up nose, the perfectly coifed hair, the glittering crystal crown, she hated this woman. Lorelei remembered long ago stories told by her sisters, of the Fey Court to the north, of the games of a different sort played there. She had found herself in their midst, it seemed, and it chilled Lorelei to her soul.

“Sing again, little thief, and a thief you must be, for nixies never let anyone share their songs. You will sing to amuse me. Do not attempt trickery; I shall not be ensnared by a simple nixie ditty. Sing. Now.” She stamped her foot down in demand.

Should she do as bid? This vile woman could and likely would have her slain for sport. If she pretended to play their game, perhaps she could find a way to get out of the situation, with her wings and other favored bits of her person firmly intact. So, she sang. Huddled in fear at the feat of an uncaring seelie queen, Lorelei sang for her life. She sang of the river, of her sisters, of the home she had run away from, she sang out her heartache and her loss. Little did she know, it was the last time she would ever sing so beautifully, so magically.

“A different song.” The queen mused, tapping an elegant finger tip against her lips. “Do you wish to live, little thief?”

She had to play their game. “Yes... Highness.” The unfamiliar word stuck in her throat and almost refused to leave her lips.

Satisfied with the answer, the queen fluffed her curls and smoothed out non-existent wrinkles in her gown. “A trade then, thief. I offer your life.”

“I... I have nothing to offer in trade... Highness.” Lorelei gestured down to the simple strips of fabric that served as her clothing. Next to the courtly gowns and tunics of the hunt, her attire appeared to be nothing more than shredded rags.

The queen grinned malevolently. “Oh, but you do. Your Song, little thief. Your life for your southern nixie Song.”

The Song? Lyriel’s Song? If she made this trade, she could truly never go back. There would be no forgiveness. This was not the Game merely spoiled for a day; this was something her sister valued, the only thing that was truly Lyriel’s own.

“She won’t do it. Let us ride her down, Rozleen. She is not one of our own and has no business on our lands.” The armored man on the horse leaned forward and coaxed.

“Hush, bratling prince. I shall wait a moment more for the ungrateful wretch to decide.” A slippered foot tapped impatiently on the forest floor. Reluctantly, seeing no other way out of the situation, Lorelei nodded. Queen Rozleen smiled that malicious smile once more and gestured with her arms at the crowd of courtiers, scattering them back into the trees to cover away from her displeasure.

Rozleen drew a red crystal suspended on a delicate chain from around her neck and held it in the palm of her hand. She circled the miserable fairy three times, chanting in the old tongue of her people, words Lorelei could not understand. But she felt the power, it was impossible for any fey not to feel it. Her body began to tingle. Then it got hard to breathe. Her throat began to burn horribly. Tears streamed down her face as she felt a piece of herself being torn away. The crystal began to glow, the brightness increasing in equal proportion to the pain Lorelei felt in her throat. Then the pain stopped, the burning was gone, and she felt drained and newly empty.

“Sing, little thief.” The Queen Rozleen demanded, cuffing Lorelei behind the ear.

She opened her mouth, and attempted to continue the song, but what came out was a harsh sound to her ears. Her voice sounded deep and ordinary now. It sounded... human. Everything that made it special was gone. Tears fell in earnest as she stared at the crystal glowing in the Queen’s palm, before the hand was closed over it and it disappeared. She was well and truly separated forever from her sisters, now.

“Come along then, thief, you may ride at the back. You are fetching enough of face, I am certain someone will give you a place.” Rozleen dropped the crystal back into the bodice of her dress and strode over to her mount, the fallen fairy forgotten in the instant she ceased to possess anything of value.

Lorelei managed to find herself a dubious place in the Court of Queen Rozleen. Her stay there was by no means pleasant. She was neither wholly seelie nor wholly unseelie, and so was not trusted by any at the Court. She was mocked frequently for her rustic manners and speech. The courtiers were cruel, forcing her to croak out songs in the horrible new voice, which made the beautiful songs she knew sound ugly to her ears.

Eventually, Lorelei learned to repay cruelty with cruelty, trick for trick. She still had the lessons of her youth under her belt, and she could still cast her magics. She had only lost the Song; in time she found she could use the ways of the Game to better her situation, the tools of Calling had their uses at Court.

