

SARAH-KATE SIMONS

Swamp Thing

He couldn't talk with the wolf's head on, but he was still cute enough in his tuxedo. Looking good in a tuxedo doesn't indicate much though—even my sister's boyfriend manages to look like an upstanding human being in one, if you can ignore his tendency to bite. Not to mention that the mask left it up to the imagination whether or not he was suffering from a bad case of acne and didn't make him the social life of the party either.

“Do we...know each other?” I ventured, after being stared at for several long minutes. I gestured vaguely in the air with my glass of fizzy. “I'm told there's a bit of wolf on my grandmother's side.”

Those dull glass eyes gazed back at me, expressionless, and I heaved an internal sigh.

“Brilliant.” I rolled the word off my tongue, dumping my glass on the table. “Great chat. Should do it again sometime. I gotta run, late for the night dance.”

With a fake smile Mother would've framed for the wall, I drifted away from the dining room, heading for the stairs. When I risked a peek through the banister, wolf-boy remained staring at the spot where I'd stood. *Yeesh. Someone came here fresh from the loony bin.* Yet another thing to add to my list of complaints for the mayor when I finally got to meet him on my 21st— please stop inviting nutters to live here when there's a perfectly good asylum five miles up the highway.

Lola sat at her dressing table, in her bathrobe with her hair bundled up in a towel tower, busy admiring her new earrings.

“You’re going to make me late for the dance,” I complained, sprawling across her bed with a long sigh.

“Don’t be a drama queen. You’re always late because you never go.” Finishing with her earrings, she rose and crossed to her wardrobe, pulling out some of the new dresses she bought earlier this week. “Red or blue?”

“Red. You look ugly in blue.” I wrinkled my nose, wondering why she’d even bought a dress in that colour in the first place. Maybe it was the rage at the night balls at the moment.

“Did you talk to him?” she inquired, taking my advice and picking the red.

“Who?” I paused in my attempt to see if I could get into that pretzel position Miss Lovelace had demonstrated at school yoga class.

“Asa.” She favoured me with her ‘why are you such an idiot’ expression, and I scowled, resentful. “Y’know, hot stuff in the wolf mask? His dad’s the new groundsman for the dance lawn?”

“Ohhhh, him,” I said. “Heck no.” I squinted. “Hang on, his name’s Asa?” An urge to laugh overcame me and I snorted, struggling to equate such a nice name with someone who came to masque dinners as a wolf. *What a dork.*

“If you made an effort, you’d have a partner for the night dances,” Lola said with an arched eyebrow as she unwound her towel and began brushing out her long hair.

“Your hair smells good,” I complained, not wanting to dwell on the topic of me spending any more time with wolf-boy. *Please, let me die first.*

“I actually wash it, that’s why.”

“Ew.” I returned to trying to make myself into a human pretzel. Miss Lovelace made it look so easy.

“Just because you’ve made it to sixteen still taking mud baths in the woods and wearing your shirts backwards doesn’t mean we all have,” Lola said severely, gathered her lace cardigan, and left for the dance.

As usual, I remained behind on the bed, and achieved human pretzel status at ten thirty, when the dances started. Not that I would know. Everyone knew better than to partner the ruffian Everhart

youngest and so I kept my appearances on the dance-grounds non-existent. Lola seemed to think wolf-boy was my second chance, but there was no way I would go anywhere with a guy who wore a wolf's head to dinner.

I took my morning constitutional swim in Blackfriars's lake, a pleasant place full of enough eels, mud and lake-weed to keep sensible people away and my reputation where it belonged—nose deep in dirt. Halfway through my third lap, some idiot decided to wander down and draw pictures in the sand with a stick.

I practised how long I could hold my breath. Annoying as being interrupted was, a bit of practice never hurt when you had a free-diving contest in two weeks that Mother expected you to win. Mother was just jealous because ghosts can't compete in diving competitions.

After breaking my own ten minute record out of sheer spite, I surfaced to find my peace returned to me. Still, the morning was irreparably ruined, and I sulked out of the water to my towel. Dripping wet, I stomped over to where the intruder had drawn on the sand, intending to investigate what had warranted disturbing my peace. Clutching my towel, I struggled to make out the wavy lines. *These weren't created by anyone talented that's for sure.*

Taking a closer look, I discovered that the markings weren't drawings at all and my mouth dropped open.

A couple of sand-flies bit me on the shin.

I didn't notice.

And yet, to say the truth, love and reason keep little company together nowadays.

