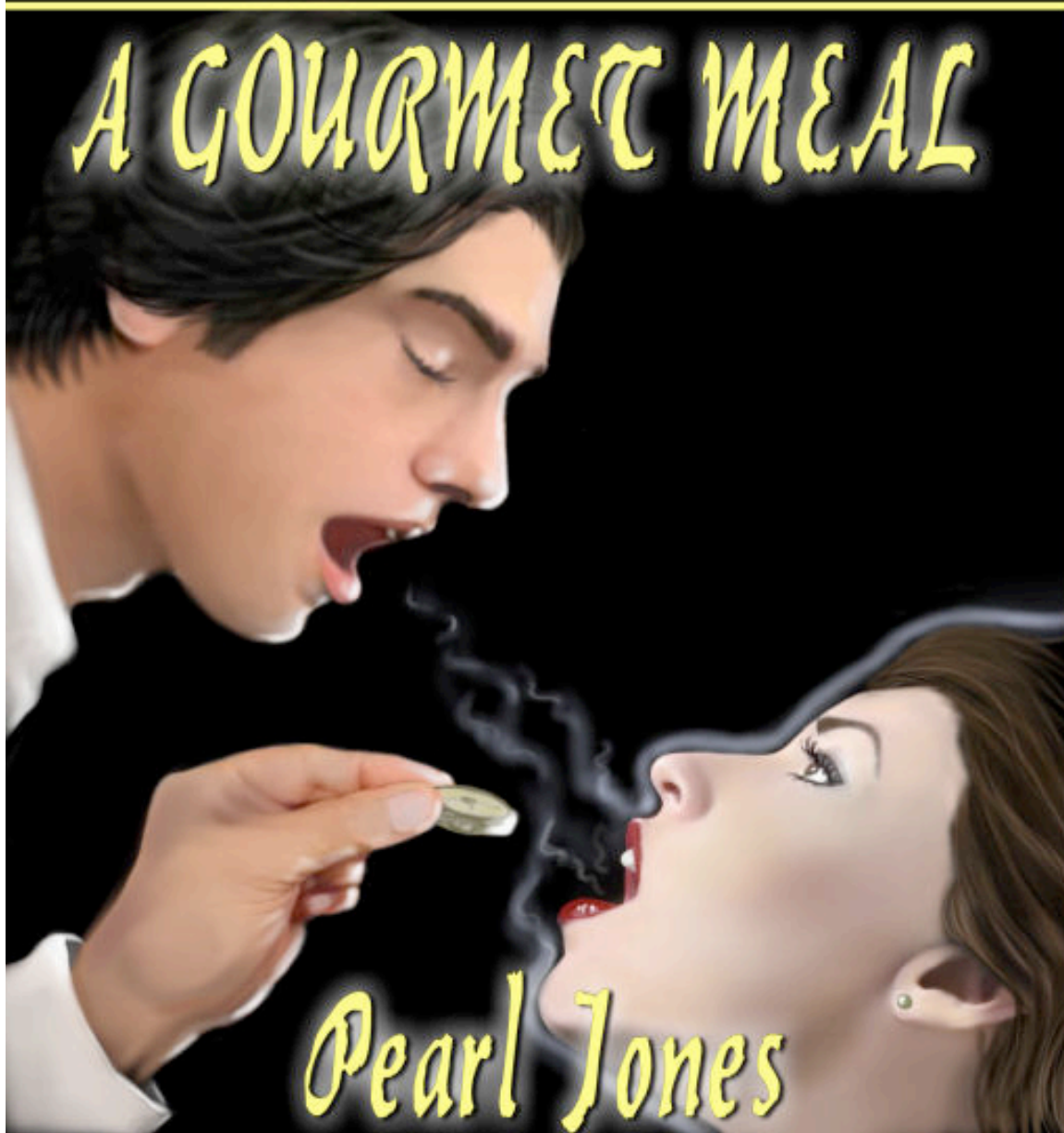


* Lady Aibell Press *

A GOURMET MEAL



Pearl Jones



www.LadyAibell.com

a division of Chippewa Publishing, LLC

A Gourmet Meal

by

Pearl Jones

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Lady Aibell Press/A Chippewa Publishing Publication, August 2006

Chippewa Publishing LLC
P.O. Box 662
Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin 54729

Available Formats:
Adobe Acrobat Reader (PDF)

Other available formats:
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Franklin eBookMan (FUB), hiebook (KML), iSilo (PDB), Mobipocket (PRC), OEBFF Format
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Edited by Angie Dobson
Cover Art by T. Jay
Proofed by Brandy Overton

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

A Gourmet Meal

“Anise,” Marc murmured. “Bergamot.” His hands moved quickly, stroking, rubbing, pressing, almost bruising, scent rising hot and strong in the air. “Lavender!” He moved from one plant to the next, testing firmness, texture, health. The restaurant’s garden was not large enough for his taste, but he drew what pleasure he could from the sense of life beneath his fingers and the blend of aromas his touch called from the herbs.