The courtiers were almost all fair prey to her new Game, for nearly all had abused her or slighted her in some way or another. Slowly, most courtiers learned that it was not wise to provoke the silent and brooding fairy in their midst. Lorelei learned to wear masks of coldness and indifference to keep people at a distance; she learned to glare and to smolder, and to use those looks to ward people off. These were the lessons the Court taught her.

Over time, with her new protections in place, Lorelei began to resent her place in the Court. She knew she could not simply leave; one did not leave Rozleen’s Court, the majority of those who left did so in tiny little pieces spread out over the forest floor, victims of The Hunt after drawing Rozleen’s ire. Lorelei knew

she would have to be clever, else find herself fleeing Haulflin, his hounds, and the rest of The Hunt one night.

She watched and learned which courtiers irritated the Queen the most, which had enemies, which had tempers easily set to flaming. These were her targets. She nudged them into conflict with each other, a spoken word here, a roll of the eyes and gesture there, a tiny bit of magic and seduction sprinkled about. Lorelei made sure that everyone suspected her part in it. She did nothing terrible enough to draw down severe punishment, but she managed to get herself labeled a troublemaker.

This first part of her plan enacted, she began to repay old unkindness, slights, and hurts with a bit of spell casting. She had perfected spells of metamorphosis, going beyond the simple glamours Lynessa had taught her in her youth. Soon, the halls of the castle were crawling with toads, snakes, ravens, rats, mice, and bats. Grinning with mischievous glee, she was holding a spider in the palm of her hand, the shape-changed Comtesse of Avanridell, when Haulflin stomped up to her, grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her to the Queen's audience chamber.

"Enough, bratty thief!" The Queen hissed as Haulflin dropped her roughly before the throne. "I cannot have my courtiers eating each other! It is simply not done! Bad form, thief." Rozleen still referred to Lorelei as thief on the infrequent occasions when the unfortunate fairy drew her attention. Lorelei had never attempted to correct the Queen by professing innocence of thievery; she preferred that her head remain attached to her neck, after all.

Lorelei knew this was the chance she had been preparing for. "Highness, I am bored. The others will never accept me. Perhaps there is some task I might fulfill outside, away from those who annoy me and provoke me to mischief?"

"Child, do turn the Comtesse back into a fairy, the marquis is about to swoop down and snack upon her." Rozleen gestured casually to the large spider still clutched in Lorelei's palm.

Lorelei pouted. "Oh, must I?"

"Disobedient brat!" Haulflin cuffed her upside the head, dislodging the spider/Comtesse, which flew across the room to land upside down on the tiles.

"Oh, dear, I do believe the mousey Lady Melescent is going to find herself as meal for our snake Lord Dustin, if she attempts to hop over and eat the Comtesse now." Queen Rozleen commented airily. She was leaning her cheek upon one fist, propped on the arm of her throne, watching the various courtiers scuttle, hop, slither, scurry and fly about the chamber. A good number of them had made their way here to the audience chamber. "Fix them, thief."

A direct order was a direct order. Lorelei sighed and quickly cast the spell to break her enchantments. Soon the room was filled with groaning and whining courtiers.

"Vile unseelie loving fairy!"

"You beast! You were going to eat me!"

"You licked me! How dare you!"

"You ate my auntie!" That last accusation started quite an uproar; until a search of the castle revealed the matronly auntie safely ensconced in the larder, where she had devoured a fair portion of cheese, while still in rat form.

"Highness, a task, I beg of you?" It cowed her to say the words, but Lorelei was truly begging for release at this point. The Court was stifling her, killing her, turning her into a creature she did not like and had quite grown to fear.

Rozleen tossed her hand carelessly, "Yes, yes, begone. Go see if you can sneak into the Eastern Court somehow, learn what you will and return to me some information I can use. Find me some treasure, little thief."

And thus, Lorelei escaped, intending to make her way to the Eastern Court and see what she could learn there, and send back to Rozleen, for she had no intention of ever setting foot or wing into Rozleen's Court again, if it could be helped.

As she wandered the path away from the castle, the sky rumbled overhead and lightning flashed. Lorelei gave a grin and spread her wings. She did so love to play in the rain...