

Dreamspinner Press
Fairy Tales



TRUTH IN THE DARK

Amy Lane

PART I

KNIFE

I was not beautiful.

I may have been at birth—most babies are beautiful at birth. But my foot was twisted and deformed as I emerged, and my spine eventually tilted to accommodate my limp. My teeth grew in oddly spaced, and at twelve, I developed your average pubescent skin condition, only with me, it assumed freakish proportions. By the time I was twenty, it had pocked and cratered my face beyond repair and beyond redemption. My hair grew thin on my scalp, and overall, no one had uncovered a mirror in my house, in my viewing, since I was fifteen.

My older sister Gwen brushed her hair blindly in the mornings and got so good at it, no one knew the difference when the heavy, strawberry-blonde mass of it was hanging plaited to her waist. My mother did the same and started keeping it short around the same time. I pretended not to notice that they did these things for me, and they pretended they didn't take glimpses in stray windows as they walked through the village to make sure they weren't terribly askew.

We lived on the northernmost island of an archipelago. The archipelago itself was governed by an old and kind family. I understood that cousins and kin often took an

island to live on, to rule in benevolence, but as kind as the idea seemed, our island was not one of the lucky ones. We were a rude fishing village with a merchant port, and that was all.

The children in my village weren't always kind. When I was twelve, Gwen was late to come to get me from the woodworker's where I was apprenticed, and I walked around the corner of the sawdust hut to find myself surrounded by village bullies. I'd known their names. They'd taunted me since school (which was why I'd left early), and the taunts and the jeers had only gotten worse.

That night—I don't know. I will not pretend to know what drives men and their children to violence. I only know that after Gwen found me, bleeding from my face, from my ears, from my rectum, I never said their names, and I never saw their faces. I only saw their feet and heard their voices. You cannot take a person's humanity and then retain your own.

In the weeks it took me to recover (and the blows I took to my face did nothing to alleviate my pressing ugliness) I tried very hard not to ponder the horrible irony that I was too ugly to love, and too ugly not to violate.

The third night after it happened, as I was still pissing blood from my damaged kidneys and my mother was nursing me through a terrible infection that threatened to level me, my sister Gwen came home. She walked into my bedroom (a tiny one, but mine and only mine) and kissed my fevered cheek, then asked Mum to come bandage her hands. I got a glimpse of her through bleary eyes: her eye was blackened, her lip was split, and her hands were covered in deep,

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painful slices that would make sewing even more of a chore for her the rest of her life.

I thrashed, I screamed, I tried, through a swollen mouth, to demand who had done it to her, but Gwen had come to my bedside and crouched, her face set into the lines of an executioner who was proud of his work.

“No worries, Naef,” she said firmly. “The boy who did this—to you and to me—he will never bother us again.”

It didn’t occur to me then that I had babbled with my fever and my pain, and that she would know who that boy had been.

I was delirious with fever that night, with the town healer as my witness. The town healer never saw my sister, not that night nor the weeks that followed, but it was no matter. No one would believe that a girl would do that to a young man’s body, and it wasn’t like the boy’s cronies were bragging about seeing him rape a cripple for fun. Be that as it may, there is a particular violence in finding a young man pinned to the sand with daggers in his shoulders like a butterfly, and the gentle flesh at the apex of his thighs sliced open like a flounder, the stones within removed, and the body dead from the loss of blood such a wound entailed.

When I learned of the nature of the young man’s death, I curled into a corner and wept inconsolably for the last week of my healing. My sister, Gwen, the girl who would chase spiders outside rather than kill them, the girl who had once beaten the town bullies for trying to drown kittens, and the girl who baked sweets, every spring, for the neighbor’s children at Oestre, my sister, Gwen, did that horrible,

horrible thing. And she did it for me, because I was too weak to defend myself and too monstrous to be left alone in my corner, carving my bits of wood.

Someone must have noticed or known. Someone must have made the leap, if not to my sister, at least to me and mine. My skill as a woodcarver was unparalleled, and the beating had not taken that from me. My attackers were too brutish or too unimaginative to reason that the true violation of my spirit would not be through my arse but through my craft, and so my fingers were left unbroken, and my skill remained mine. But that's not where the bastardization of my name started.

No, it must have been some mistaken assumption, some horrible leap in logic, and I have to admit, it made perfect sense. After all, monstrous was as monstrous does, right?

Either way, it didn't matter. The day I returned to my place in the woodworker's hut, "Naef" had been burned away like my innocence, and all that remained was what I became: "Knife".

I used that name. In truth, I preferred to huddle in the back of the woodworker's shop and play with my tools—the awl, the lathe, the tiny scraping pick—they were all my friends, and in my hands they became like paints or piano keys or potter's clay: I controlled them, and they sang for me. When I worked wood, the ache in my leg ceased to matter, and the shrieking harpy that my back had become over the years, well, that bitch curled up and died. When I was with my blades and my craft, I was master of my body, and I was free.

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The summer I became “Knife” I stopped making toys, which is what I had made my name with, and started making chess sets. Good versus evil, beautiful versus beastly. That became the fashion of my craft. Every set was unique, and dragons would battle knights or dancing girls would battle leering courtiers or elves would battle trolls, all embodied in the exactly crafted figures that emerged from my hands. Me and my knife, we wrought wonders, and all it took was one burning glance from under my scraggly, sand-colored hair to make the rest of the fuckers in our village remember that there were many, many things a knife could cut.

I made children cry with a glare and a snarl. When the women pulled their skirts aside as I passed on the streets, limping furiously and hauling at my lurching spine, I would spit on them. Schoolboys would jeer at me as I passed the small house where boys and girls learned their letters, and I flicked tiny, homemade knives. I would score blood, every time, and crow disgustingly as I stalked away, enjoying their tears.

I became the town pariah, and that was well and fine for me.

It was not so well and fine for my gentle sister.

Poor Gwen. She affected not to care about the way the boys in the village sneered at her as she walked me home. She pretended that being the one girl at home, sewing with her damaged hands, was not one more burr in her stocking among others when the rest of the village was gathered on the sands below for the raucous dances of Beltane or Litha or Samhain or the solstice. In our village, when a dog killed a

chicken, it was common practice to tie the dead chicken around the dog's neck with twine until the poor carcass rotted off. Well, instead of her rightful kill, poor Gwen was stuck with me twitching at her neck and stinking up her chances for a real life, one with a husband and a family, one with kindness and love.

The kicker came when a new ship came in with the fall tide. It was too late in the season, so the sailors put up in a local inn, as they often did. The first lieutenant started frequenting the dress shop where my sister worked. He was a handsome man—anyone could see it. A strong jaw, warm brown eyes, golden hair. But it was the way he looked at my sister, the way he brought her dinner when her workday was done, and the way he listened to her, head cocked to the side, considering, when she spoke softly and hesitantly about her day, these things made him beautiful beyond stars.

For her, though, it was the way he spoke to me.

“Hi, Naef,” he would murmur, not loud, because loud, overly jovial voices tended to make me startle, trying desperately to pull into my shell like a crab. “What did you make today?”

I would show him, although it took me weeks to do so without suspicious haggling on my part. He would turn the pieces slowly in his hand and smile. True appreciation, that one.

“When you are done with this set,” he said one day, “could you make one for me? I will pay your master well, and pay you well also, for taking the commission. Could you do that for me?”

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The ship was going out within the week. A chess set was always more than a fortnight endeavor for me. “Will it make you come back this season?” I asked, looking sideways to where my sister was standing, staring out to sea with troubled eyes, as though he had already left with the tide.

Kyln looked at my sister too. “That’s the idea,” he said softly. “But the set is for my cousin, and it’s a very special gift.” He looked at me now, in all seriousness. “I’m not asking this out of pity, Naef. I’m not asking just to see your sister again. I’m asking because my cousin... he’s having a troubled time, and I can’t give him counsel, and I can’t stand in his place. This... this is all I can give him. The things you make are beautiful, and my cousin is the best of men.”

I swallowed and nodded. Kyln was also, apparently, the best of men. I watched my sister bob her head nervously and give him a watery smile as he walked toward her, hand extended, me hobbling in his wake.

She was going to tell him no. I knew it in my bones.

That didn’t stop me from pouring my heart into the chess set he commissioned from me. He wanted a set where the white king was a beast, a lion on two legs, and his queen and court were animals.

It was beautiful.

The black pieces were twisted, like my spine and my heart, and pock-riddled and snarling. The animals were grotesquely formed, with distorted limbs and enlarged heads, half-formed chests and engorged phalluses. The black king was... was me, glaring from a carved riddle of hair and ugliness, and physical pain and painful anger.

I carved him last. When it was done, I spent an hour simply running my fingers over the ebony and maple, the warm finish soft under my fingers.

It was the most amazing thing I had ever crafted, and a part of me wanted to destroy it, crush it into splinters with a hammer, because it left me naked in my hideousness, and it was all for naught. The morning before I finished, Kyn had arrived on our shore, looking tentative and humble and hopeful, and my sister had broken his heart.

I'd seen it. I'd seen her as he'd walked up from the harbor, and her face had been a mixture of joy at seeing him and terrible, terrible sadness. I'd huddled in my workshop corner, watching the two of them talk. I hadn't seen her face, but I'd seen the stoic disappointment on his. She'd turned away first, and walked away with shoulders held stiff as a soldier's, and I thought that maybe being my first line of defense had done that to her. Every beat of my heart ached like an abscessed tooth.

Kyn was good to his word, though, and he came into the little shop, ignoring the master woodsmith, who used to kick me and spit on me until I got very good at the tiny knives.

I let him look at the chess set, and something about it must have permeated his misery.

"It's magnificent, Naef," he said softly. "It's... it's all I could ask for. It should make Aerie-Smith very happy."

Aerie-Smith was a *very* odd name, but I didn't ask. Instead, I took what little grace I possessed and tried to give him a bandage for his heart.

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“It’s not your fault,” I rasped, taking the white pawns (different exotic birds, all of them) and wrapping them in soft leather.

“I’m sorry?” he asked, and his face was naked with grief.

“It’s not your fault. She... she’s wrong-headed. She’s staying to protect me. It’s not worth it. I can’t seem to tell her that it’s not worth it....”

I was looking at my scarred hands, and watching miserably as my snarled hair became wet and even nastier than it already was. I saw his hands: clean and calloused from working on the sea, but still, straight and even, sensitive, and not covered in woodworking scars or attached to bony wrists. They moved out of my vision and came back, wet on the backs. Then those fine, noble son’s hands came to cover mine and I almost shook them off, just so they wouldn’t be soiled with my touch.

“It’s more than worth it,” he said gently, and I pulled away and wiped my cheek on my shirt. I could very likely fall in love with my sister’s suitor, but even then I knew my temper was too foul. I would need someone as bullheaded as I was, and Kyn would never be him.

“She killed for me,” I choked, and was expecting to see him recoil. He didn’t.

“So she said.”

I was so startled I actually met his eyes. “She told you that?” I couldn’t help it, and the expression was so alien it actually hurt my face. If nothing else, taking the pressure off my teeth made my head ache with relief. “There’s hope!” I said, not sure if I could talk through a smile. “If she told you

that... oh, Kyn, you mustn't give up hope. I'll... I'll run away. I'll stop rotting on her neck like an albatross. I'll...."

I turned away then, frightened and unaccustomed to hope. When I spoke again, my voice was under control. "I would do anything to see her happy. Come back. Come back, and don't mourn me if I'm not here...."

I was not thinking of suicide. I was not thinking of hurling myself off the cliffs to the north. It was a bitter life, full of hatred and bloody thoughts, but I still clung to it. If nothing else, I would not give the humans around me the satisfaction of leaving it before I'd exacted my last measure of revulsion from them.

But Kyn's hands came down hard on my shoulders. "Don't think of it," he rasped. "Don't think of leaving her. She'll walk the ends of the earth to find you. Stay. Stay here. I have a plan. A plan that could get you out of this place, that would free her heart. I have a plan, Naef. Don't despair. Please. For the both of us."

Kyn's faith—oh, gods. What must it be like to have such faith in the world, in plans, in your own ability to control your fate? It was contagious, that's what it was. I could not help it. I caught his hope like a plague.

"Fine," I snapped. "But if you don't return, or break her heart, you'd better be dead." I looked at him in my accustomed way, from beneath my brows and the snarl of hair in my eyes. "She killed for me. I owe her."

PART II

VOYAGE

I was still surprised when the stranger arrived.

He was preceded, in the way of all small villages, by a tremendous rumble. The children skipped and sang about a beast, and he was surrounded by a throng of the curious. Imagine their surprise when he strode past them all and into the woodworker's shack, past the master woodworker and to my little corner.

I looked down and saw the bare padded feet, with their tufts of golden fur and un-retractable claws. That should have frightened me or awed me or something, but instead I saw the fine flannel trousers that went with them, the even placement of the hips, and high quality linen waistcoat, and the blue overcoat with the brass buttons. I could smell the arrogance, and it made me hunch my shoulders around my tiny space and do all but snarl like a rabid dog.

"What do you want?"

"My cousin told me about you." The voice was rich and golden. No sudden, snappish accents, no flinty distaste for the whole of humanity. Warmth, culture, and joy all emanated from an alien throat, and I thought that the face would have to be pretty damned horrible for me not to hate this creature on sight. Except he'd just said "cousin."

“Shite.” I shook my head and kept my gaze firmly fixed on some blind spot of mud right below my window. “You must be Aerie-Smith.”

There was a rumble of approval then. Oh good. I knew who he was. “You’re not even going to look at me?” The surprise was evident, and I heard a little bit of offended vanity in the voice too. Apparently, this “best of men” enjoyed his role as a beast.

I shot him a fulminating glare from under my brow. “I hate gawkers,” I muttered. “I don’t wish to be one.”

I looked down again and closed my eyes, feeling like a foolish child. He was a beast. His head was that of a lion: flared, flat nose, delicate whiskers, small, amber cat eyes, rounded, tufted ears, mane, everything. His beauty... oh, gods, it was so unfair. The children were singing in the streets about a beast, but he was beautiful enough to eclipse the sun. How could a creature who walked like a man and spoke like a man and had the head and fur-covered body of a beast achieve beauty, whereas I, who was supposedly a man, could only wallow in my own beastliness? I glared at my mud spot again and tried not to let my throat grow thick with a boy’s aching disappointment.