Oh, the wonders he could create with these. If only there were someone to appreciate the nuances. He had customers by the hundreds, thousands, but not one true gourmet. No one capable of fully appreciating his art. How long had it been? How long could he last, without—*No! I shall make dishes to seduce even the bluntest of them, and their minds shall spiral up, and...it will suffice.*

He would not allow himself to question that belief. He could not. Almost unwillingly, he turned his head and looked toward his restaurant. It was still there, backlit by the dawn, the elegant, enticing architecture a promise of the delights he would provide. *Sun by Marcel* was popular, and booked well into the next season, one of few restaurants with no financial problems. *Eh, bof.* He frowned; his need was not for money.

Need...

His hand spasmed. The bush tore free of tended soil to dangle in his grip. “*Merde.*” The gardeners would have cause, for once, to complain. Not that they wouldn’t have grumbled in any case, but perhaps true pique would give their curses a bit of pungency. He let the herb fall, let his shoulders slump, and turned his mind toward the tasks of the day. *Lunch, and then...another night of tossing pearls before swine.*

Hmm. Suckling pig served whole over a bed of jewels would not go over well, however much he liked the thought. His smile twisted, imagining the shock if he dared to put stones on plates, even precious ones. *So, edible gems, and let their eyes taste what their tongues might not.* Medallions of pork with dried cherries reconstituted in brandy, and onions cooked ’til translucent. Gold, diamonds, rubies. *Emeralds. What for the green?* His step was light as he headed for the kitchen, creating as he went. Something in the nature of a seasonal vegetable, an item the pigs might eat, had they not been cooked and served. And sweet potatoes? Druids’ gold was rather orange, he recalled. *I’ll make a full menu. Call it a seasonal celebration, and update some of the old Saxon dishes for sides.*

Marc imagined the restaurant manager’s likely reaction were he fool enough to speak that concept aloud. Might the man’s tight-curved hair straighten with the shock, or curl yet more? His words were easier to predict: “Saxon?” Jess would sputter. “B-but that’s English. And everyone

knows Brits can't cook!" Astounding, how enduring some myths had proved. Astounding, too, how little truth some of those myths contained. He turned his face up toward the sun, for an instant wishing to be a plant, to drink sunlight as nourishment. It would probably become dull after a time, the unvaried diet, but sunlight, at least, was plentiful.

Forbidding himself the comfort of a slide into self-pity, he returned his mind firmly to his new recipes. The staff would doubtless howl, but the diners might be pleased. *Diners, the bane of my existence. My salvation.* Like baby birds, the lot of them: hunger without discernment, mouths always open for whatever pap might be near. Still, it would amuse him to introduce his customers to the forebears of their favorite... *What is that phrase, garbage food?* He hummed as he entered his domain.

Amusement and excitement and herbs lent him only a bit of strength, and soon enough, his hands began to shake. Marc muttered imprecations beneath his breath and checked the clock. Still an hour 'til lunch. His own hunger pangs had nothing to do with food, but he nibbled a bit of bread anyway. *I shall endure.*

Voices drew his attention: the sous chefs half-amiably arguing about the proper preparation of this dish or that, ordering the rest of the kitchen staff around like the petty tyrants good cooks so often became when given any sort of chance. He thought of making an appearance to quell the noise, thought about pulling one of them aside for a quick nip. They were all so healthy, so vibrant, so tempting. Surely none of them would miss the bit of strength he needed...

Do not think it. They would miss what else would come with that strength, he knew, and he was not—*would not* become—the sort of monster who would do that. He knew too well how short the difference between thought and deed, and from that deed, there could be no return. The doorbell chimed, and Marc turned gratefully toward the sound, a smile of sheer relief stretching his lips wide. No need to contemplate that fate, not with the florist stepping even now through the door. Her mind was easily as lively as any of his staff and untapped, this month at least. Marc could feed her, and feed from her, and be sustained.

Not sated, no, but strong enough at least to survive until the lunch seating.

He wondered, briefly, if the bloodsuckers of legend had any better a time than he. *No, you are what you eat—and modern man must be a rather greasy draught.* But a Dracula's lack of conscience might be nice.