"That's Shakespeare," I informed the trees, hands on my hips.

"Someone's defacing my lake with Shakespeare."

When I arrived home, I told Lola the exact same thing. She squinted at me, the steam from the hair straightener drawing beads of sweat from her forehead. "So?" she asked. "I'd love it if someone came and wrote Shakespeare for me to find. Romantic."

"Ew!" I yelped, burying my head under a pillow. "Take it back this instant."

"You're a girl," my sister informed me in a long-suffering voice.

“Statistically there’s got to be someone in the world who finds grime and ridicule attractive.”

“I’m a pretzel,” I said firmly, looping my legs around into the pretzel shape. “Your argument is invalid.”

She groaned, setting the straightener aside, and left the room. I tended to have that effect on people.

Thoroughly worried by her words, I made sure I spent the day in baggy pants and a backwards shirt, put my hairbrush in the bin and took an expedition to the blackberry thicket in the middle of the woods. By the time the dinner bell summoned me inside and it was time for Lola to get ready for the night dance, I looked like an inhabitant of a trash tip, and felt very proud of myself.

“Don’t lie on my bed, you stink,” my sister complained, waving her lipstick at me in a manner I found threatening.

“No one wants to write Shakespeare for me now,” I said, grinning and settled back in her chair instead.

Lola’s only comment took shape as a muffled grunt of distaste as she finished applying the lipstick, and picked up her newly delivered dance shoes.

“Blair’s picking me up tonight,” she said, pursing her lips in the mirror and making kissing noises. Behind her, I gagged.

“Ew. Are you still dating that loser?”

“He’s not a loser!” she snapped, bristling all over like Mr Tiddles when I sprayed him with the garden hose by accident last week. “And you’re going to come downstairs and say hello nicely without looking like the Swamp Thing.”

“Too bad,” I chirped, smiling sweetly back at her. “Nothing swamplier than me.”

“If he ditches me because of you—”

“Nah, he wouldn’t give an eel brain if I fell in a ditch and died. He barely even knows I exist.”

Lola muttered something that sounded very much like ‘I try very hard to keep it that way.’ That persuaded me to feel something that might’ve been guilt, and I let her drag me down the stairs to the front door. After milling about in the hall for a while, the doorbell rang, and she practically hurled herself out the door onto Blair, who

wore his commonplace tuxedo. They proceeded to spend several minutes on the doorstep eating each other's faces off, before setting off for the dance without another word to me.

Thanks for that pointless waste of my pretzel time. Planning to get myself a nice cup of hot chocolate and then play skittles in the hall with Mother's tall china vases, I began to pull the door shut and stopped.

There was a stranger on the path. A tall, slight fellow with a mess of blonde hair that sported a variety of twigs. This choice of hair accessory persuaded me to give him a chance, and I left the door open.

"Can I help you?" I asked in my best polite voice.

"I don't know yet," he said, his voice shy, thick with some foreign accent. He drew a little nearer, avoiding the light from the house, but I could still glimpse enough of him to note that he wore his tuxedo awkwardly, and that the pants had grass stains on the knees, and the jacket was coated in what looked like dog fur.

Not a bad fashion statement.

"Are you..." he paused, as if looking for the right words. "Do you have partner? I have asked around town and all the girls, they have partners."

"Well I don't," I said proudly, puffing out my chest and flipping my hair. "I'm single as a pretzel."

"Oh," he said. "Would you go to dance if you had partner?" His words were stilted, but I got the sense he was trying very hard.

"Duh," I replied, shrugging. "I mean, it's probably bone dull, but I've always wanted to have a look around the dance grounds—wait. Are you offering to take me?"

"Ja," he said, removing one of the twigs from his hair and proceeding to snap it in two.

"OK then." Bouncing off the steps, I pushed the door shut behind me and jogged to join him. Seeming surprised, he stared at me for a few moments, then set off up the driveway. The tall wrought iron fence that lined the dance ground glittered at the end of the main street, and a seed of excitement flowered in my stomach. *I'm going to the dance! I never go to the dance!*

It's totally overrated but like...still.

“You aren’t holding my hand.” I blurted the words suddenly as we approached the gates to the dance ground and the warden, whose eyes had narrowed at the sight of us.

“No, I am not,” he said, blinking baffled indigo eyes at me.

“Hold it,” I hissed. “They won’t let us in.”

The stranger laced his fingers with mine, and I shivered. His hand was freezing and I wouldn’t be surprised if mine went numb.