When I’d heard the word “beast” I had dared to hope for an equal. What I had gotten was a god, and nobody wants one of those shining about to reveal his flaws.

There was an affronted silence, and then a sound.... I’d heard that sound before. It was appreciation of my work.

“You *are* the Naef my cousin talked about. You *did* craft my chess board.”

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It was a statement, not a question, so I didn't feel the need to answer. I grunted affirmative and added, "You can call me Knife."

"I'd rather not." Another statement, just as cool as you please, and I risked a full-on look at this Aerie-Smith the beast.

"It's my name...."

"It's the name you gave yourself. Not the name life gave you. If I could give myself a name, do you think I'd pick something like Aerie-Smith? No. You live with the cards you are dealt, and you play them for the best. No re-dealing a better name because you felt like it."

"These fuckers in this pisshole gave me this name!" I snarled, suddenly furious. "My job is to live up to it. Now call me Knife, or I'll answer you with a real one to the back. Kyn sent you, which is why I haven't pissed on your shoe... fuzzy feet yet." Keep going, even with the slip—that was me. "So what is it you want?"

Again, that cultured amusement. "A companion, for a year," said Aerie-Smith. "And one regrettable and unpleasant task for you to accomplish. And that is all. A year and a few months, and you may return here, return to your family, with a bag of gold and a way to leave this place, and that is all."

He couldn't have surprised me more if he'd dropped his trousers and started stroking himself off, right there. (Why, yes, I was wondering if he was hung like a man down there—who wouldn't?)

“A *companion*?” I was surprised enough to straighten (as much as I could) and meet his eyes. “A *companion*? Are you damaged? Simple? Masochistic? If you’re that desperate for a companion, look in the privy and find a turd. Odds are it will be more pleasant to look at than I am and a damned sight better at conversation.”

A peculiar wrinkling came over Aerie-Smith’s features then. His nose whiskers pulled back, and a whuffling sort of snicker passed through his teeth. I stared at him for a moment, defensiveness gone in the wake of my wonder.

This is what it looked like when a lion-god laughed. It was enough to penetrate my self-hatred and make me think of the people who really mattered.

“What if my family is somewhere else?” I asked, struggling for something to say. “What if my sister comes to her senses and finds a home with your cousin? Can I still...?” I looked around at my little corner, my niggling, festering hovel of misanthropy. It was ugly—hell, it was rabid, but it was all I had. All those days staring out the window while my hands wrought wonders, and now, the prospect of leaving frightened me? Fuck that. I made an effort to square my hips with my shoulders, to stand tall and be a man. “Will I be returned to my family, even if they’re no longer here?”

The fit of laughing passed, and his lion eyes were sober as he nodded.

This was it. A way out. Gwen and my mother could leave to find Kyn’s family, and I could join them. We could leave this village and its memories and my sister could be happy. My mother even, she was still young. She had turned down

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suitors, because none of them were kind to me, but another town? Another chance? A place where her daughter was happy, at the very least, with grandchildren to love? My father had died when I was very young, but they had been affectionate to the last. She would have wanted more children; that much I knew.

“I need to talk to my sister,” I said with some resolve, and he nodded his regal head, surprised.

“Of course. I’d like to meet her myself.” His expressions were hard to read on a human scale, but one side of his muzzle pulled up in what might have been a deprecating smile. “After all, I love my cousin very much, and your sister is about to be family.”

I might have said something vicious then, about Kyn being a lucky bastard to have her, but that memory of touch on my hands was still fresh. It was not meant to be sexual. I certainly hadn’t taken it that way. But touch... any man who looked like me treasured touch. My mother’s hugs, my sister’s hand on my shoulder—these things were precious to me. I could not disparage—not even in harsh jest—a man who had offered me the kindness of touch.

“My sister is the best of men,” I said, and then felt foolish, although I shouldn’t have. Gwen was loyal, strong, and brave. All those labels we should give to men, she’d earned them too. “She is also the very very best of women,” I amended, and Aerie-Smith blinked those amber cat’s-eyes gravely, and nodded that massive, noble head as though he understood. Well, he loved his cousin—maybe he did understand that there were certain people blessed by the gods with beautiful souls, whose quality was not measured

by their hanging bits or lack thereof, but by the sturdy grace of their hearts.

“So will you talk to her now?” he asked after an awkward silence, and it was my turn to blink.

“She’s working, same as me. You’re so high and mighty you cannot wait for working folk to finish their days?” Ye gods, it was barely noon.

Aerie-Smith couldn’t blush, but the room got suddenly hotter, and he smelled blushy in a way. He looked down and his tongue came out, broad and flat, and absentmindedly cleaned his whiskers. I found myself gaping and quickly looked away. I, of all people, should know that some things, even automatic gestures, could not be controlled.

“I feel foolish,” he said, and for all he looked like a lion and walked like a man, it seemed like such a wrongness that such a one as him should be discomfited by myself.

“That’s unlikely,” I snapped, almost more to break him out of it as to change the subject. “Strange village, strange customs. I’m a sharp-edged snapping turtle. Judging from my opinion of yourself or men in general is a good way to take a mind to sprint off a cliff. There’s an inn. You passed it on the way up. You’ll see us all leave at the right time. Gwen and me, we leave later than everyone else. We’ll take you to visit Mum then.”

All of that, the longest speech I’d said since I was four and rambled on to my father about things like insects in the yard and birds in the tree, and he would pick up on the thing that would rip the skin off my spine.

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“Why do you leave after everyone else?” he asked, puzzled.

I made a sound more animal than human and barely missed his cheek with one of my fine, tiny wooden knives. I checked my aim at the last minute. “Because we choose to,” I snarled. “Now just fucking go!”

I saw him flinch back, shocked, either by the tiny missile or by my language, I didn’t know. But I was done. He’d come to give me a way out of being my sister’s albatross. I’d take it. I’d be fucked if I gave him another piece of my soul after that.

I turned from him and kept my hands still as I continued my work. I only had three pieces on this last chess set to complete, and seeing as it would be my last for the master woodsmith in this godsforsaken shithole, I wanted it free and clear before Gwen came to get me in the evening. I watched as his feet, tufted and massive, padded out the dirt floor of the hut, and listened as the front screen door snapped shut on its leather thong. He jerked his tail (protruding from a special vent in the back of his trousers) out of the way just before the door closed.

Then, and only then, did I allow my fingers to tremble for a bit before I went back to work.

He was good to his word, though. He met us walking up to our home and made polite conversation with Gwen, and then gave my mother a bunch of flowers and some spice packets, and made polite conversation with her as well. Me, he nodded to courteously, but I imagined he was starting to rethink his “bargain” for a companion for a year.

That didn't stop him from asking.

You'd think, after covering their mirrors for seven or eight years, becoming cold with their neighbors, listening to the town tell them they were whores and fools for not drowning me at birth, that these two women would have better sense.

My mother 'bout threw the batch of flowers in his face when he asked if he could hire me for a year and a half, and my sister pulled a knife and screeched at him to get the fuck out of our home.

Mum didn't even reprimand her for the language. In fact, she used the word more than once herself.

I actually had to stand in front of Aerie-Smith and defend him in our home.

"Mum! Gwen! He's Kyn's cousin!" I appealed to my sister. "Gwennie, do you think any man who wants your heart is going to send a poisonous gift to me? Think, sister! It's a job, far away. The other young men venture far away. They go to sea on the merchant ships or take jobs fishing far to the coast of the mainland. For all I look like a disease, I still walk like a man...."

"Stop it," Gwen shouted, dashing her cheeks with her sleeve. She always hated hearing me speak of myself poorly, but I would not let her speak of me any differently. She told me once that my smile made my face sound and handsome, and I didn't talk to her for a week. Call me any name you like, but don't lie to me. Not to me, when I know who stands on the black side of the chess board.

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“Stop it!” Gwen said again, into the thundering silence of the first time. “Naef, do you think we raised you, we sang to you, we helped you in your first steps, just to sell you to some”—she looked at Aerie-Smith and spat—“some flesh-monger now?”

Behind me, Aerie-Smith gave a growl of protest, and I rolled my eyes. My sister was about to try to skewer him like a fish on a spear, and he was worried about his reputation?

“Gwennie, think straight!” I guffawed. “Do you really think someone in clothes like his is going to venture from gods-know-where to sell me for flesh? *Me*? And if he’s looking for circus freaks, I’m sure we’d be standing in the same tent.” That earned me a sound like a chuckle, but I didn’t look back, no matter how gratifying that might have been. Instead, I moved forward and took my sister’s scarred, battle-ready hands into my own, and reached out my other hand to Mum.

“It’s not forever,” I told them softly. “This is Kyn’s cousin, and I believe him. It’s a job, and then it’s over. It’s a job, nothing more. He’s offered me gold, in advance.” There was a sound of surprise behind me, and I shot a dagger-glance over my shoulder. There had better be gold in advance. If Kyn was going to come get my sister, she was going to have the best, most beautiful of dresses and something like a trousseau. My sister was not getting married like a dressmaker, not if I could make her into a queen. “He’s promised to send me back... and think, Gwennie.” I let go of Mum’s hand and appealed exclusively to my sister. “You and Mum could leave. You could go

someplace not so small, with no memories of us, of our father's death nor of your deformed brother...."

"You are *not* deformed!" she shouted, and I patted her hands.

"It doesn't matter, Gwennie. What I was as a child, I will be forever here. And you have to live with that, and it's not fair. It's never been fair. Please...." I never begged. Oh gods, I never begged. I never asked them for anything because they had given so much already, but I was going to beg them for this. "Oh please, Mum. Make her see reason. Make her go. Aerie-Smith will have Kyn send a ship for you, and you two, you can be out of here before the winter storms."

Aerie-Smith made a grunt of affirmation here, and I made a silent vow to keep my knives to myself from now on. It was a generous thing I was offering, and he hadn't said a word about it in the offer.

"Gwennie," I continued, "it's fall now. Go meet Kyn's family, have a wedding in the spring. Write me letters. Tell me that you were be—" My voice roughened here, and I grew angry because it was better than crying like a fretful infant. "You write me, you silly cow. Tell me you were beautiful. Tell me what you wore and that there were children singing and flowers, flowers somewhere that flowers don't grow on cliffs and sand." We had poppies here, and lupins, but nothing lush like roses or snapdragons or daisies. I had carved my sister a wooden flower, fantastically shaped flowers that I had seen in one of our few books, every year for her birthday since I'd left school and its torments and taken up my carving knife. My voice weakened and broke, and still I went on.

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“You have to promise me this, Gwennie. As badly as I’ve wanted to see you and Mum happy, you have to promise me this.”

She broke then, sobbing on my shoulder because my twisted spine put us at the same height, and Mum came and wept too. I had won, and they both knew it.

We left the next morning at the tides. Aerie-Smith stayed for dinner, and after threatening him with a knife and telling him to fuck off and then letting him watch us disintegrate like wet cereal, that wasn’t awkward at all.

Well, it wasn’t, actually. It should have been. If nothing else, he was a giant lion-god. But he was also... funny. Charming. Self-deprecating. And my mother was in the room, so I managed to swallow much of my venom and keep it to myself. I walked him to the gate around our little yard that night, knowing that the next few hours were going to be difficult and painful, and that I wished I could just slip away past the gate into the sunset and the surf.

“Thank you,” I said abruptly, and he gave one of those sage blinks that indicated surprise.

“For what?”

“For agreeing to do all sorts of shite you didn’t offer in the first place. Gwennie needs to get out of here. If me getting out of here first is what it’s going to take, that needs to happen. But you didn’t need to go along with it. It was decent of you. I’m grateful.”

Aerie-Smith blinked again and nodded. “Thank *you*,” he murmured. “Your mother and sister are lovely. It was nice to sit down to a family dinner.”

“That was their doing,” I grunted. My family was kind. I was not. “See you in the morning, Aerie-Smith.”

“See you in the morning, Naef.”

I growled. “Knife. My name is Knife.”

The arrogance and mockery in his voice was unmistakable, no matter how subtle. “Of course. My mistake.”

That night I gathered my meager possessions, and was shocked and stunned when my mother pulled out a new set of trousers and linen shirt that hung past my hips.

“To wear at Gwennie’s wedding,” she said softly. “I’d hoped. But it’s better now. This is your new life too.”

I had no words, but I fingered the fine stitches, my mother’s handiwork, and fought back tears. It seemed to be the day for them. It was a good moment, and then Gwennie had to make it real, grab me by the ear for all I was in my twenties, drag me to the sink, and cut my hair.

She was good with the shears, and I knew enough to sit still, but that didn’t stop me from caterwauling the entire time.

“Dammit, Gwennie, I’m a grown man....”

“Yes, you’re a man, and not some crazed sheepdog or llama, and you don’t need this mess in your eyes.”

“I *like* this mess in my eyes!” I snapped, and she grabbed me by my chin and stared me down.

“You’re looking to a new future now,” she told me sternly, “not hiding from the old past. You need to be able to see where you’re going.”

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“Pushy bitch,” I muttered, and she grinned at me, my love for my sister Gwen as true and as real as the sun and the sand and the sea.

“Miserable bastard.”

“Damned straight.”

“You want to see?” she asked, holding out a mirror she must have pulled out of her drawer, and I shook my head and pushed it away. She glared at me through her big blue eyes, her little bow-shaped mouth mutinous in that heart-shaped face. “You will take a look at yourself, Naef. This is the face your mother and I love, and you will see it before you go.”

She held the mirror to me, and for a moment I slid my eyes sideways and refused to look. She grabbed my chin and forced me to look myself in the eyes. I blinked.

“They’re green,” I said in surprise. The last time I’d cared enough to look at myself, they’d seemed to be sort of a swamp-water brown. So the green was nice, but the rest of my face was the same. The spots had vanished, but they’d left craters and divots and twists in their wake. There was a particular nasty scar from the corner of my mouth to my chin, which had been a line of oozing sores for what seemed a year. My nose had the lumps from being broken, and my jaw was asymmetrical from the same defining moment of my life. I pushed the mirror firmly away.