* * * *

His florist snack got him to lunch, and a room full of customers gave him strength to prepare for dinner, the usual progress of his days. He took such strength from each meal eaten, each mind's appreciation, as he could, striving always to create perfect combinations, outstanding art, even if no one would notice the finer aspects. *Oh, for one true soul!* One diner who approached a meal as the symphony of pleasures it could be. One single taste bud undimmed by processed foods and artificial flavors. Half his mouth kicked up in a wry smile for the irony of a chef starving amidst the plenty, but what he required was not to be found in a kitchen, not in a great many years. He did eat a bit of bread or fruit now and then, but his true nourishment came another way.

And too seldom, in this damnable shrink-wrapped, microwave age!

Marc shook his head at the folly of cursing the very culture that allowed him to sample the fruits of so many disparate peoples, that made it so easy for him to blend in, even to stand out a bit, and then to move on when he felt so inclined. He turned back to his kitchen, to that part of

the world he had claimed as his own for the moment. There was need of him here, to put finishing touches on dishes, approve presentations before they were delivered to the waitstaff, all a chef's myriad tasks, enough to stress even the most competent of men. It might not have worn Marc down so had he not hungered. *If the sea were glass, one might skate across. Be grateful for what is: a full room and a capable man to manage it.* A marvel, the *maitre de restaurant* was, in so many ways.

Again he wondered what Jess's likely response would be, this time to the truth about his employer. If the man even thought of him that way; at times, he seemed to treat Marc, as the chef, like some fragile doddering uncle. Well, no matter. He kept the waitstaff in line, stroked the clientele, took care of a hundred tedious details, and thus left the chef free as possible to create. Which, Marc realized, was what he ought to be concentrating on. There were hungry people to be fed, and more, to be educated, enticed, surprised, pleased by the work of his hands and heart. Something new, something unexpected...

From time to time he glanced toward the dining room, but senses other than sight gave more information: a room full of dull people with duller palates, appreciating as well as they could. He applauded their efforts, even as he bemoaned their lack of sensitivity.

Marc was checking the progress of a port-wine reduction when a single, bright mind sang out—like hearing a bird call, a sudden, beautiful sound rising high above the general noise. *Un gourmet!* That first burst of pleasure was unmistakable, refreshing as a summer rain. It was all Marc could do not to rush from the kitchen, his hands filled with the best of his art, gifts for that bright epicure's mind.

He leaned over the hotplate, eyes seeking the ceiling-mounted mirrors that helped him keep track of the dining room. Even with the room at capacity, he knew instantly who she was: her eyes were closed when he saw her, her hand dropping from her mouth, and the thrill of her pleasure brightened the ambient, the swirling energies his kind could perceive.

For a moment, that was all he saw, the perfect picture of pleasure so universal as to be featureless. But he needed to see *her*, as a person for whom he could tailor his cuisine, driving her pleasure as far as it might rise, that he might finally—*enfin!*—be fed and filled and sated with the delicate taste of her.

Her hair was dark as chocolate, her skin toasty warm. Her lips were the soft, rare red of lingonberries. Not a sweet shade, that; no, it was tart, refreshing. He stood stock-still, staring, eager to learn what he could. She brought another morsel of bread to those lovely lips, her eyelids fluttering as the bite passed that succulent barrier, and the entire room sparkled with her pleasure.

Dieux!

He drank in her emotion, strong and pure and delicious, so bright he marveled that no one blinked against the light. Ambrosia. Strength flooded his limbs, and he stood straighter, imagining the progress of her appreciation through the meal. Nourishment at last! He shivered, frankly lusty to feel her joy in his art, moaning before he caught himself. It would not do to be caught looking like a man with his hand in his pants.

Though certainly, no one could blame him. She was a luscious morsel, draped in silk and begging to be unwrapped. The first brush of pure energy always made him feel briefly randy. It would pass, he knew, as soon as his body was convinced he was not about to die. Leave the woman to her dinner.

His gaze did not return to her; it had never left. She was alone. Unusual, but he was just as glad: there would be no conversation to take her mind from the food before her, no lover to

stroke her hand when she would otherwise be reaching for another bit of this dish or that, no man's lips or tongue to clean the taste of his creations from her perfect mouth. Only him, his art, and her. *Épatant*. He turned away from the vision of her, and made his way down the line. "This table, I shall prepare." She should have only the best. For her sake, and for his. What had she ordered? Hah! His seasonal offering. Perhaps it was a sign.