The warden stared at us for a long time, and I offered my best smile. *Another one for Mother to frame.* At last, he moved aside, his heavy armour clunking, and I tugged my new partner into the dance grounds. Thick trees lined the area, surrounded by rings of daisies and red and white toadstools. Lanterns hung from the branches, flickering with fireflies.

“There’s no one here,” I observed, wrinkling my nose and kicking at a tree root. “Boringggggg.”

My companion tilted his head. “That might not be true.” He pointed into the branches of the nearest tree. “Pixie nest.”

“You’re kidding,” I breathed, walking over to the tree trunk. “I’m going to look.”

“This branch first. I come after.”

Little by little, the two of us made our way up the old oak to the nest, where we admired the sleeping baby pixies, and perched on a sturdy branch to talk.

“Lola likes the dance,” I said. “She comes with this guy from down the street called Blair. They like biting each other, ’cept they call it kissing.”

The stranger laughed.

“I don’t get it,” I continued after pausing to feel gratified by that response. “There’s just a bunch of trees. I don’t even know where they are in here. It must be somewhere really far in, but Lola hates trees. She doesn’t wander in forests, even for dancing. It doesn’t make sense.”

He thought about that, and I picked at a patch of dried mud on my cargo pants.

“Maybe,” he said after a while, “the night dances take you and your partner where you want to be, ja? She likes parties, so she has party, and we like trees. So trees.”

Tossing the scrap of mud into the air, I considered that answer and nodded. “Ja.”

My partner blinked, and smiled. “Ja, English girl.” A giggle welled up in me, and I swung my legs back and forth, laughing.

“I’m Ciara,” I offered after I recovered from my bout of the giggles, and held out a hand.

“Asa,” he replied, taking my hand and giving it a firm shake, not seeming to notice how I stared.

This is the lunatic with the wolf mask?

“Wolf,” I said faintly.

He ducked his head, blushing. “One of father’s hunting trophies. People stare too much. Make them stare at something.” Glancing up, he gestured at my mud-coated backwards attire. “Like you. Swamp Thing.” A whisper of smile passed over his face.

“I like to swim at Blackfriars’s.” The words left my lips before I could consider them.

“I know,” he said, and I fought off my urge to stare at him some more. *Wolf and Shakespeare?* My good sense informed me that no one would think less of me if I made a run for it now, but for some reason I finished, “Meet me tomorrow? I can show you where the best blackberries are after.”

Asa’s face shuttered, and he looked away, a sudden heaviness in his eyes. “I do not know,” he murmured. “Father does not...like wandering. This morning was luck.”

“OK mister wolf-boy, let me tell you a secret: I’m a human lie detector. What’s really the problem?”

“It’s nothing.” He picked at the tree bark. I sidled closer, imitating Blair’s facial expression whenever he saw my sister in an attempt to look creepy.

“Tell me,” I said. “Or the ghost of Ciara Everhart shall haunt you forever.”

Asa laughed, shaking his head at me. “You are not dead, so how can you be ghost?”

“I’ll make it happen,” I replied staunchly. “Now spill.”

Ducking his head, he tugged harder at the tree bark, his cheeks colouring. “I...do not. swim,” he whispered.

He can’t swim? Unexpected but OK. Rolling with it. “No?” I said.

“Somebody had better fix that.”

“I saw you coming home from the dance with Asa every night this week,” Lola said, leaning around the doorframe with a happy glint in her eyes. “Got something to tell me?”

I looked up at her, disgruntled that she’d invaded my sanctuary, a place she usually avoided since it was filled with jars of bugs, two lizard cages, my frog, Robert and a fish tank. It also rubbed me the wrong way that she’d caught me. I’d done my level best to keep Asa and my outings a secret to avoid this very encounter.

“Just that dance is a stupid name for a hiking expedition,” I said, retrieving two leaves from my hair that were making me itch.

“And Asa?” she pressed, coming inside and inviting herself onto my bed.

“He thinks Growltiger is an endangered species?” I said, not sure what she wanted from me.

“Ciara!” she groaned, burying her face in a pillow. The sight made me wince, knowing I’d be sleeping with her perfume all night. *Ick.*

“Has he kissed you yet?”

The question made me stare at her. An urge to vomit welled up in my stomach. “Uh no? No thank you? Not ever?”

She levelled me with her disappointed look, and I glared back, fighting the urge to smother her with the very pillow she clutched for support.