“Still my face, Gwennie. Hasn’t grown beautiful in the last years.”

She put the mirror back and peered over my shoulder so we were both caught in the sculpted pewter frame. Our

father had crafted that mirror. He'd gone out on a fishing fleet that had never come back to port, but his true love had been crafting. I'd come by my skill rightfully, that was certain.

"It's a strong face. And it's the face of the brother I love. I don't want a beautiful face in this mirror. I want your face."

Those stranger's green eyes slid sideways then, looking with admiration on my sturdy, capable older sister. "Then you'd better stop looking in the mirror, Gwennie," I told her with the softest smile that ever touched my mouth. "When you look in a mirror, beautiful is the only face you're going to see."

Gwennie wrapped her arms around my shoulders and squeezed, and the mirror told the truth tonight, because it showed her big blue eyes tearing up. I watched in that pewter nightmare as she kissed my scarred cheek and whispered, "I am going to miss you. You had better keep that promise, Naef. You may not think much of yourself, but Mum and I see the sun rise and set with you."

Being loved can do marvelous things for a man. The next morning I wrapped all of my woodworking tools in their oiled leather satchel roll and put it in the bottom of my rucksack. Then I put my new clothes on my clean body, threw my rucksack over my shoulder, and bid my mother and sister goodbye at the garden gate of the house I'd lived in all my life.

They had wanted to walk me through the village, but I'd asked them not to. I wanted them to think this would be a new chance for me; I wanted them to imagine me happy. But

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I didn't expect the village to see what they saw in me. I didn't expect the world to treat me any different.

I strolled through my village, knowing Aerie-Smith would be waiting, and I kept my shoulders as square as I could and my spine and hips square, in spite of the pain, so that I could minimize my limp. I kept my chin raised defiantly under my newly shorn hair, and dared any of the children who had mocked me or the men who had tormented me or the women who had shunned me to do so now. I was ready for them. I had a pocketful of wooden knives and a mouth full of spit, and I was getting the fuck out of here, and I'd provided for my family to do the same.

If they wanted to shun me now, they could go fuck themselves. I was leaving this place, and they couldn't stop me.

Turns out, they didn't even try.

Maybe it was because my chin was held high, or because my eyes took their attention. Maybe it was the new clothes instead of the old rags, but no one noticed me much as I limped down the gangplank. I was profoundly grateful.

Aerie-Smith noticed, though. He looked out over the prow and waved for me to come aboard, and I did, clutching the rope up the side of the gangplank with all of the formidable strength in my fingers.

I got to the top and looked out over my village and caught my breath.

"It's no bigger than a speck of flea-shit," I muttered before I could help myself, and Aerie-Smith looked at me questioningly. It wasn't. It was tiny. A scattering of

businesses, a couple of inns, and the cluster of homes toward the top of the hill, my mother's among them. How was it this flea-shit speck on a map had dominated my every nightmare since I was old enough to limp?

"It's a fishing village," Aerie-Smith said with a shrug. "There are good ones and bad ones—this one is better than some. I like your hair."

I grunted. "It's only better than some if you didn't live it in my skin. And my sister did it. Blame her."

Aerie-Smith blinked those small amber eyes of his. Well, I thought sourly, he would have to get used to me surprising him. If he shocked that badly, he should have chosen someone else, duty to a cousin or no.

"Did you bring your woodworking tools?" he asked, and I nodded.

"My personality isn't worth the passage. I figured I had to work it off somehow."

That hissing-chuckle again, complete with drawn back whiskers, and I scowled up at him. He licked his fur back into place and gave a catlike glower of superiority. "I don't know, Naef. I think your personality alone could be worth the trip to your flea-sized—"

"Flea-shit sized," I corrected perversely.

He regally inclined his head. "Your flea-*shit* village. You and I will get along very well in the next year, I think."

I grunted and shrugged and busied myself looking at the ship.

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It was magnificent, really. The wood was burnished and seasoned and stained and oiled, and the fittings were brass. The ropes were clean and well cared for, and the lamps at the posts on the prow and stern were brass and glass and they gleamed in the morning sun. A crew busied itself about us, giving me no more attention than they gave Aerie-Smith until a fine-looking, powerful man came up and bowed.

“Ready to cast off, sir. All is well?”

“Indeed, Captain. Your men are proficient as always. Can I show our guest to his quarters?”

The captain nodded to me, friendly-like, and I gave a curt nod back. If everyone else was pretending there were no freaks on board, I could play that game. Still, it was a relief to follow Aerie-Smith into the forequarters of the ship. I had my own bunk. It was tiny, barely big enough for a swinging hammock and my duffel, really, but it was mine. There was a small stack of wood in the room, under the one piece of furniture in the tiny space, exotic wood, with fantastic textures and surprising grain, and I gasped for a moment, hunched down by it, touching it.

“For me?” I asked, stunned at such a gift.

“Of course,” Aerie-Smith said, as though it should be obvious he would go out of his way to be kind to me. “And feel free to whittle at the furniture as well.”

I looked at the rough, all-purpose stool that sat in the corner by the wood. “It could use it,” I muttered, thinking that it would take no work at all to make such a plain thing something of beauty. I had done it with all the wood in my mother’s house.

For the first time since leaving, I wondered that my mother would have to leave all of that work behind. Well, I thought with a determined shrug, better all that work than Gwennie's dreams, right? There was some more movement then, and I realized the ship had left the quay. I frowned a little and said, "Thank you," with less grace than truth, and Aerie-Smith inclined his massive head gracefully and said, "You're welcome. Did you want to go topside now?"

With Aerie-Smith's bloody great bulk out of the cabin, there was actually room to breathe, but I was still glad to follow him topside. We got to the deck just in time to watch my flea-shit village become nothing more than a smudge on the horizon. Dimly, at the top of the village rise, I saw the tiny house with the handcarved moldings and the pewter fixtures, and imagined my mother and sister watching my ship disappear into the big blue of the water.

It was at that moment that I realized I was completely in the dark about my destination.

"Aerie-Smith," I said, feeling something like wonder for the first time in my life, "where in the fuck are we going?"

There was that hissing rumble again, and I looked at my "companion" sourly. Wasn't it lovely that I could entertain him so easily?

"Laugh all you like," I sulked. "It's not going to make me know where we're going any more than I do now."

He licked his whiskers again—a gesture that was becoming more and more appealing, in the way that it makes cats look vulnerable and happy—and whuffed out a breath. He was a little embarrassed.

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“I have an island,” he said, and I knew my eyes got wide. “Well,” he muttered defensively, “you already knew I was a nobleman. It’s not like everyone has their own ship, right? Anyway, I have an island, in the southernmost part of the archipelago, and it’s sort of... well... enchanted, and that’s where we’re going.”

I don’t know what my expression must have been, but Aerie-Smith licked his whiskers and ducked his head again. “The crew—before we get there, they’ll be turning into animals. It... one minute there are people on the rigging, the next minute, they’re chimpanzees. They can do the job,” he reassured me, as though that would be my main worry, “but, well, it can be a bit of a surprise.”

I opened my mouth, closed it again, opened it, squinted, and wrinkled my mouth, at a complete loss. “And you?” I finally managed, when the silence had actually pressed a sound out of me.

Aerie-Smith brightened, as though he was happy to get a question he could answer. “Oh, I stay much the same. I have the power to change completely if I like, go down on all fours, hunt like a real lion, but mostly, I do what I do now: go about my business, try to keep my village happy and prosperous.” He sighed then, and true heaviness weighed down on his shoulders. “I try to keep the villagers in their routine, make them remember they’re human. It’s getting harder every day.”

I blinked. “So,” I said, thinking my way, “this enchantment, it’s not something you signed on for?”

He licked his whiskers again and looked off into the

horizon. It was a fairly awesome thing, that wide, blank vista of gray water and blue sky, but I don't think that's what Aerie-Smith was seeing.

"My fault," he said quietly. "My fault. My arrogance, my own damned flaw. I...." He looked away. "It doesn't matter. I've found a way to fix it, and fix it I will." Those impassive, feline features continued their sage regard of the horizon, and I kept my own counsel. Apparently there were things that neither of us wanted to talk about, and that was fine with me. But still... I felt an unaccustomed curiosity as we regarded the massive, heaving mystery of the swells and the unfathomable creatures that lived beneath them.

"Aerie-Smith, what color are your eyes, when you're not a beast?"

"Brown." He was looking at me instead of the ocean, I could feel it.

"Like your cousin's?"

"Very much like them."

I smiled a little and kept my eyes on that horizon. "Your cousin has nice eyes. He and Gwen will have pretty children."

"With a little luck and some follow-through," Aerie-Smith said kindly, "you'll get to see them."

It wasn't until much later that I realized he didn't say *he* would get to see them. But when I remember that moment, I remember the regret that came with the thing he did not say.

PART III

STORMS

Aerie-Smith was not a bad companion, for all his godlike appearance. We would find an out-of-the-way place on deck as the ship carved through the waters, and sit together quietly. He would be reading or writing on a small desk fitted for his lap, and I would be whittling, because that's what I did. One day, I sat and watched as one of the young sailors leapt from mast to rig to sail on nimble feet, and thought of wind and water and dancing. He was a pretty boy, but that's not what I was thinking about as I carved. I was thinking about his strong limbs, the beauty of a healthy body, the wonder that could be sinew, muscle, and bone.

What I was carving was... wind. I looked at it taking shape in my hands and was impressed with myself. It was abstract and moving, flowing from curve to flare to shade, and it was very, very beautiful. I looked from the piece in my hand to the pretty boy with something like gratitude, and it was then that Aerie-Smith cleared his throat.

"You should say something to him."

I looked at him with such fierceness that his eyes went immediately to my pocket, where my tiny wooden knives still resided.

"I was just saying," he amended quickly, "that if you think he's attractive, let him know. I know these sailors. If he likes men, he'll at least eat a meal with you. If he doesn't, he'll say thank you and be on his way. You don't have to stare at him as though you were starving and he was a steak you couldn't have."

For a moment I honestly thought about going for my knives again. "I was watching him move," I snarled, showing my carving like a talisman to ward off idiocy. "I'd have been watching as close if he'd been a dancing girl or a racing puma or... or... a giant lion, about to run off a cliff because he's dumber than boiled potato shit!"

With that I threw my little carving at him. He caught it deftly and looked at it, surprised, and I lurched off to hang my body over the prow and stare moodily at the ship's wake—another thing of beauty I longed to capture in wood.

He was up at my elbow in a moment. I really did forget my vow and go for my pocket of wooden knives this time, but he caught my arm as I went. "Your work is beautiful, Naef...."

"Knife."

"Knife. But there is still no sin in desiring men...."

"Oh yes. Because being a freak isn't bad enough. Being a perverted freak would get me killed."

"It's not perversion, it's just...."

"Stow it," I muttered, tired of this conversation. "It's not like anyone will ever touch me. Male, female, freak first, pervert second... either way, my pecker's staying in my fist."

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There was an uncomfortable silence, and then that cultured, even-toned voice said, “Well, as long as you and your fist are on a first-name basis, I’m sure there’s no sin in that, either.”

I couldn’t help it. My mouth quirked at the corners, and I let out a snort that might, *might* mind you, be construed as amusement. I quickly contained myself and then snuck a peek at Aerie-Smith. He looked a little bit wistful, as though he’d been hoping I’d let out the full laugh. I sighed. Well, if a companion I was supposed to be....

“I call him Bob,” I said with a completely straight face.

Aerie-Smith laughed so hard the laughter turned into those great barking roars that big cats sometimes make, but those made me laugh, and no one on the ship seemed to care, and I allowed myself a fit of the giggles while that magnificent laughter was bounced over the hull and off into the sea.

It was pleasant, but it was not to last. On our second week out, we could feel a storm blowing up. The air became electric. The hair on my arms stood up, and my twisted foot and the lump in my spine ached like anything. Aerie-Smith popped his head in that morning to suggest that I stay in my cabin. Things were busy on deck, and he was planning to do the same.

He didn’t ask me if I wanted to join him, which was a first, and his tone was clipped and short, and generally put my back up, and I was not very gracious in my retort.

“Fine,” I snapped, “I’ll hide here like a monster in the shadows and wait to see if the sun will kill me or the storm will.”

“For the sake of the gods, shut up,” he growled, losing his temper for the first time since we’d met. “The only one who thinks you’re monstrous is yourself, although if you want a lead on something truly hideous, you should listen to yourself whine.”

I recoiled from his tone, from his words. Not fair, I know, since I had all but built snarling to an art form, but I had grown used to his kindness and even temper. I was too self-centered to look to see what made the change, which was bad form on my part. Instead, I pushed past him, almost knocking him over for all his size, and charged up to the top of the deck.

“I’d rather die in the storm than live in this rathole another moment!” I called behind me, and then... then....

Oh gods, are you listening? A storm out at sea is one of your greatest creations. You should hear it praised. The sky was dark, almost as night, and the swells... they were taller than mountains. The wind was a frenzy, and for the first time I missed the feral tangle of my hair, because it would have been glorious to stand on the prow of that ship, snarling like the beast I felt to be, my hair my badge of beastliness.

As it was, I grasped the rail in tight hands and turned my face to the wind and screamed with the joy of it. I watched as the ship climbed a great swell, and up and up and up and up and up... and just at the crest of it we

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dropped, sliding into the trough of it with enough of an angle to look as though I were heading straight down. The impact at the bottom was abrupt and the spume was enough to knock me off my feet if I hadn't been holding on for dear life, so I kept there, clutched the rail, whooping and screaming and daring the gods to get me.

Haven't killed me yet? Well, give another go, you fuckers! I'm still here! C'mon and get me! Tear me down, shake me, bend me, twist me—I'll spit in your face you ball-less bastards. Now come get me!

And so on. I was exhilarated. I was *enraged!* And the storm was my nemesis, my goddess, my salvation, and to this day, I believe that if I had been thrown from the ship and sucked down into the darkness of the churning brine, I would have gone with a snarl of triumph on my face.