He was drizzling sauces on a plate to delight her eye when the crisis broke: an accident on the floor. Even before the noise, he felt the trouble, a flare of fear where pleasure should have been. Marc growled and went to be The Celebrity Chef for a while, telling himself it was just as well she was distracted, as he should not be seen sipping at his gourmet's pleasure, lest his joy be misinterpreted.

In the kitchen, a fire was a problem, but no emergency so long as it was put out; on the floor, a different matter altogether. Accidents disturbed the tranquility, took customers' minds off their meals. Not only hers, but others, including his favorite regulars: an older couple with an appreciation for food that far surpassed the dulled taste buds of the usual clientele, and an enjoyment in one another that often made Marcus weep. They had ordered a flambé, and that damned sloppy waiter Jess hadn't yet fired had finally gone too far, splashing the Grand Marnier, and then lighting it on fire—both the stuff in the bowl, and the spill. *Le con!*

Marc used his voice, his hands, and senses less amenable to name to calm the customers, stroking and soothing and projecting calm. The usual flush of guilt rose as he used his influence, but he eased his qualms by considering the couple's combined age. They had earned some tranquility, and a room full of jitterers would, at the least, give them indigestion. His mind was all on them until they and those around them were once again at ease, then he reached for his gourmet, only to find the ambient suddenly gone dark—a mix of fear and frustration and anger he knew only too well, so strong they made his jaw clench, his vision swim.

He blinked, turned to look; her table was unoccupied. His epicure, his salvation, gone? No! Perceptions overlaid, sight and feel, and there she was, being hustled toward the office by...*Jess*? Yes, though the man was more distressed than Marc had ever seen him. The chef followed, more worried than he cared to admit even to himself, weaving through the crowd with an ease he would normally have taken pains to conceal. The three met at the office door, and Marc reached past the trembling manager to turn the knob. What had him so distraught?

"She was taking notes." Jess's lips barely unpinched enough for the words to escape, pressed back into a thin line the instant he was finished. Marcus looked from his maître d' to the woman, feeling his hope deflate like a soufflé. *A critic? Her?* It wasn't possible; enjoyment that pure could have no mercenary purpose. It simply could not. *Could it?* Her picture was not among the rogue's gallery maintained by restaurateurs. Too, she dined alone, which meant she could only judge one appetizer, a single entrée—and to take notes in public? No. It simply could not be. He shook his head. Jess brandished a napkin. He took it, staring down at elegantly spiky handwriting, more attractive than legible. After a moment, he made out, "Perhaps the swine ate the pearl...onions?"

She had a sense of humor. Of course she did. Like the silk she wore, and the casual, natural hairstyle, and the neat-shaped unvarnished nails, she was perfect. Even the smell of her, no clashing perfumes, no weird chemicals, only warm, clean, healthy woman. "*Parfait*," he murmured.

"That's a dessert, right?" She laughed a bit nervously. "Planning on making one out of me?"

You are more than dessert. You are a feast. He was tempted to speak aloud, to see what she would do. Only the thought that she might run stilled his tongue. "No."

“Good. I’m not much for sugar, as a rule.” She took a step to her right, then back. The impulse to pace, quickly stifled? “Wh-what are you going to do?”

She didn’t act like a critic, of that he was certain. He set his feelings aside and simply looked at her, waiting. Sooner or later, she would tell him—by word or gesture, scent or sign—who she was, why she was there. A busboy walked down the hall, carrying a large basket of bread, and her eyes widened as he came into view. No, she was no critic; that was yearning, longing, strong and pure. “You did not finish your entrée.”

“I would have, but...” She glanced sidelong at Jess, stolid and silent by the door. “And now it’s gone cold, if the waiter didn’t take it away.” Her lower lip slipped forward, withdrew. He judged it an impulse to pout, quickly thwarted.

“For whom do you work?”

“No one.” She answered his raised eyebrow. “No one! Really. I thought, I’d do a review on spec, see if I could get hired on. The daily’s food critic is an idiot. Maybe I should’ve stuck to little holes-in-the-wall and rib shacks, but I hoped your—ah, the restaurant’s, name would get my piece read.”

If she wore makeup, it was quite discreet. Either nature or apt artifice had given her eyelashes thick enough to cast shadows. He watched her blink, remembered her eyes closing in gustatory pleasure. Realizing how much time had passed since she had spoken, he grasped for words. “You got a table, alone?”

She seemed to understand the question. *Sun* was not the sort of place diners simply walked into, and who planned to dine out without company? “Um, the reservation was for two. I made it weeks ago.”