“Well he does seem to be taming you at least,” she sighed.

“Taming—excuse me,” I spat, sitting up. “He doesn’t think I need taming. He likes swimming in lakes and getting covered in mud and inspecting bugs and climbing trees. We want to go up to Songbird Mount next summer and go hiking.”

Lola blinked several times. “You need to get a life, Ciara. And soon. No one will want you.”

“I have a life,” I snarled, something inside stinging. “And just because you don’t want me doesn’t mean everyone else won’t want me either.”

A loaded silence descended over the room. My sister rose, tossing the pillow aside. “Suit yourself.” Nose in the air, she stalked out. “Stay in here with your ugly, froggy friends.” She slammed the door.

“Well,” I said, taking in a shaky breath, my throat feeling thick. Struggling to rally myself, I got to my feet and walked to feed Robert. Dropping his quota of flies into his habitat, I peered through the glass at him. “What do you think?”

I asked him.

“Ribbet,” said Robert, staring back with bulging eyes.

Sighing, I crossed to my bedside table, picked up the dial-up phone and twirled until I had the number I wanted.

“Ja, English girl?” Asa said. Somehow he always knew when it was me calling. “We going pond-dipping tomorrow?”

“Can you come get me?” I asked.

“Five minutes,” he said, without any further questions. The line gave a disconsolate click as it disconnected.

I tried to force my body into a triumphant pretzel, but I just wasn’t feeling it and my legs wouldn’t tuck up properly. For the first time in a good six years, I wished Mother was less ghost and more human.

A rock bounced off my window with a pleasant crack, and I slid off the bed and trotted over to push it open. “Hiiiiiii,” I yelled, waving down at Asa, who’d shown up fully dressed, carting a basket and what appeared to be fishing rods. *He’s good, this boy*, I thought, slinging my legs out over the sill. *Who needs a sister anyway?*

“Midnight picnic? Ja?” he called up to me, not all fazed that my route to the ground involved nothing safer than a windowsill, a drainpipe and a dubious ivy vine. Lola would’ve been screaming and calling the emergency department. Traversing the drainpipe, I dropped to the ground and wiped my hands off on my shirt, creating two pleasant algae stains.

“Sounds capital,” I said, feeling better already, accepting my fishing rod and looping my arm in his.

“You good?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at me and I pulled a face. *Couldn’t be that obvious, could it? Shame on you, Ciara’s face. Try for some emotional obscurity next time.*

“Ciara?”

Oh sneezing pixies. With a groan, I turned and found Lola leaning out of my open bedroom window, make-up plastered face twisted into an expression of some sort. It was probably meant to be sisterly

love and remorse, but she mainly just looked constipated.

“What is it?” I yelled walking backwards towards the woods, Asa keeping step with me. “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“Is that your sister?” he hissed in my ear.

“I know right? Total horror,” I agreed, and waited for said horror to reply.

“I just wanted to say—” she began and I buried my face in Asa’s shoulder.

“Your heartfelt remorse can die in a pile of manure. Go back to bed.”

At my words, my friend choked, and ended up coughing hard into his hand.

“You’re giving Asa consumption,” I added, patting him on the back and waving a fishing rod at my sister in a threatening manner.

Lola closed her red-painted lips, visible even in the dark and at this great distance. A cricket chirped in the grass at my feet, and I snickered. *Great timing, little guy.*

“You left your cardigan,” she ventured. The comment’s stupidity didn’t warrant an answer, so I folded my arms, waiting for her to get to her point.

“Can I come?” she said at last.

“Nope,” I said, detaching a squashed fly meant for Robert from my shirt with a fingernail. “Go back to bed Lola before you say something even more stupid. I’ll bring you back a fish if you don’t annoy me anymore.”

“Please?” she begged, and I found my own jaw threatening to transform me into a goldfish. The prissy airhead seemed dead set on coming, for some inane, incomprehensible-to-a-normal-human-being reason.

“She could come,” Asa offered with a shrug, raising the picnic basket. “There’s plenty.”

“Sand flies, briars, mud, dead fish and the possibility of snakes,” I called to Lola.

“I don’t care,” she said, her voice trembling a little, but she swung her legs out over the sill in a defiant manner. I smacked my forehead with a palm. *Oh kill me now. Hated my guts ten minutes ago, now wants to try night fishing in the forest with me. What an A+ horror.*

SWAMP THING

“Fine,” I growled, throwing up my hands. “Just for heaven’s sake, please use the stairs!”