It almost happened. Up, up, up, up we climbed, and *fyuoooooooooo...* we slid into the trough, and the fifth, twentieth, one hundredth time we did this, my hands, which I'd thought welded to the rail, came loose, and my foot, which had been twisted in with the railing as well, was not strong enough to hold. I felt the openness of the air beneath my body and actually spread my arms and prepared to fly to my doom with a smile, when a strong arm wrapped itself around my waist, and I was being hauled, kicking and screaming and furious, out of my beloved storm and down the stairs to my tiny room in the hull of the ship.

"Stop struggling, damn you!" Aerie-Smith roared. "Stop it! I'll be damned if I let you back up to kill yourself, but if I hit you on the head, gods know when you'll wake up!"

“Why?” I wailed. “Why’d you save me? Why? I could have gone flying. I could have gone happy! Why drag me down here, when here is where I’ve been all my life?” I was not talking about my tiny cabin, and we both knew it.

Both his arms were still wrapped around my middle, although the fight had left me for the moment, and now they tightened, and his cheek came down on the top of my head. I closed my eyes, reluctant to put any meaning to it, but knowing there was some, anyway.

“I made a promise,” he snapped, anger vibrating from his voice. “I promised them I’d get you back home. Do you think I’ll break that promise because you had a bout of storm madness?”

My body grew, if anything, weaker. It wasn’t hard. I was freezing, and now that I was inside where it was warm, trembling from the cold and the shock and the exertion of keeping myself on board the damned ship for the last half hour or so.

“Duty,” I said quietly. “I understand.”

He made a growl of sheer exasperation. “I would miss you too,” he said simply. With brusque movements, he set me in my hammock and started stripping off my wet clothes. I whimpered like a child and tried to hide my thin, deformed limbs from him, but he batted my efforts away and wrapped me in a blanket and settled me into my bunk, tucking his own waistcoat under my head for a pillow.

“Words,” I mumbled, but he captured my face in a massive paw and made me face his great, noble lion’s head.

“Truth,” he reassured.

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“If it’s so true,” I asked, humbled and tired, and beyond pride, “why not spend the storm together?” Who says I got to own pride, anyway? It’s one of the things the gods don’t give a man like me.

“Oh hells,” Aerie-Smith groaned, pulling up a stool deftly by hooking it with an extended claw, and then sitting down on it. “You idiot... all this because....” He grunted and looked supremely uncomfortable. Outside, the lightning flared and the thunder cracked, almost on top of us. “I hate storms,” he admitted baldly. “I hate them. You, who are always so brave. Did you think I wanted you to see me twitching like a housecat under a table?”

And then I saw it, the darting eyes, the raised fur at his nape, the shaking paws, the nasty bout of temper. “Yes,” I mumbled. “Yes. That’s exactly how I wanted to spend the storm. So nice of you to offer. Do you know any songs we can sing?”

His laugh was about wrung out, and between the storm and ourselves, I could tell we’d exhausted each other. “How about a poem?” he asked, and then proceeded to bore me to sleep with the old story about a lost sailor and an albatross and offending the gods. Like I wouldn’t know that one? Me, who had been an albatross all my life? When I woke up, he was asleep on his own foreleg, his massive head as regal when his eyes were closed as when those eyes were blinking sagely over the horizon.

That was only a few days before the sailors changed into monkeys—and don’t think *that* was not a disconcerting moment. Aerie-Smith and I spent an entire day on deck

picking up clothes and putting them in a neat pile in the sailor's quarters. The transition had happened abruptly—one moment men, the next monkeys, doing their jobs, and the clothes had simply slithered down into puddles where they lay.

In spite of Aerie-Smith's helpful words about asking the pretty boy to sit and talk, I had continued to keep to myself, but I'd enjoyed listening to the conversation of men who were not talking about cruelty. They sang, they laughed, they told jokes, many of which were private jokes among people who worked, played, ate, and (in some cases, I was sure of it) slept together. Many of them were married, and I heard about children and about wives, mothers, sisters, brothers, friends. It was as close to being a part of humanity as I'd ever come, and I missed it when it was abruptly gone, replaced by circus chattering and, well, dodging shite, if one must know.

I spent some time watching the monkeys, even some time carving them. In fact, I left a pile of carvings of individual sailors going about their business, doing what sailors do in beast form. They had the same friends when they were beasts as they did as men, and I thought rather happily that this said something about the nature of both men and beasts, but I couldn't put it into words.

The change made Aerie-Smith keenly unhappy, though. Whatever it was he'd done, however he'd earned this curse or geas, I think he could have happily lived his life as a lion-god, and not blinked once at the unfairness of it all, but to see the sailors—his people—reduced to chimpanzees throwing shite and masturbating where they sat... well, it

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made him taciturn and abrupt. He never reached quite the expertise of misanthropy that I had perfected, but he would sit for hours staring moodily about the zoo that used to be his ship, shaking his head and muttering to himself. He would make an effort (a supreme effort, actually,) for me, continuing to talk to me as though I were a person, a real one who mattered, and not some charity case he'd taken on for his cousin, and I was grateful.

That gratitude lasted right up until the spell touched me personally, the morning I woke up to find the ship docked. We had reached our destination.

The change of it probably happened abruptly, as I slept, as it had with the men on the ship, but my awareness of it happened only gradually. I was aware of the waves lapping at the hull of the ship, a rather nice sound, when it's gentle, and I was aware of the shifting shadows of mid-morning. I blinked slowly, frowning. Usually, the pains in my leg or my back or my shoulders called me awake before then, made me quit my bed—at least long enough to use the privy can in the corner—so that I could stretch out and return to sleep, such as it was.

There was no pain this morning to wake me up.

I frowned and reached out my arm to my clubfoot and looked, horrified, at the clean, straight limb in its place. Alarmed, I popped out of the bunk and onto my sound two feet. My hips were square, my shoulders were straight, and my body was long, lean, and lovely.

I was horrified.

“*Aerie-Smith!*” I bawled, in an absolute panic. “*Aerie-Smith! What have you done to me?*”

His cabin was down the ship a bit from mine, but I heard him thundering forward on his massive back paws, and the door flinging open in fear was not a surprise to me. I, however, was a surprise to him.

“In the name of flying monkey shit, what in the fuck happened to you?”

“Look at me!” I demanded, shaking out my perfect limbs. “*Look at me!*”

“I’m looking!” he snarled back. “What in the fuck happened to your eyes?”

“My eyes?” I was startled. “Who in the fuck cares about my eyes?”

“I do!” he snapped back. “They were green and narrow and furious, and I liked them. You’ve got... child’s eyes. Big blue eyes now....”

My hands went to my face, and I moaned. Not a beard stubble or pockmark to the touch. Even the horrible one, the one that had twisted my mouth out of shape, was gone. My nose was straight, my chin was square, and my hair... was cut, into bangs (gods!) and around my ears like a fucking school girl and....

“Change it back,” I muttered, hating it. My insides matched my outsides... I had spent years... I had spent my entire *life* twisting myself inside so that I could match the body and the face the fates had plagued me with. “Change it back!”

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“I can’t!”

“Then who can? *Dammit, Aerie-Smith, change it back!*”

I was on the south side of hysterical, and two massive paws seized my shoulders, pushing me down into my bunk again. Touch, I thought randomly. It had been so long since I’d been touched.

“*I can’t!*” he snarled, loud enough to get through. “Think, Naef, *think!* This is a side effect of my island, don’t you see? So at this point, we’ve got two choices: you can come with me and live like this for a year, and know it’s going to vanish when the ship returns to take you home, or you can turn around right now and go back. I won’t blame you, but you’ve got to make your choice, Naef. If you’re not going to be here in a year, I need somebody who will be!”

And in the end, that’s what made my decision for me. Damn Aerie-Smith and his self-sufficiency. If he needed me, if he really needed me for this “regrettable task” of his, then it was a first for him, to need anybody. I couldn’t *not* do it. He’d been too decent to disappoint now.

“My name,” I muttered, teeth chattering, “is Knife.” I huddled in the corner of the bunk though, trembling, until those massive paws soothed at my shoulders again, and I let them.

“Why is this such a bad thing?” he asked after a moment. “Your whole... whole self has been forged by your appearance... this would be a blessing....”

“A blessing?” I snapped. “You’re beautiful, Aerie-Smith. Did you think it was a blessing when you were someone not yourself?”

“I don’t really think of this form as beautiful, Nae—” And then, because I glared at him, “Knife.”

“You should,” I chattered, still in shock. “Why now?” I mumbled into the cave of my knees and my body. “Why now? When I was a boy, I would have given anything to look like this. Now that my heart is as twisted as my body?” Unexpectedly, I felt tears starting down my perfect cheeks. No. No. No. And then I was just whimpering the word.

“Naef,” Aerie-Smith said softly, that great paw coming to push my perfect hair back from my perfect face. I couldn’t stand it, that he should see me like this.

“Just go,” I whispered, looking down at my perfect thighs. “I’ll be packed and ready to leave in a bit. For now, please, just go.”

He did, reluctantly, I could tell, and I gave myself five minutes to weep for the beautiful boy I never was, and, all appearances aside, could never be.

There was a menagerie waiting for us as we disembarked: two leopards bearing a palanquin for our luggage, a flock of flamingos in livery, bowing as Aerie-Smith walked down the gangplank, and a cart drawn by what appeared to be a herd of goats, all harnessed up by the monkeys holding their halters.

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I didn't miss Aerie-Smith's wince as he boarded that little cart, all bedecked in lace and velveteen, and waved to the throngs of animals as we boarded, sitting together like a married couple off into a new adventure.

The sight was funny, almost enough to lift my spirits a little, if it hadn't hurt Aerie-Smith quite so keenly. "They went to a lot of trouble for this," he muttered. "I'm proud of them for trying."

People, I thought with a shock. These were his people. I wondered if he knew the villagers to their names, to their children, to the people they wrote to off his small island.

"Do they live in houses?" I asked, afraid of the question, afraid it would feel painful, afraid it was insensitive, but really wanting to know.

"Yes," he said, not taking offense, gods bless him, "they do live in houses. And they eat the deer on the island for food." He looked to the leopards, who were sniffing at the goats in a predatory, experimental way. "For now."

Suddenly I wanted badly to know what it was he had done. His own appearance did not seem to bother him, but to see his villagers lose their humanity, that made him bleed, and I was sorry for it.

"Will they make it?" I asked, probably giving voice to his greatest fear.

I wished for the millionth time that he had human expressions, because I could not read the look on his leonine face to save my life. "With hope," he said quietly. Then he stood in the cart and addressed the crowd.

“You have been very patient!” he cried, and suddenly all those animals, making an unholy racket of growls, squawks, hisses, grunts, and moos in addition to their human voices, became as quiet as death in snow. “All of you, you’ve been patient with me, with your condition, and with the pain of not knowing when the curse will have an end. I’ve come to tell you that it will. In a little less than a year, you will have your bodies back, your bodies and your humanity and maybe even some of the years you have lost. There will be....” He swallowed. Maybe they couldn’t see it, but I could. “There will be a price. But once you have yourselves back, I’m sure it will be a small thing, and one hardly missed. In any case, it is not your forfeit to pay. So rejoice. You will be human enough soon, and clothes, I’m sure, will become a priority once again.”

There was the odd sound of animal laughter, from such an assortment of animals then that I could barely fathom, and then the goats took their cue, made goat noises (maaaaa—maaaaaaaa... I knew how they felt) and trundled off with our silly/sad/glorious/grand little cart in their wake.

“What’s the price?” I asked softly.

“Nothing to worry about now,” he replied in the same tone, but I did. I worried about it a lot. For one thing, it kept my mind off the stranger’s body that I now wore.

We reached a house on a hill. I’d half expected a castle, but this was a tropical island, three quarters humid jungle, one quarter fishing village populated with animals still struggling to walk upright. What I got was a villa sitting deep in the glossy green foliage, local wood, open doors, open shutters, bright drapery and gauze to keep away insects,

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high ceilings, even in the upper levels, and a balcony for every upstairs room.

It was so lovely it made my throat hurt. No wonder the island's capricious gods had gifted me with this body. My normal, freakish self would not have fit in well.

Moving without pain was odd at first. Every step I took felt brittle, because although I didn't realize it, I had lived my life anticipating the wrench in muscle, the bright stab of twisted bone hitting hard ground, and the ache in my leg and my spine as my body was warped beyond endurance. I wasn't aware that I was watching in fascination as my feet, encased in sandals I'd borrowed from one of the monkeys since my boots no longer fit, followed each other across the rich brown earth beneath them, until Aerie-Smith touched my shoulder.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked carefully. "You are acting as though something should happen."

"Pain," I murmured. "I'm waiting for pain."

It didn't come, at least not in the trip across the pathway to the stone patio of the villa. But as I stood in the vast front room/dining room of the first floor, I realized that I was waiting for another kind of pain as well.

My duffel bag had been brought into the front room and dropped at my feet, and I was wondering where to put it when the thought occurred to me. I reached out to grab the duffel and looked at Aerie-Smith uncertainly.

"You're going to want sex now, aren't you?"

He'd been busy conferring with a large parrot, who perched on his arm and spoke like a man, so I assumed he was one. Aerie-Smith was so surprised by the question that he whirled around, dislodging the parrot (who took a chunk out of his furry arm) and knocking over something breakable and probably valuable with his tail.

"Lot," he said to the parrot, his eyes large and disconcerted, his tongue lashing his whiskers between every word, "could you excuse us for a moment?"

Lot squawked and flapped off, leaving Aerie-Smith and me looking at each other in awkward silence.

"Why would you even ask that?" he demanded, finding a napkin on the pre-set table and dabbing at the blood on his arm.

"Here," I snapped, "let me." I took the napkin from him and dipped it in a full flask of water, wiping the blood off the fur in careful swipes.

"Answer my question!"

I glared at him, irritated that he wouldn't know what I was talking about to begin with. "I'm pretty. I don't care if you like boys or not. I've got a mouth that was made to get a cock wet. Any man would think it." I'd seen my face in the windows as I'd taken one step and then another up the stone inlaid walk. My lips were pink and soft and full, and my chin was round and sweet. I'd seen achingly beautiful brides who looked less ready for a man's bed. I was so pretty, I'd probably turn a woman who didn't like *women* right off.