“Ah. I see.” He did. The blush on her cheeks that told him she had no one to ask. Too, he saw her determination, her hope, her not-quite-desperation, her need—and, even now, her appreciation for his food, that had her craning her neck toward the door as if hoping the waiter hadn’t yet cleared her table, cold entrée or no. “Do you truly wish to be a restaurant critic?”

“Well, um...” He watched the small dance she performed: Step to the left, back. Stare at hands, palm up, down. Inhale. Repeat. “Not really. I want to write books. Fiction. But I need money now, not the two years down the road I might get if I were published, and writing’s the only thing I’m really good at, so I decided to try my hand at non-fic. Newspaper stuff.”

Horrible thought. As though I had determined to go work for Clarence Birdseye on the strength of my skills with food. “I shall give you something to write about.” A hundred visions of the things he might feed her rose in his mind, the pleasures he might spark in her—and drink from her, like the finest of brandies, heated and refined. “Come with me.”

Jess frowned, but said nothing. The fog of his displeasure was easy to ignore. Her anticipation burbled out from her, enough to make him giddy. Marc led her back into the dining room, bowing her into a seat at the table left always open for him or his guests. He watched her carefully, measuring her reaction to the space. The wall curved into a sort of alcove, not quite deep enough to merit the name, but enough to provide some privacy, or a sense of claustrophobia, depending on the viewpoint. When she settled in easily, he relaxed. It would not do to have his salvation at all discomfited.

He flagged a waiter—not the clumsy oaf, a good one—and turned to her. “The seasonal menu again, Miss...?”

She blushed. “Oh! Um, Sasha. Sasha Day.”

“Sasha.” Marc rolled the name on his tongue. *It suits you.* The sounds felt good in his mouth, as well as they would on her skin when he breathed them between her breasts. *Odd.* That impulse should have faded, not grown stronger. “Please, consider yourself my guest.”

“Th-thank you, but why aren’t you throwing me out? You know I can’t write an impartial review now, but still...”

“You were not given a chance to finish your meal.” The waiter set a basket of bread on the table. Marc rose, bowing slightly, and returned to the kitchen. His hands were shaking again: excitement, not weakness.

* * * *

He joined her for dessert, or desserts, rather—a selection of honey-cakes and sweetmeats, traditional recipes updated for modern palates. Sasha frowned up at him, and he recalled her words earlier; she was not a fan of sugar. “An exception for the night, please, and in exchange, I shall give you a topic for an article to replace your lost review.”

She looked from him to the sweets, and shrugged. “Might as well. Guess you already know I like to eat.” Her voice was bitter, and though she popped a small cake in her mouth, there was no burst of energy from her. She was not enjoying.

He frowned. He had no urgent need to drink more from her at the moment, though he was not yet sated; that was not the point. She was a customer—more, a gourmet, and a guest at his table, and she was unhappy. But why? She was well-formed, a woman of undeniable curves, but not what he would have called fat, and even if she had been, what of that? She was healthy, graceful, intelligent, took pleasure in food, in life... There was no pleasure in her now, as she smoothed her napkin over her thighs.

“I do not understand why some women believe the offal fashion magazines dish out. Would you really trade such loveliness to be a skeleton with half an ounce of flesh?”

She looked up then, eyes wide and shining, and for an instant, a very different sort of energy shimmered forth from her, but then she frowned and looked away, and the hint of promise was gone.

l’Infer.

It had been a long time since he had truly wanted a woman. Hungry, he had no interest in anything else. He wanted this one, he belatedly realized, with a depth of feeling that disturbed him, but she had just said no, as clearly as if she had spoken the word aloud. He had to respect that.

No, I do not.

“Excuse me,” he said softly, and bolted from the room, from the restaurant. He walked through the garden, heedless of the leaves he crushed, the scents blending in the air. Wrestling with his need took far too long for his comfort, but he won. *I will not bind her, will not force her, will take only what is freely offered. That was the oath I made, and I shall keep it. If not for her sake, then for my own.* When his hands lay easy at his sides, Marc went back inside, to make a few small preparations and to select a small gift for her. The first of many, he hoped.

“Forgive me,” he smiled and slid a notepad onto the table, “I thought this might help. Better than napkins, at any rate.”

Her eyes went wide, then slitted. She nodded. “I still have my pen. So, um, Mr. Marcel, what am I writing about?”

“Marc.” He forced a chuckle, though laughter was far from his first impulse. There had been so many names...and she would not believe that even were he to tell her. “Just Marc, please.” He had considered her question already, what to say that she might find professionally useful, what might help her, and him. *If I give her too many topics for a single night, perhaps I can convince her to return to me. To the restaurant.* “What would you like? An interview with a chef-owner for a local business piece, favorite recipes adapted for the home kitchen, the science of cooking, ingredients from your back yard—”

He had been prepared to keep going, but she held up a hand. “Ingredients from your back yard? Where do you think we live, exactly?”

“You might be surprised to find what grows near to hand.” He reached for a tartlet. “Acorns, for example, can be found in all fifty of your states, I believe.”

She did not ask the obvious question; he hadn’t expected her to. Instead, her eyes roamed the desserts, seeking. “I give,” she said at last.

Her interest bubbled in the air, not the singular energy from which he fed, but an effervescent tingling along senses for which he had no name. Like champagne. “The shortbreads,” he said, “are acorn and oat and girasol. The glazes are all made with local fruits, the sweetmeats as well, and the honey, naturally. I cheated a bit with the charlottes, but only because I prefer a tarter apple than the local varieties.”

Sasha picked a sticky sweetmeat up and held it to the light. “It’s beautiful. Like a jewel.”

He shivered. Her mind was so like his own. And her body... The longer he looked at her, the more beautiful to him she became. It wasn’t the tilt of her cheekbones, but the bright humor shining in her eyes, though her form spoke to a part of him he had never outgrown, a preference for a sort of unfragile femininity. She was no barely open bud, but a blossom in full bloom, ripe and gorgeously wanton—and if he let his mind continue down that path, he would disgrace himself. He offered her a tour, “And I promise, the waitstaff shall not clean our food away.”

Her lips parted, closed. He could guess what she had been about to say. As well she hadn’t; he did not want to argue with her. He led her to his private kitchen, his playroom. As he had requested, the staff had finished cleaning the surrounding areas and were out of sight, if not hearing.

Sasha stepped through the doorway and looked around, eyes bright and eager. He was sure her gaze missed nothing, from the stain on the floor to the bread proofing beneath a tattered bit of floursack to his erection striving toward her from beneath his clothes. “What’s all this stuff for?”

“Creating art.” He smiled, but said nothing more, waiting to see what she would do. If she would ask about some food item, pick up the conversation where he left off, or lean against him full-on and raise those softly parted lips to his own...

“Art. Yes, it is.” She frowned at a bowl of root vegetables. “Oh! Jerusalem artichoke, right? I’ve always wondered about those.” She laughed. “Figures it’d be a gourmet thing.”

“Anything edible can be ‘a gourmet thing,’ if handled with the proper respect. Those are very healthful. I use them often.”

She glanced at him, darting a look from beneath thick lashes, then picked up one of the knobby roots, running her hands all over it. Learning it, with fingers and palms and even rubbing it over her wrist, testing it completely. Her lips were barely curved. He bit his tongue, hoping pain would bolster his faltering self-control. She enjoyed the root’s form, its weight and shape and textures, innocent sensuality like aged whiskey: amber in the ambient. “Huh.” Not an elegant

sound, but honest. It made him wonder what she would sound like when he sheathed himself in her.

If.

When.

Her hair shimmered in the dim overhead light as she moved, waving the 'choke under her nose. "It doesn't smell at all."

"It does." His voice was too rough, almost harsh. He heard it, knew she would, as well, but made no sign, no shrugging or grimacing or useless clearing of his throat. Instead, he reached toward the root. She did not seem inclined to let it go, so he tilted his hand, raking his thumbnail across the skin.

"Oh!"

He watched her nostrils flare, felt her drink in the scent, tasted her pleasure at the new sensation. His tongue surely had permanent bite-marks.

"I know this! Tonight, you served me this. But where? In what?"

It was all Marc could do not to fall to his knees: she was a true epicure, and the strength of her pleasure in aroma and the memory of the taste it called was brighter, headier, than anything he could recall. It washed over him like fire, and he longed to drown in flame.

"Can you eat these raw? Enough for me to nibble a bit, I mean."

A thousand suggestive, lascivious comments lingered on his lips. He swallowed them down, nodded, and held out his hand for the choke.

"No, I'll do it, if you'll tell me how. You said they were, um, healthful?"

He nodded again before leading her to a sink, then handed her brush and towel, mimed scrubbing, and stood back, well away from the spray. She had sure hands, and humor fizzed and bubbled around her, mixed with excitement, curiosity, anticipation, and the froth of simple joy, though he knew not the cause. As she worked, her breasts swayed, her hips shimmied, her thighs shifted, imperfectly hidden by her dress.