"You just paid a queen's trousseau to have me as a companion. I don't care how horrible the task is at the end of

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the year. You'd have to be tempted. Any man would have to be tempted. I just need to know what to expect, that's all." I shuddered, remembering the brutal hands on my body, the surprising, terrifying pain. "If I know it's coming, I can prepare."

Aerie-Smith's uneven breath was so big it ruffled my hair. "Naef...."

"Knife...."

"*Naef*, look at me!"

I finished wiping the blood and tied off the hurt, using the bulk of the napkin as a pad. I'd given myself many such hurts with the woodworking tools. My hands were... *had been* a mess of superficial scars, all in stages of fading away.

I refused to look at him.

"Forget I said anything," I muttered, when the silence waxed too oppressive.

"Naef—has this happened to—?"

"I was a fool for thinking you'd stoop that low," I interrupted, not wanting him to continue, not wanting... oh gods. Not wanting his pity. I let go of his arm and turned to grab my duffel. I felt the wind of his arm as it passed me, trying to stop me, and I ignored it. "I'm sorry for the insult."

"*Naef!*"

"*I told you*," I burst out before controlling my voice, "my name is Knife." I hoisted my duffel, surprised once again by the easiness of this new body, and turned toward the stairs

with their narrow strip of carpet, leading up to what were obviously the bedrooms.

“Which one is it?” I asked, and the thickness of his voice in reply came as a surprise.

“The first one on the left. You have your own balcony.”

“That’s generous,” I told him, trying to be reassuring. “Thank you.” I started up the stairs, still not looking at him. He didn’t have to open this wound. This was not his problem, not his hurt to doctor.

“If you’re not going to say anything real to me,” he growled, “keep your bloody thanks to yourself.” I closed my eyes as his padded footsteps thundered through the house. The front screen door slammed, probably as he went out to help unload the rest of the cart and the palanquin.

I kept my eyes closed tightly for a moment before I went up to see my bedroom, which was once again mine, and mine alone.

PART IV

PREY

Aerie-Smith seemed to have recovered from his fit of temper by that evening during dinner, which was a relief to me. He was normally so even keeled; it was soothing, knowing my companion for the next year wouldn't just lapse into temper or a fit of melancholy or... or any of the things I would and did do on a regular basis, really.

Poor man. Whatever this "regrettable task" was at the end of the year, it must be something truly tremendously awful to put up with the likes of me.

We sat to dinner, which was a miracle of potatoes, eggs, and venison steak. I didn't ask where we got the eggs... the logistics of living with a menagerie as a village were just too huge and too awful to contemplate. I *was* relieved that the meat was venison, though, and I hoped that the deer population on this temperate island would just keep right on thriving for my stay. (After watching what must have been a pre-school class of piglets roll together, squealing with excitement, earlier that day, I may never eat bacon again.)

"How is your suite?" he asked courteously as we sat, and I tried not to grimace.

"Fabulous," I answered sourly. It was: dark wood paneling, burgundy trappings. The bed alone was the size of

my entire room back home, but here it sat in the middle of a great room, complete with bookshelves, end tables, and an armoire. “The privy alone is good enough for a Queen’s arse.”

This, too, was true. What I didn’t tell him was that my first thought had been relief. The idea of running down a flight of stairs and out this vast monstrosity of a place to a privy hut on the back lawn had been truly daunting. But as I took in the hot and cold running water and commode, I realized that this body I was wearing could make that little jaunt with no trouble at all. Getting used to moving without pain might take longer than it seemed like it should.

But my reply pleased Aerie-Smith—at least he curled his whiskers up in that cat-smile of his—and I was glad. “Tomorrow,” he said with some satisfaction, “we’ll have a tour of the island. It’s not large.” He seemed a little embarrassed at that. “But it’s a good place. You’ll have the run of it. You should enjoy yourself.”

I blinked. Have the run of it? But then, even if I was his paid whore, I suppose I’d have *some* time off. “Will I be the only human here?” I asked, liking the idea.

Aerie-Smith shook his head. “Only sometimes. We get merchant vessels. There’s a surprising number that still trade with us. Only people who lived on the island at the time of the curse actually turn into animals....”

I frowned. “Then how does that explain me?”

Aerie-Smith shrugged. “I’m not sure, really. I think....” He shook out his mane. “It doesn’t matter, does it? You’re here for a year, and that’s what you’re wearing, I guess.”

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He was hiding something from me, but I let it pass. I'd accused him of being a rapist and a predator. I could keep my mouth shut about a few things for the moment.

"So, uhm..." I took a bite of potatoes and chewed awkwardly. "What *are* my duties here?"

Aerie-Smith looked sideways at me. "The mornings are your own, I suppose. They're when I take care of business matters, hear the villagers complaints—" My eyes got big, and his grimace was very human. "Don't ask, and do my correspondence. After that, well..." He shrugged. "Play chess with me, I suppose. Read in the study. Talk to me, let me hear another human's voice." Again, that sideways glance. "Even a sour, sarcastic one, if that's what you have."

I curled my lip at him and rolled my eyes. "It's what I'm best at. You know, there are islands out there closer than mine. You could always find another 'companion'. Your duty to your cousin... that's discharged. You could always find someone..." I scowled. "Someone less pretty on the outside and ugly on the inside, I guess. I'll do your regrettable task," I added hurriedly, "but I'm nobody's prize companion."

"No," he said shortly. "You gave your word."

"But I'm... I'm not a nice person!" I cried, wishing I'd never asked the question but now feeling like I *had* to stay with the conversation. "Why would you want to spend a year with me? I'll do the bad thing. I'll probably bitch about it loud enough to offend the gods, but I'll do it because, like you said, I gave my word. But... me in the study? Playing chess? There have *got* to be better choices out there!"

Aerie-Smith growled to himself. It sounded like muttering. "I swear, you are so bloody-minded sometimes. I could ask you to roll around in pigshit for me, and you'd do it with less bitching than a simple bloody godsbedamned game of chess."

"I'm a horrible chess player!" I told him. Although, truth was, I'd only ever carved the damned sets; I'd never played one. "I'm just asking. You don't want me for sex, not even now when I'm apparently sex on the perfectly shaped hoof, and I'm no godsdamned good at business matters." I gestured helplessly to the grandeur around me. "Why waste all this on me?"

"I... I like you, Naef. Bitter tongue, nasty little knife collection—all of it. You're nobody's victim. You're quick with that smart mouth of yours, and you're... you just seem incredibly brave to me." He gave a disgusted whuffle. "Insane, sometimes, but brave. Can't we spend a year together and irritate each other in complete good will? Honestly, I've been looking forward to it. Is that wrong?"

I lost my hunger abruptly and stood, uncertain. What to do with praise? What to do when someone beautiful tells you that you're not repulsive? Well, this body was obviously made for something besides sex.

"I'm...." I looked down at my perfectly formed feet.

"What's wrong, Naef?" His voice was both puzzled and gentle, and I couldn't look at him.

"I'm...." And I couldn't even finish that sentence. I had sound, whole legs and a straight spine and clear skin. I didn't even know what "I" was anymore. And now, Aerie-

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Smith was trying to tell me that “I” had never been that bad to begin with. My brain was reduced to chaos and rubble, and I didn’t even have my malformed backbone to keep me stalwart enough to pull myself clear.

“There’s an hour ’til sunset. I’ll be back.”

And for the first time in my life, I ran away.

Running was glorious. No pain. Absolute freedom from pain. I ran blindly, half-laughing, half-shouting, and looking where I was going only far enough to not end up smashing into a tree. The island was full of them, great ferns and fruit trees, since it was a temperate, tropical place, and I ran until the act of running filled my brain, until my lungs lived only for my next breath, until all words were superfluous to the blurring greenery in my vision. Until I almost hurled myself off a cliff.

I wasn’t aware Aerie-Smith had followed me, but there he was, on all fours, his waistcoat still buttoned around his chest, roaring at me from the edge of the cliff until I skidded to a halt and sat down abruptly, gulping in great breaths of air.

When I’d recovered myself, I stood up and dusted off my bruised bum, then walked gingerly over to the edge of the cliff. It was neither as high nor as steep as the cliffs I was used to near my home village, and my heartbeat eased from tympani to snare drum as I tried to calculate how big an idiot I had been. I probably would have survived the tumble; it was more like a steep hillside than a cliff, but it wouldn’t have been fun, and the dunk in the ocean would have been a

shock, that was for certain. As it was, it would be a pretty place to watch the sunset—on some other day.

“Gods,” I snapped to myself, “I’m no better than a brainless girl in a storybook, needing rescue every page or so.” I turned to Aerie-Smith, who was still a lion with a waistcoat, on all fours, and looking at me with a decidedly irritated snarl on his inhuman face. “Thank you,” I muttered. “I had no idea you were even following me.”

The rumble from his chest was exasperated, and I realized that I had him at sort of a disadvantage. He couldn’t talk in this form. Well, good. He had me at a disadvantage daily. It was a relief, for once, to be the more articulate of the two of us.

“Should we walk back?” I asked, putting a bright front on my face, and even a lion can roll his eyes in disgust. He was a bloody great cat; I’m sure lions in the wild were not higher than my chest, but he was. As it was, he took two steps in front of me, went down on his shoulder, and looked back at me imperiously. There could be no mistaking that damned arrogant nod of his, but I was having none of it.

“Not even,” I said succinctly, “if I had a club foot and a twisted spine.”

He roared. Not the warning sort of roar he’d given me to stop me from going off the edge of the cliff... embankment, but a full-on, “I’ll eat you, you bloody stupid prick if you don’t get on my back now, godsbedamned if I won’t!” bark of fury.

I curled my lip at him and walked right on past him. “You don’t scare me,” I muttered. “If you’d wanted to eat me,

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you would have done it on board the ship when the monkeys stopped cooking.”

The snarl he emitted next was pure fury, and I was not prepared for what happened next. I had my back to him, so I couldn't see the exact mechanics of it, but I think he changed form, threw me on his back, and then changed back. It's the only way to explain how I came to be hanging on to his mane for dear life as he ripped through the trees and underbrush to get us back to the villa.

I was unprepared for his trajectory to change, though, and for something, a blurring, brown, terrified something, to be racing in front of us in panicked frenzy.

I was very unprepared for Aerie-Smith to swoop down upon it, seizing its neck in his jaws and shaking his head once to snap its spine and kill it dead. We continued our teeth-jarring tumble back to the villa with tomorrow's breakfast (I assumed) rattling between his jaws.

I stared at the deer, the blood pouring down her neck, her eyes glazing over, the terrible shock of being alive and happy one moment, pursued the next, and dead the moment after that written in every line of her expression. My stomach churned and my vision blackened and the minute Aerie-Smith stopped on the stone patio of the villa, I flung myself off his back and onto my knees and was abruptly sick.

He disappeared for a moment and came back upright—with his lower half wrapped in a tablecloth from the patio set. “Naef...”

“Go away,” I whispered, and he growled.

“No. I can’t. Naef, the sun will set in five minutes or less... the elves who cursed this island, they come out at sunset, and they don’t like it when we share the island with them. Trust me. I learned the hard way.”

That got my attention, and I glared at him through the darkness dancing before my eyes. “Is that what this was?” I demanded, gesturing with my chin to where the dead thing lay. “A warning? An object lesson? If you don’t eat me, the island will?”

Aerie-Smith made a wounded sound. “It was breakfast,” he said blankly. “That was all. It is easier for me to hunt as a beast. The roe was there in my way, that was all.”

I took a gulping, wheezing burst of air into my lungs and coughed, the bile in my throat rough and not going away. “Oh.” I felt numb, through and through. Not an object lesson. Dinner. Not a warning. Just a thing that predators do. *My people are losing their humanity.* Oh, Aerie-Smith, were you worried about yourself as well?

“Naef,” he muttered, “you can yell at me inside. Tell me I’m an insensitive bastard. Call me a murderer, kick me in the balls, anything, but please, Naef... please.... I don’t want to touch you again without your permission, but I will... dammit... let’s get inside....”

I made a try to stand, but my knees were shaking too badly to do it. Aerie-Smith held out his arm with tentative urgency, and I took it, because his desperation was getting to me, and I hadn’t survived the whole of this dreadful day to let my own inner twistings be the death of me now.

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I closed my eyes and took his arm, and allowed him to guide me, wobbling, off the patio. Inside the wide doors was a sitting room with a couple of long, soft couches, and he allowed me to slide into one of these.

I sprawled, insensible, until Aerie-Smith returned, wearing a pair of trousers and holding a large glass of water. Outside, the final glimmering of pink sunset faded from the sky, and left us with large picture windows looking into the darkness.

“I’m sorry I frightened you,” he said gruffly, as I took the water. “I admit, I was in a temper. It made running the roe down seem much more reasonable than it probably appeared.”

I looked at him and grimaced. “I’m sorry I’m weaker than a child,” I said, wondering if I could simply curl up in a corner of this couch and sleep. “I’m sorry I’m....” What was the word for what I was? My body was fine now, at least for my stay. What was my soul? “Damaged,” I murmured, resting my head on my arm. Outside, beyond our patio, out in the thick of the forest, small lights danced. They looked so pretty, I mused. Too delicate to cause the sort of fear Aerie-Smith had shown, but then, what would I know?

“I’m so damaged,” I mumbled to those dancing lights. “I don’t want to inflict that on you, but I just seem to be flicking tiny knives at you, whether I have them or not.”

“My hide is pretty thick, Naef,” he murmured. His body was close enough to touch, but out of habit, I didn’t.

“Dammit, Aerie-Smith, I’ve told you before....”

“I refuse to call you Knife,” he said. “Not tonight.” And I was suddenly far too tired to argue. It had been a long day. Long and exhausting, and I was ready to lapse, unconscious from it. “Naef, would you object if I carried you to bed? You’re falling asleep, and the household is closing down. It will get chilly down here, and there are braziers in our rooms. Please?”

When I tried hard to move, he said, “Please, just let me do this for you.”

I yawned, and managed, “Only if you’ll call me ‘Knife,’” before my eyes closed. I didn’t fall completely asleep. When his arms wrapped around me, I mumbled and turned into his smooth chest, feeling the roughness of his waistcoat opening to reveal muscled skin. I opened my eyes, startled, and saw the fur that was supposed to be there. It was warm and soft and a little coarse; he was a greatly sized beast. I held out my hand and felt the fur that I saw.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my hand under the waistcoat and felt the smooth chest underneath it.