This, then, is Hell. To be within reach of what I need, and know I can have it if I simply give over my soul. The devil took his time with my damnation, but I must admire his attention to detail.

"D-did I miss a spot?"

"No." He had no idea what she was talking about, but no matter. The word needed saying, and he needed to hear it. "No." There was a knife in his hand, and a cleaned 'choke; the one she had washed, of course. He peeled it, working with no thought to impress, but only years of experience.

Experience was not what moved him to present a slice to her lips.

She took it neatly, and he felt, again, that wondrous sparkling enjoyment spilling out from her, overflowing, pouring like the water of life, more and more and yet more, impossibly sustained. *All this from a slice of tuber? And I thought myself a gourmet, once upon a time!* He could not have said where lust left off and awe began, nor did he care. He knew only that he wanted to drink her in until he could drink no more, and then begin again, and again.

Their eyes met. This time, when he offered a bit of 'choke from his fingertips, she was not so dainty, but let her lips brush softly against his skin, and he could not have said whence the greater pleasure came. He took a single step nearer—

And she stepped back one single step. Then one to the side. Her pen was in her hand, though he had not seen her withdraw it. A pretty thing, neither small nor cheap nor common; it suited her. She had left the notepad on a shelf by the door, though, so it was only a prop, something to

look at that wasn't him. *Am I crowding you, my lovely? I do not mean to.* He tried to let his thoughts show on his face.

She smiled, but only briefly. Breathed, too quickly, almost panting. Her mouth opened, closed again. "This...you've certainly done what you said you would. I don't think any editor could turn down the article, articles, I can write from this." A tremulous smile. "But..."

He waited, watching her fidget. She squirmed quite delightfully, shimmering silk by turns outlining and skimming past her curves. Long-fingered hands played with the pen in a manner he found excruciating, circling the barrel, stroking its length, tapping the tip, teasing the base. Her breasts heaved as she drew in a deep breath, another level of torment for him.

What she was feeling, he had no idea. Oh, he could see she was nervous—it needed no powers gained beyond the grave for that—but his sensitivities were overloaded, glutted, sated and somnolent. Whatever concerned her, she was not focused on the silk rubbing against her skin, the satin-smooth wood of the table, the perfumes of yeast and herbs and arousal that floated in the air. But he had no way of knowing what distracted her from those sensations.

"M-Marc." She closed her eyes, swallowed hard, drummed a tattoo on that dratted pen. "Marc." A sigh. "I can't do this."

He would not insult her by pretending not to understand. "Whyever not?"

Her mouth fell open—he had surprised her, then. Good. "Th-there are people out there." She nodded toward the door.

"There are people in here." A step closer. So close. He felt the heat of her breath on his skin. "Two of us."

"No, I mean, your staff. What if they come in?"

"What if the world should end? This is my space; they will not intrude." He closed the distance between them. "Let me...taste."

She gasped, stood, shook her head. He winced at the rejection, though he could tell it was not personal. Perhaps because it was not. She wanted him; he knew that. If her aura were not proof enough, there were her words, her dilated eyes, the scent of her. But something kept her from surrendering to her own desires.

She reached past him quickly, awkwardly, and tore pages from the notebook, stuffing them into her purse before he could tell her simply to take the whole thing. She was leaving, and he was not ready for her to go. *It would be so easy.* His thumb tracing the seam of her lips, the feel of her on, around, his digit, the energy of her enjoying him. A little mental twist, and she would be his devoted slave. Not for life, not without a blood bond, but for a while.

He would be less than a man to do that to her.

I am not a man. I have not been in many years.

She deserved better, and that, he knew, was true. True, too, was the cold calculation: If you bind her, she will lose her discernment. Zombies had little sense of taste. Wry laughter echoed in his mind. *The Devil is a master of his art. If I seek to hold her, I lose her. If I do not, she leaves. All I am left with is...a craving I may never slake.*

"Um, I guess I should go now, huh?"

He longed to beg her not to, but could not think of a single argument he might make. So short an acquaintance, so soon ended—a single meal, ephemeral as all such, to linger forever in memory. He spoke a single word, to himself, to her, to the universe. "Why?"

"Um, I have enough for my article, articles, so I guess we're through, and..." She lifted the pen to her lips, and he was lost.

“Are we?” He closed his eyes for a long moment, imposed a constraint upon his mind—a self-compulsion, painful to endure and dangerous, but he did not trust himself. Certain, then, he could not try to enchain her, he relaxed enough to meet her gaze. “Good. Then I can tell you how rare it is, how much a privilege, for an artist to meet one who completes his art.” He touched her cheek, watched as warm color flooded the area, felt her response to the slow stroke of his finger. “And you do, you know.” She shivered, and so did he, feeling her pleasure change, richer, thicker, now. “*Parfait.*”

Her laugh was half a sob; she had to swallow before she spoke. “Th-that’s still a dessert, right?”

“It is.” He paused, appreciating her all the more for the way she trembled beneath his gaze. “The perfect end to a perfect meal.” He leaned down to her, brushed her lips softly with his own, and sipped her soft sigh as he would wine.

Her decision was made so quickly he almost missed the change in her; from hesitant, uncertain, she became as eager as he—and broke the kiss. Her hands made short work of opening his jacket, undoing his pants. She stilled once she reached skin, not even breathing as her pleasure in what she found bled into the air. She smiled and grasped him, and his own breath hitched and stopped.

She learned him as she had the sunchoke, every sense fixed on him, her fingers now swift, now slow, pressing and pulling, completely enchanting. One hand cupped his balls. He felt the soft heat of her palm, moist warmth of her breath as she knelt to sniff, and then to lick, and the wash of pleasure at his taste poured out from her into him.

He stood it as long as he could—not long at all—then wrapped his hands in her hair and pulled her slowly up his body.

“Why?”

“You are...intoxicating, but I fear I would not last long were you to do what you were about to do.”

She mocked him gently, “Such manners.” He tasted himself on her lips when she kissed him. “Some cultures end a meal with something salty or spicy, right?”

“Savory,” he murmured, his fingers playing the fastenings of her clothes, dipping beneath. She tilted her upper body back to look at him, and he stole the chance to kiss her again. His hands slid to her hips, pulled. “Is that your pleasure?”

“Oh.” She wriggled, hot, pulsing. “Yes.” She reached down and circled her hand around his shaft.

“No. Not that. Not yet.” Marc took her lips again, his mind awhirl. Salty and spicy and *savory. I may die yet. Only let me pleasure you first.* Her need stained the ambient colors out of a rainbow’s dream, tastes and scents melting together into texture, sound, sensations combined in ways no artist could ever capture—and he floated, lost within her strength, as his hands stroked down her body, leading the way for his mouth.

He felt every twitch and thrill as surely as she did, all the pleasures beyond name, beyond bearing, as he so delicately suckled her, laved the lush rise of her breast, traced his way down toward her navel. He gave voice to her moans, as she could not, racked on sensation; knew even the words of her thoughts, so like his own: each wanting the moment never to end, to go on forever, but at the same time, desperately wanting him to just *get to it already.*

He had never known so clear a mind as hers. She had never been so conscious of her own emptiness, hollow greater than her whole, aching to be filled—and more, to be filled to

overflowing until she spilled over, escaping the bounds of her own skin, pouring out into the world. Into him.

His tongue was like fire, licking, and she was cold where he was not. Yet, still, she burned. She managed to find her voice for one desperate word. "Please!"

His answer was laughter and the slow brush of a kiss on her thigh. Then another to match, on the other leg. A third, between the two. He shivered at the contact, as did she. *She tastes of roses and the sea.* He dipped his tongue into her again, savoring a taste he, with all his art, knew he could never match.

"Please," she whispered.

This time he laughed, half drunk on her, on the pleasures the night had already brought, and the ones he knew were yet to come. "You would not gulp your food, would you?"

"But I'm...hungry."

She was a feast for all his senses, rising out of silk like Aphrodite from the waves, a woman fully formed and ready. "In time, you shall be filled, I promise you." *As shall I, ma chère coup de coeur.* He bent with a gourmet's eagerness to his meal.

THE END

About the Author

Pearl Jones

Pearl Jones writes erotica, erotic romance, erotic horror, and erotic fantasy, some of which may possibly be based in part on personal experience--but she's not inclined either to confirm or deny. She has been known to claim she'll try almost anything at least once, if promised caffeine, chocolate, and/or designer shoes. Silk is always good, too, as are certain other pleasures. At present, she may be chained to a keyboard and typing madly away. Or she could be chained elsewhere. One never knows. The sad truth is, she's probably feeding a refrigerator on feet sometimes referred to as a cat. But writers are known for their rich fantasy lives, so let's go with artisan-crafted silver chains and a handsome alpha to crack the whip...metaphorically, at least. You never know. She's followed her muse to some very odd places, not all metaphorical. So far, she's survived, and returned to tell the tales.

Our authors love to hear from their readers!

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