I kept my eyes closed then, and continued to rub his chest, his shoulders, his bare upper arms in wonder. He felt good: warm, rippling flesh was under my hands, and it was accepting of my touch. I felt under the waistcoat again and this time, felt nipples. Little man-nipples, hard under my fingers. I know I smiled then, playing with them as we jounced up the stairs.

“Naef...”

“Knife.”

“*Knife.*” His voice sounded strained.

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“Mmm... Aerie-Smith?”

“You’re playing with my body and giving me an erection that could double as a carpentry tool. I doubt very much you know what you’re doing, but I do, and my body wants things yours doesn’t know about, so stop it!”

I kept my eyes closed and made a little moue of disappointment. Heavens know what that expression looked like on my new face. If sex was its own god, that expression would be it. I know this because Aerie-Smith groaned and pulled me closer against him, and for the first time in my life I didn’t mind being small and scrawny and thin.

“You feel like a man,” I mumbled. “Like a man, not a beast. Not a lion-god. You feel so good....”

We’d reached my bed by then, and he all but dumped me out of his arms and onto the mattress. He made up for it by pulling the covers up tenderly and dropping a whuffling kiss on my pristine, unblemished brow.

I sighed. “There must be something really wrong with me,” I sniped, “if I can’t get a man to touch me when I’m wearing this body.”

The sound that Aerie-Smith made was indefinable, and men have probably been making it since honor was invented—shortly after sex was invented, of course.

“The only thing wrong with you is that you’re drunk on exhaustion,” he muttered. “And that you don’t know enough about me to dislike me yet.”

“What’s to dislike?” I asked dreamily. “You take all of my shite, and your chest feels amazing....” My eyes were closing.

I should have wondered that my own sweetness didn't make me sick-up again, but for the moment, it sounded perfectly normal to tell him that he was wonderful.

Aerie-Smith chuckled. The sound was strained, but there was humor in it. "I think your standards are incredibly low," he said, and then there was another whisper across my brow, and he was gone.

The next morning, I probably would have been terribly embarrassed about feeling my host's body when he was helpless to stop me, but other things came up.

Awful things.

It started out nicely enough. Breakfast together on the patio. Eggs and toast and venison. I swallowed a couple of times looking at the venison, before I reminded myself that I had eaten deer meat before and considered it a treat from the relentless diet of fish and greens that we ate on my island. I was not a puling child or a spoiled girl. I knew about having to kill to survive.

Aerie-Smith watched my little inner battle soundlessly, making a grunt of relief when I finally took a bite. It was very good, but I didn't say anything about it, and I don't think he expected me to. Our conversation was limited to the things about the island I didn't know; specifically, the creatures who came out at night, who didn't like sharing space.

"You have to understand," he said reluctantly, "I offended them first. I offended them, and I earned this body, this punishment, and they're not going to forgive me until I find a way to make atonement. Once I do that, my people can have their forms back, and this island will be as any

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other. But until then....” He shuddered. “Those first weeks, after this happened, the townspeople kept trying to talk to them. Nobody returned, and bodies were never found. I don’t know if they’re dead. Maybe they’re just... I don’t know... a part of that magic now. But they’re gone, and we miss them, and it’s one more thing in a thousand I have to pay for.”

All right... I’d put this off, for fear of, well, I don’t know. For fear of finding something out about Aerie-Smith that I couldn’t forgive. It had been... pleasant, not being angry at the world for a bit, but maybe that wasn’t a luxury I could afford, not even in this body.

“Oh gods, Aerie-Smith, what in the seven hells did you do?”

He regarded me somberly. “Finish your breakfast, Naef. Finish your breakfast, and I’ll show you where the swimming hole is. We’ll even bring a picnic. I’ll show you how to walk back alone. Trust me; you’ll want to be alone.”

And with that he rose from the table and let me pick at the rest of my food in moody silence.

In my old body, the walk to the swimming hole would have been worth it. It would have been hot, sweaty, and taken up much of the day, but it would have been worth it. In my new body? It was like having a secret gate in the backyard to the most wonderful place on earth.

It was a little white sandy cove, half in the sun and half in the shade, the shadow traveling with the day so that there was always a place to bask in warmth and always a place to recover from it. The cove itself was wide enough for the

waves to come in, but you had to go deliberately out to sea to catch the big ones, which was good, because I didn't swim.

We got there, and Aerie-Smith set up the blanket and picnic, then sat down and looked at me expectantly.

"What?" I asked, looking at the cove longingly. Even though my home island had been up north, still, there had been bright days in the summer when the boys had gone down the beach from the harbor and stripped to their small clothes to dive in. They would come up sputtering, because the water was chill, but they would stay in until their lips were blue. The buoyant surf and the pretty day... I had never blamed them. I had watched them yearningly, to tell the truth, not because I had admired their bodies, but because I had wanted to be them, playing and laughing, as free as a seabird, and twice as careless.

It had made me hate them more.

"Aren't you going to go out?" he asked me quizzically, and I shrugged.

"I don't know how to swim," I said baldly, and he raised his eyebrows. Yes, I could tell—lions have eyebrows, same as us. "What?" I snapped. "You think I wanted to bare my skinny, misshapen body to the world?" I remember my mother taking me when I was small, and the knot of children whispering and pointing at me from the other side of the beach. I'd become hysterical, and she'd walked me sadly home. After that, when Mum and Gwen had gone, home was where I stayed. After a while, they didn't even try to go themselves.

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“You don’t have to worry about that for the moment,” he prodded gently, and I wrinkled my nose at him.

“No, but I do have to worry about drowning,” I said sourly, and he leaned back his head and laughed.

“Ye gods and little fishes, Naef. You could find the dark side of a rainbow, and that’s the truth. It’s salt water. Go out into it, and let it bear you up. If you relax a bit, you’ll swim soon enough.”

I looked up at him, half-hopeful. “And if I don’t?”

If he’d been human, I think his smile would have been decidedly sideways. “If you don’t, I will dive in and bail you out by the nape of your neck like a willful kitten, how is that?”

I stuck my tongue out at him and started stripping to my small clothes, trying for all the world to behave as though I was not nervous doing so. “It sounds more like a promise than a threat. Remember, I’ve felt that chest.”

And now I’d disconcerted *him*, and that felt lovely. It gave me the courage to get to my slight linen shift and drawstring short pants and wade out to the cove.

“You know, those are only going to get wet and chafe,” he said, not fooled for a minute about how discomfited this made me.

“Yes, but chafing is better than sand in my creases,” I told him, feeling cranky... for all of about a second. The water was cool enough to refresh but warm enough to... oh gods.... Every step into that glorious blue water made my

body tingle and the world at large feel like a big glowing bowl of happy.

When the water was up a little past my waist, a breaker came in. I stood calmly, waiting as it rose to my chest, and then I let it bear me up until my toes left the sand, and I flew. I caught my breath as the wave left and my feet touched down again, and then stood, mouth open in wonder, waiting for the next swell to hit.

I don't know how long I did this. Long enough that, when my limbs trembled too badly for safety, I found that I had been treading water with the swells, allowing them to carry me, turning my back to them, and riding them into the shore with breathless shrieks.

After I don't know how long... after an eternity or an hour of riding those turquoise-colored swells, feeling like a bird in the sky or a fish in the ocean, I let the final one bear me to knee deep and floundered out of the water, laughing with the unselfconscious joy of a child. Aerie-Smith stood as I padded up the beach and wrapped a bath sheet around me before I even thought of one for myself. I took it and huddled underneath it, chilling a little from the breeze overhead, and looked at him with a face so open I almost forgot who I was.

"Enjoy yourself?" he asked indulgently, but I had, so I didn't care.

"It's like magic," I breathed. "I've never been so close to flying!"

The expression on his face then... oh, gods. It was tormented, is what it was. He looked joyous for me, and so,

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so haunted, as though this second, this moment, was stolen, and he didn't want to give it back.

"Aerie-Smith?" I asked uncertainly, and he shook his head and held out a sandwich he'd pulled from the basket.

"Eat, Naef. You're happy. I'd like to see you happy for a moment. It's a treat for me really, yes?"

I scowled, the expression fitting my face again as it should. "Well it *was*," I sulked, but then I took a bite of the sandwich—venison, lettuce and tomato—and all was right with the world.

I finished the sandwich and the sun started to penetrate my towel. I cast a furtive look at Aerie-Smith. He was sunning himself unashamedly, his face turned toward the sky and his eyes closed in that self-satisfied way that big cats have. I let the bath sheet drop and did the same thing, letting the sun and the slight breeze dry my thin linen shift and shorts and feeling the glory that was good health and sound bones.

I probably could have slept there, but Aerie-Smith harrumed, and I looked up. "We need to get in the shade," he said regretfully. "Your skin is very pale. You'll burn."

I sighed, and we stood up and relocated. I wrapped myself in the sheet again because it was chilly in the shade, but the soothing pleasure of watching the surf coast in was still there, and I was happy enough for the time being. It was into that contented silence that Aerie-Smith spoke.

"I stole a kiss," he said softly, and I looked at him, blinking hard.

“From who?”

“A pretty girl,” he said with a sad smile, and my heart plummeted like a shot bird.

“I didn’t know you liked girls,” I said. He’d told me I’d made his body respond, and I thought maybe that had meant....

“I spent a lot of time at court, Naef,” he said in a matter-of-fact way. “Court is like... well, you can have your choice at court, and I took my choice. Boys mostly, but girls were nice too. But this was here. I’d returned, my great-uncle had passed on, and I was ready to rule and be happy here. But one night, I was walking home from the village, and I cut through the woods. And there, in the clearing, was a girl.” He shook his head and let a breath out of his wide cat nose. “Still one of the prettiest damned sights I ever did see. She was wearing this diaphanous green dress, and her hair was loose and glittering... and sunrise orange.” He shook his head again. “It was something *literally* out of a faerie tale, and it is my own damned fault I didn’t notice the pointed ears.”

His eyes were still out to the ocean. I kept trying to see them, but he was avoiding my gaze. “You have to understand,” he began, and then snorted in disgust. “Right. There’s nothing to understand. I’d just spent five years at court, where every ‘no’ really meant ‘maybe’, where a ‘virgin’ was someone who *hadn’t* been had for money. And we talked pleasantly, and she... she flirted, I suppose, but I didn’t know then that it was in the nature of her people to banter. I went for a kiss, and she said, ‘No!’ and I captured her hand and pulled her in for one anyway. She slapped me across the

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face, not hard, but hard enough for me to let go of her. I apologized, and I was sincere. I had... well, I'd thought my advances were welcome, but the damage had been done."

He managed a sideways look at me, and I kept his gaze, trying to figure out why this should shame him so very much. It was a misunderstanding, yes? A simple thing. A young man's indiscretion. No worse than my wandering hands on his chest when he was not ready for them.

"You're acting like you expect me to kick sand in your face. I'm tired. I'll do it tomorrow. And I seem to have left my knives in my bloody great bedroom. Keep going with your story," I snapped, puzzled and a little irritated. If this was the worst thing he'd ever done? Well, I could wipe the floor with him in a fight, that was sure, and that was when my body wasn't working properly, either.

Aerie-Smith sat forward and crossed his legs. It didn't look like it was even possible, the way they were jointed, but he did it anyway. "You see, the thing is, elves may seem to be a promiscuous people. From what I understand, they have sex as easy as breathing, and nearly all of them will have sex with any gender, race, or species that they can interact with. Unless they're bonded—wedded in their hearts. That's when things get tricky. An act of infidelity can result in the death or the great pain of the other partner, especially if the act is consensual...."

"You just said you stole the kiss!" I protested. He could not have it both ways!

"I *did*," he insisted. "I *did* steal the kiss, but she'd been enjoying my company. There was that moment—even the

most stalwart of hearts may have it—that moment when she forgot she was being unfaithful and just lived the moment. She stopped it in time, but her beloved was greatly hurt, and it had been my fault....”

“You couldn’t have known!” I protested. I saw where this was going. The fear of the lights in the clearing, the self-blame for the curse. I was only stupid sometimes. This just seemed... it seemed damned unfair, that’s what it seemed.

“It doesn’t matter!” He stood with such swiftness it was almost magical. “Naef, I hurt someone because I was arrogant, and this is the punishment they gave me. I was arrogant in my heart, so I got to wear my arrogance on my body, and that’s what you see here! You keep calling it beautiful. Well, sometimes confidence *is* beautiful, but arrogance? That’s just beastly. Me, my villagers, we were all made as beasts, to remind us of that. This entire island has been cursed, to remind us of that. You, your form, it was because I liked you, maybe even desired you. They made your outside to match your inside....”

“This is *not* what I look like inside!” I protested, rising to my feet.

“Oh, that’s what *you* think!” Aerie-Smith snapped. “And that’s not the point. The point is, I’m everything you should hate. You touched me last night because you thought I was someone desirable....”

“Well I wasn’t wrong about that!” I argued right back. Gods! And he said *I* was bloody-minded.

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“You thought I was someone worth your time. Well, I’m not. I’m no better than those people you hated back home, no better than the people who hurt you... ouch!”

Because I’d taken my perfect foot and damned near broke it on his stone-tempered shin. “Shut up, you bloody great damned arse!” I shouted. “Shut up! What do you know about it? You stole a kiss! Who the fuck should care! It wasn’t your crazy world, it was theirs, and it’s wrong that they do this to you. Don’t you dare—not even in your worst moments—don’t you dare compare yourself to what happened to me. You tried to kiss a girl. I was hunted down like that damned deer you killed last night! Do you hear me? I was... was hurt, was torn and beaten for no other reason than I was in a clearing, and I couldn’t run fast enough. And there wasn’t one of them, there were five. And I wasn’t food. I wasn’t even sport. I was just a meat sack to kick and to pound and to rape. So don’t you stand there and feel all tortured about not being a good enough man... fuck that, and fuck *you*.”

“So now my sins aren’t good enough for you?” he growled, irritated, I was sure. Well, he was right enough about arrogance being one of his failings.

“Well, they’re good enough for the island, I would imagine,” I said, trying to be reasonable, “but I don’t give an oozing rat’s shite about them. I’m not that good a person. I like you. You’ve been good to me. I’m sure some poor chicken down in the village imagines pecking you to death, but I don’t think that far.”

“Well I do!” he snapped, clearly out of patience. “You are as virginal as a dragon’s sacrifice. And you have *no* idea what you do to me—and *not* your pretty new body, so don’t go throwing that in my face. But if you want me, you can’t just touch me, and hope I’ll take over. I’m *trying* to tell you that if you want something to happen between us, then you had damned well better be prepared to reach for me, because you are going to have to put my hands on your skin yourself. I *will* not steal a kiss from you, Naef, and I *will* not trespass ever again when I’m not wanted, are we clear?”

“I’m not a virgin,” I said stonily, and he rolled his eyes.

“The hell you are not,” he replied, just as obstinate.

“I just told you....”

“You just told me you were violated. It doesn’t count. It *never* counts. You beg me for my mouth on your cock, and maybe you can stop looking over your shoulder during Beltane in pagan lands, but for now....”

“For now I’d sooner piss on you than look at you,” I snarled unfairly. “You’re saying I have to do all the bloody godsbedamned work. I’m sure it’s gratifying to think of the likes of me trying to seduce a lion-god, but unless you get me drunk, my confidence just got pulled away by the tide, so it looks like both of us are going to be high and dry for the next year, doesn’t it!”

Aerie-Smith roared, the loud kind that echoed, and I scowled at him with my hands over my ears until he was done. When the echo faded, I took my hands off my ears and got ready to resume the argument.

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“This,” he growled, “is where I go back to the villa, and you stay here for a bit alone, because otherwise, I’ll drown you myself.” It was a baseless threat. We both knew it. “I just want you to think about it, Naef. We can spend a happy—and celibate—time here, and that would be lovely. But if you want to try that new body out for the hells of it, you’d be better off seducing some poor sailor for a tumble, because if you come for me, you’d better be damned sure you know what you want.”

And with that, he gathered the picnic basket and the blanket and left me the bath sheet, and then stalked off of the beach, muttering to himself. When he got to the edge of the forest, he turned to me and said, “You’re not obligated to come to the study this afternoon, if you don’t like!”

“Oh fuck that!” I retorted. “You wanted a bloody companion, well, you’re stuck with him. If you’re lucky, I won’t bring my godsbedamned knives!”

PART V

SYMMETRY

I stayed there for an hour because he wanted me to, but I knew what he was asking me to think about, and I'd already done the thinking.

Yes, I had the shiny new body and the pretty new face to go try out on the world, and from what I'd seen on the voyage, sailors were a fairly randy lot. I suppose, if I'd really wanted to, I could have found some strange cock to play with on the trip over. Beggars weren't often choosers, and I'm sure a lot of those men were on good general relations with their own private "Bob" as well.

But I didn't want one of them.

Perhaps, if I'd been stuck here on this island stewing in my own ugliness, I would not have dared reach this high, but I wasn't. I was stuck here in this body that could run, that could swim, that could... well, do all of the things I'd wanted to fantasize about doing to a man but hadn't, because it would just hurt too much to be denied that simple human touch when I longed for it.

And if I *was* stuck here in that other body, I still could have done many things. I could have gone to the village and begged a ride from another ship. I could have maybe earned my keep or built a hut near the others (I was a woodworker,

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after all) and living alone in yet another fishing village did not frighten me.

But I'd felt Aerie-Smith's chest, and he'd responded. And he didn't want sex from this body, or not this body alone. And he roared in my face and snarled at my surliness and gave as good as he got.

And he was kind. So damned kind.

A man like me... a man like me did not take kindness for weakness. Kindness in the face of all the tiny knives the world had to throw at a body—that was real strength.

So I sat and watched the tide roll in and resolved to go into that wonderful surf for every day of my stay. It was late autumn on my home island, but here it appeared to be summer. I assumed there would be very little change here, and I was pleased. It would be a vacation from the unpleasant things of the world: my pain, my ugliness, even the bitter snows of winter that made my back hurt and pained my foot beyond endurance in my home village. It would be a time when I could reach for things I might not have the courage to reach for ordinarily, and I was tired of being hunched over the bitter droppings of my own heart.

I might never reach high enough to make love. I might never reach for him in the flesh. But I was damned sure going to reach for his companionship in the same way he'd reached for mine. And I wouldn't let him dwell on his own supposed crime, either. The real crime was that such a good man would have to pay so badly for such a small sin.

If I only had a year here, I would spend it helping him forgive himself. I would spend it in his company, just as he'd asked me to. At this point, I would have done it for free.

So eventually I picked myself up off the sand and put my clothes over my now-dry linens, and made my way back to the villa. After I bathed and dressed in my other set of small clothes and one of my older suits, I headed straight for Aerie-Smith's study. He probably thought I landed there because I had no choice. He would have been wrong.

I had choices. He was just the best one. In fact, he was like a reward for things I hadn't done right yet, and I was going to savor every word with him.

Because I am who I am, that word was in quarrel.

"I get black king," I said in surprise, sitting down to the chessboard. I'd bloody well carved the thing from my own likeness. I'd earned it.

"No," he said shortly, making sure the set was turned so that the white king was mine. He gave the closest thing to a scowl he could muster. It involved the baring of long teeth and the narrowing of small round eyes, and was not an entirely human expression.

"The lion-king is you!" I protested. Now that I'd seen Aerie-Smith in the flesh, I thought I hadn't done him quite justice. I'd missed the kindness in the eyes and the sage bearing of the head, but then, how was I to know that there was a person quite like Aerie-Smith in all the world?

"And the black king is supposed to be you," Aerie-Smith said unhappily. "Don't think I don't see the foot and the hair and the spine, for all the other grotesqueries you put on it."

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You're not that person, Naef. If I'd known how badly you regarded yourself, I would have made you carve me another piece."

I looked away uncomfortably. "So the black king should look like I do now?" My voice was curiously devoid of bitterness. I was honestly lost in this game. "And call me Knife."

"You shouldn't be on this side of the board at all," Aerie-Smith said quietly, and I looked at him with a bit of my sharpness back.

"Because the two of us playing the white pieces against nobody would make such a splendid game," I said dryly, and that made him laugh.

"I will take black king today," he said firmly, and I flushed, all sharp retorts gone. I had made that decision. I was here of my own free will, to bask in the kindness of a friend. I would try to pay that back with better than I had been.

"I will carve another black king," I offered. "One that has nothing to do with me. You should never have to play the dark side of the board."

It was hard to decipher his next look. "That was incredibly kind," he said softly, "but don't carve anything you don't mean."

I grimaced. "Yeah, don't get too used to the kindness. I don't know the first thing about chess, and I guarantee I'll be cranky and irritable in about five minutes. Forgive me for that, by the way."

His smile became a bit less misty. “Already done.”

We played for a bit, and he told me the basic moves and let me make my own mistakes. I got my arse thoroughly trounced twice, and then in the third match managed to hold my own. We were sitting there, waiting for me to make up my damned mind, when he spoke unexpectedly into the silence.

“I would have killed him for you.”

I looked up, not only surprised, but completely losing track of what I was doing. I pushed a pawn blindly into a space and said, “I beg your pardon?”

“The... the monster who hurt you. I... I actually thought of having him killed for you.”

I blinked, absurdly touched. “That’s lovely,” I said, meaning it. “But Gwen did it already. Rather gruesomely. With a knife to the balls.” I watched him capture my pawn and sighed. “I always wish I’d had the chance.”

Aerie-Smith stopped playing for a moment and regarded me somberly. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

Aerie-Smith blew out a great gust of air. “You know, I think your sister needs another chest of fabric and linens in her trousseau.”

What could a man say to that? “I would be much appreciative.”

That somber regard never wavered. “As am I.”

I lost the game in the end, but it was close, and by dinner we had both forgotten our harsh words from earlier.

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We retired, and I lay in my bed quietly, thinking about... well, him, mostly. How any man could take on so much shame for such a small thing as stealing a kiss. For all the evil I had done in my sewage of bitterness, it seemed as though he'd taken on my sins as well, and it wasn't fair.

I'd gone from that thought to the ever-present memory of his smooth chest beneath my palms when there was a knock on the door.

"It's open," I said, not wanting to get up. For one thing, I was in my small clothes. They were all I had in the way of pajamas, and they were... thin. I thought more than once about what I must have looked like coming out of the surf, and the thought made me blush. My body or not, I had certainly put it on display that morning, and that was not a thing I was used to.

Aerie-Smith came in, still dressed and bearing a lamp. The downstairs must have been closed up already. "Not yet asleep, Naef?"

"No, Knife is not asleep," I corrected doggedly. I had to hold fast to my name, at least, didn't I?

"Well, 'Knife', I wanted to tell you that you will have some more clothes tomorrow, including a swimming costume that won't reveal more than you want it to."

I blushed. "You noticed that, did you?"

"Quite impressive," Aerie-Smith said dryly, and I felt compelled to confess.

“That part’s actually mine,” I told him, feeling one part proud and six parts foolish. “I don’t know why the gods didn’t change it to make it proportional, but they didn’t.”

I don’t know if I could have defined Aerie-Smith’s expression even if he *were* human. As it was, he licked his whiskers several times and blinked slowly. “Well, then,” he said after a moment, “that is something I shall have to remember.”

I nodded. “So extra small clothes are welcome, then... and the swimming costume. But really, don’t bother much for me... I’m not that important to the household, and really—what need do I have of looking shiny and rich?”

I said it nicely enough. I truly did. I didn’t want him to put his people out, and he seemed to take my special care in tone under consideration before he answered.

“Is it not enough that I want to do something nice for you, Naef? You... you were very kind to me today. Can I not simply give you gifts? I can afford them. It would make me happy. Isn’t that enough?”

I scowled, because hadn’t I resolved that I would do my best to make him happy, since we were stuck with each other? “Whatever makes you happy,” I said sourly, and then made a concerted effort to unbend my face. “That... would... be... nice... of you,” I managed on only three breaths. His eyes grew the size of dinner plates, and he made that hissing chuckle of his.

“Well, given the effort you just made to be civil to me,” he said, laughing, “that would be the least I could do.”

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I grumbled to myself and rolled over in bed, curling up low on the pillow. “Fine. Whatever you wish to do, Aerie-Smith. I’m here for your entertainment, right?”

I could almost hear him rolling his eyes at my back. “I didn’t mean to hurt your damnable pride, Naef...”

“No worries,” I sighed, keeping my back toward him but letting go of my grudge. “I really do like it here, you know? I’m lousy at showing it. Lousy at people. You know that. I was trying not to be such a pain in the arse, that’s all. Of course I have no practice at it, and so I failed. I’m sorry. Just, for once, I didn’t want to be difficult.”

I could feel him bending toward me, and the sudden arrest of his movement. A thrill zinged through the pit of my stomach and my groin. *He wanted to touch me.*

“I don’t mind difficult,” he said, so close that his breath teased at my ear, and the one part of my body that was still mine stood up and paid attention. “Impossible, I have trouble with. But difficult is... worth it.”

I stared straight out in front of me and resolved to be brave, and to reach for something. “Aerie-Smith?”

“Yes.”

“If I asked you nicely, would you kiss my temple to bid me good night?” My pride cramped in my stomach, but his lips brushed my hair, and I almost whimpered. His hand came to my shoulder so he could steady himself, and because I was looking into the darkness it was his real hand, his human hand. The lips that firmly touched my skin were human shaped, and warm and firm, and a little moist but

not too. That hand on my shoulder lingered, stroked, and then took a chance and slid down my upper arm before his warmth was gone at my back and he stood.

“Good night, Naef,”

“Good night, Aerie-Smith. My name is Knife.”

He grumbled something about how sometimes it really was, and then departed, leaving me on my side, staring into space, with a hard-on that could spear fish if I pointed it that way and shot.

Ye gods, what a simple kiss had done to me. I groaned softly, rolled over to my back, and ran my hands down my new and perfect body. One hand stalled at my nipples, because I'd liked the feeling of Aerie-Smith's, and that had seemed to do something for him, and the other hand coasted past the dark hair on my lower stomach, straight to my cock.

My cock had always seemed out of proportion with my body, and so had my balls. It was long and thick enough that I couldn't quite touch my thumb and forefinger around it, and it was a *long*, hard stroke from base to tip. Mmmmm... that didn't stop me from stroking. Hard at the base, harder at the end, squeezing the foreskin over the flat head, and then down again. I moved my other hand from my nipple (which was hard, because squeezing it was like plucking a string straight from my nipple to my balls, but it had to be done) and used that hand to cup my balls, squeezing gently.

I grunted a little, groaned, and then stroked myself again and again and again, arching off the bed and wondering if this had always felt this good or if it was

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thinking about Aerie-Smith that did it. In my mind I saw him... but not him. I saw him as a man, features vaguely like his cousin's but harder, older, with a chin that was more square and a nose that was more forceful. Then I saw him bend a head with hair the dark gold of a lion's, and place it directly over my groin, taking my aching cock into his mouth.

Pre-come spurted on my hand, and I used it to rub my thumb over the head, playing with the slit enough to make me groan. Oh... oh gods... the thought of him touching my body hurt good enough to make me weep.

One hand stroked faster and harder, and one hand squeezed and played, and within moments I had gone from exploring to... to... to... coming, in one hot blast all over the inside of my small clothes, all over my hand.

I stopped then, panting, and listened to the sounds of the dark. It had felt good, damned good, to touch my body without pain, but that was all. In the end, it had still been me, coming emptily into my fist, wondering what it would have felt like with another human touch, and the thought left me lonelier than I'd ever been in my life.

Then I heard a sound from outside my door. A suppressed groan. A whuffling breath.

Oh gods. Aerie-Smith. He must have lingered at the door and heard me. He must have stayed for the whole show.

My hand convulsed on my still-hard cock, and it gave another final, explosive spurt, and my body shattered into a surprise climax that made my vision dim.

Oh gods... he hadn't been here to touch me, but for the first time, I hadn't been alone.

For the next three sennights or so, we did this. I would run about the island in the morning, or work in the workshop he had set up for me (another kindness—ah gods, would they never end?) or sometimes go into the village and interact with the villagers. That last should have been awkward, but wasn't. Some of them could still talk, and all of them tried their best to interact with a human as humans.

I found I liked the family of nanny goats very much, but the family of sheep bored me silly. The leopards left me watching my back, and the giant family of mixed-race dogs was perhaps my favorite family in the village. It was a good place. I'm not sure if it was the curse they had been living under, or if it had been a good place because it had a good ruler from the first, but I had the feeling that my childhood might not have been quite so miserable here. The idea that another me might have grown up feeling friendship, well, that seeped some of the bitterness from my bones, that was a certain thing.

In the afternoon, I would journey to the study and play chess or listen to him read. He had a selection of musical instruments in there that he never played. When I asked why, he held out his paws and flexed them. "I can write and function, mostly, but don't think it wasn't a struggle."

I thought about his hand on my shoulder every night, and his lips upon my cheek. "Close your eyes," I suggested. "See if it works then."

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To his surprise, it did, and I got an afternoon of rusty playing. It wasn't rusty for long, though, and after a while I thought I could hear him play the lute or the guitar for maybe the rest of my life.

He wouldn't let me get away with that, though. By the second week, I found a guitar thumped into my lap, and my fingers pressed to make chords. I scowled and bitched for a bit, and found that my chords were twisted and minor, but he didn't seem to care. He just kept at me to make music, and make music I did.

At night, every night, I would ask for a kiss on the temple or cheek, and he would oblige, his hand pressing against me as I closed my eyes, his touch making my body a throbbing nerve of want.

The night before the ship came in, he kissed my cheek and ran his hand down my arm, and I captured it with my own.

"Why do you close your eyes?" he whispered.

"Because when I do, I feel your skin, and it's really you."

He made a terrible sound of yearning then, and I squeezed his hand.

"Will you stand outside tonight and listen?" I asked. I had to keep my eyes focused on the far wall for this one. I would not have had the courage to ask him if I could see his face.

"Yes."

“Good,” I breathed, and he moaned breathily into my ear.

“Would you like to know what I’m doing in the hallway, when I listen to you?”

“Yes,” I whimpered.

“I’ll tell you the night you ask me to stay.”

And then I was the one moaning as he padded stolidly out of my room, lamp held aloft before him.

That night, as I held myself and came, I made sure I cried out his name.

The next morning, he asked me to go greet a ship that had docked the evening before. The ship went by the island his parents ruled on, and he was hoping for a letter from his cousin. Thinking wistfully of my sister and wanting news, I was pleased to do it, but neither of us counted on the strange, twisted magic of my new body.

The sailors, who stood at an ease among the villagers that showed they were used to the island and its ways, were surprised enough to greet me. One of the younger men was charged with finding a small chest of letters and such to deliver, and since it was fairly heavy, the two of us carried it back to the villa together, one with a hand on either side.

He was a nice sort, so it seemed. Bluff, hearty, handsome in a homely plain sort of way. I’d been on the island for nearly four sennights, and the shock of being

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pretty, of knowing that other folks saw me that way, well, it had faded. And it's not like the leopards were dry-humping my leg in excitement, whenever I walked by.

I simply talked, and for a bit, it felt normal. Fun, in a schoolboy way. He told me about his mother with her small patch of land and her chickens, I told him about my sister and her penchant for feeding stray cats. I mentioned that I hoped there was a letter from her or her sweetheart in the chest, and he suggested we stop in a clearing to see.

I told him no. I'd been hoping to go through the contents of the chest with Aerie-Smith. I didn't want to spoil that moment, even for this pleasant stranger named Ban. He suggested we rest anyway, so I did, setting the chest down with him at the edge of a clearing and leaning against the bole of a fruit tree.

"The bananas look ripe on this one," he said, eyeing the fruit, and I looked up.

"Still green yet," I murmured. "There's a stand of mango trees further on that are tasty, but don't eat too much." Aerie-Smith had cautioned me about that, and I'd heeded it. Lots of protein with your fruit was a way to keep things balanced, or you'd be spending all your days on the privy, and that's a sad way to use the time in paradise.

The boy eyed me with exasperation as I went to pick up my end of the chest. I offered him fresh water from a skin at my waist, and he rolled his eyes.

"I'm not really talking about fruit, you know?" he said meaningfully, and I looked at him blankly.

"Then what are we talking about?"

"You're the closest thing to a girl I've seen in a month. What do you think I'm talking about?" He circled the chest to come nearer to me, and I felt a blush steal along my body from my toes to my neck. Oh. I hadn't really counted on this.

"I'm sorry," I said, truly regretful. Maybe if I'd been another man, or the same one in another time. But not now. "I'm not interested, really. I have someone else in mind."

Ban rolled his eyes. "Oh who *cares*? This isn't marriage; it's a tumble in the grass. Just bend over, and let me have at you. I've got some lard in my pocket. We'll both have some fun, and my balls'll stop hurting for the first time in weeks!"

"Your balls are not my problem!" I protested, irritated. "I said no! Now, if you can't stomach a no, then just leave and let me carry the box up myself. It's not far." In fact I could see the villa, standing out from the clearing. "And if I have to hear any more about your balls, you might put me off tugging for life!"

The boy closed in on me, trying to pressure me against a tree with the force of his chest, and for a moment, I felt my heart pounding in my throat and a terrible panic forcing bile into my mouth.

"Well maybe it's not a matter of choice!" Ban snarled. "Look at you, soft as a bloody child. It's not like anyone here would care if you screamed, now would they?"

"Sure they would," I grunted, irritated with myself for being intimidated by a broad chest and a brutal span of bicep. I was stronger than this, and I knew it. My back hit the tree, and I felt the pressure of my knife digging into the

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flesh of my hip, and then, by gods and by Aerie-Smith, I remembered who I was. “But I don’t need anyone else to fight off a sniveling pus-bag like you, now do I?”

And with that I pulled my knife from my belt and held the point up to his chest.

He looked surprised for all of a moment, and then he smirked. “Oh come off it, princess. You don’t really want to use that, do you?”

I smiled prettily. “Not nearly as badly as I want to do this!” And then I kneed him in his precious, underused blue balls.

I was still short, and the blow grazed him instead of pounding his knockers into his throat like I’d planned. He went over long enough for me to dodge away from his grip but after a shudder and a howl he popped up again and rushed me.

I knew how to handle a knife, though. I’d practiced in the long hours of being taunted in the woodworker’s shed, and I held it, blade out, while he charged. I dodged and caught his arm in a wicked slice. He howled again and this time turned on me in pure fury. This time I caught him in the shoulder and lifted my foot to thump solidly on his knee. I heard the pop as it came undone under my sandal, and I screamed in triumph as he screeched in pain.

He went down this time, and I kicked him while he rolled there.

“Pfaw!” I spat. “You bloody arsed fuck-shite! You keep your bloody pecker in your pants around anyone, girl or boy,

or I'll damned well shank you while you stand, you hear me?" I was dancing, jumping up and down, flushed and rushed with the idea of winning, of defending myself, of not being anybody's victim, not this time around.

Ban pulled himself up, whimpering, and shambled off the way we had come, blubbering the whole time. Good. Fuck. I wondered darkly if I'd been the only one he'd tried, or if there wasn't some poor homely peasant girl on a distant island, wishing like hell she'd never smiled shyly at a plainly handsome man. It was almost enough to make me charge into the forest and slit his throat, but I didn't. For one thing, I didn't know for sure. For another, it was a far leap between defending myself and hunting a man down and killing him in cold blood, and I wouldn't do it.

But that was because I'm not a hunter. To a predator, that trail of blood was like a storm at sea had been to me: a thunder-crack of madness.

The wind from Aerie-Smith's passage hit me almost before his roar of fury.

I'd had no idea he was even near, but he must have heard me and changed to his beast form. His pants were gone, but his waistcoat was, once again, askew and still buttoned around his waist, although the sleeves of the shirt underneath were ripped at the arms. That was about the only detail I could take in as he flew whipping by me on his way to kill Ban.

I watched him charge into the forest with my mouth open, not sure if I wanted to protest or cheer. In the end I did neither. I heard another roar and a terrified yelp, and then

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the sound of prey being run down in the brush. It was over in less than a heartbeat.

In several more heartbeats he came staggering back, his shirt and waistcoat hastily tied around his waist like a loincloth, his mostly human form moving cautiously, as though afraid to startle me.

His muzzle and front were covered with blood.

“Aerie-Smith?” I asked hesitantly. Even in his beast form, his face was a terrible study in contrition and resolve. He was afraid of what I’d think of him, but I knew he’d do it again in a seared breath.

“No one touches you,” he growled, as though making sure I knew this.

I agreed. “No one touches me,” I whispered. He raised shaking paws, as though to put them on my shoulders, and then held them there, afraid of how I would take his touch.

“No one hurts you,” he growled, his voice breaking a little, and I took one paw and pressed it to my shoulder, and then took the other in my hand and held it to my chest.

“No one hurts me,” I said gently. I was shaking inside, and in a way, I was terrified. But not of him.

“Naef... you must not let anyone hurt you,” he begged. “Even if I’m not here to protect you.”

I didn’t point out that I hadn’t. The man I was a month ago would have pointed out that I’d been doing just fine without him. The man I was right now knew that wasn’t what he needed.

"I'll never let anyone hurt me," I told him soberly, and that great head and golden muzzle nodded, and I did something else I wouldn't have known to do a month ago. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and lay my head on his bloody chest.

He rumbled shakily and held me close. I shut my eyes and felt warm muscles under my cheek, and human fingers rubbing slow circles on my shoulder blades.

We stood like that for long and long and long, until the sweat slid down my back and between my arse cheeks, until the warmth of the fur I could not feel made me itch. We stood there while his breath ruffled through my hair and the forest resumed its regular noises of bird and beast and far away ocean, until his heart stopped thundering in my ears and the fine trembling left his arms around my body.

Eventually I stepped away. I didn't ask what had happened to the dead sailor, and I realized that I didn't rightly care. No one would be his victim anymore, and maybe that would be enough.

Aerie-Smith hoisted the chest easily over one shoulder, and without another word, we resumed our walk home. After a few steps, he said my name tentatively.

"Naef?"

"I should think it's quite clear," I muttered, not wanting a lot of talk because I was fine with things, "that my name is Knife."

He let out a surprised burst of air. "For today, I think I might let that be," he said mildly, and we continued on, the silence lighter by half.

PART VI

SILK

That day in the library, after we'd returned and bathed, he read me a story about a poor lass with a truly despicable lot of sisters, who fell in love with a beast who had a similar enchantment as Aerie-Smith.

"Would it be that easy then?" I asked Aerie-Smith, excited about the way the girl had returned the beast to form just by confessing her love and shedding a few tears. *That* I could do. I might be a twisted little bastard in my heart, but if all I had to do was tell the world what was in it to help the man who would kill for me, well, I was all for it.

Aerie-Smith was grimly amused. "What? You think all you need to do is confess your undying love for me, and all of this"—a gesture to his form, to the lemurs in attendance, ready to fetch us water, to Lot, the major domo, scratching away at his perch—"would just... melt and become normal?"

I shrugged and blushed. It was obviously just a story, then. "It was worth a thought," I muttered.

"And very generous of you," he said magnanimously. I scowled. As though I'd do it out of sheer altruism. I wanted Aerie-Smith to love me. It was really that simple. If I could shout my weak and twisted heart to the heavens, and that would make him love me, well, then, why not?

“Shut up,” I muttered. “Did you want to open that trunk now?”

We did. I’d only been gone from my family a month, including the voyage, but I had missed them. I was disappointed to find no missive in there from Gwen or my mum, but Aerie-Smith had some news of them in his own letter.

“Here, Naef—listen. This is from my mother:

“Your cousin is to be married. The girl is a dressmaker from a small fishing village, but your aunt has met her and adores her already. She wrote immediately to tell me that Gwen is a sturdy sort of girl, with a good heart and an unexpected sense of humor, and that Kyn could not have done any better for himself in the first water of court. They will be married in the first blush of spring, and although the girl seems to have lived poor as a church mouse, an unexpected benefactor has given her the trousseau of a queen.

My only regret, my son, is that you will be unable to attend the ceremony. You say you have found some way out of the curse, but I tell you now, I would rather you return to us cursed to see Kyn married than be blessed with all of your lost gifts and your lost time.

Kyn misses you terribly, as do we all.”

We sat in silence for a moment after that, and I felt tears starting and blinked them away impatiently. “Thank you,” I muttered, not looking at him.

“For what?”

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"I never said it, after you came and offered Gwen the world if I'd come with you...."

"The hell you didn't," he said, sounding amused. I curled my lip at him.

"Well I'm saying it again. You coming in and giving my sister her trousseau, her reason to leave the island—these were princely things to do, and I cannot thank you enough." I steadfastly refused to look at him. "My sister deserves everything—deserves it all. You gave it to her. Thank you."

His hand came down on my shoulder gently. "My mother's island is between Kyn's and my own. I'm sure there will be a letter from Gwen in the next ship."

I nodded. "She knows I don't read much. I hope she used small words."

That startled Aerie-Smith. "Don't read much? You're a genius with most things. What do you mean you don't read much?"

I shrugged. "I don't know how excited you expected me to be about schooling," I snapped. "And as much as I love the sound of your voice, do you think I'd be letting you do all the work in the afternoons if I could read more than a child's primer?"

I heard his startled intake of breath and tried not to swear. Glorious. On top of everything else, I'd just told him I was stupid.

"You mean you've sat next to me for the better part of a month while I bloody well read books, and you haven't said a word?"

I sniffed. “You know, Aerie-Smith, you just told me yourself: The world isn’t made a better place by the unburdening of a heart. That’s a children’s story, and I’m not a child. Is dinner ready yet?”

As it turned out, it was, but he stewed over the reading thing as we sat through it. The dumb-arse wanker lying dead in the forest? No, he seemed to have been forgotten. Knife can’t read? Stop the bloody world.

“I could teach you,” he said, as though approaching a lit fuse on a cannon.

I shrugged. “I could learn, and why does that surprise you?” Because his eyes got wide and he almost choked on his cony.

He shook his head. “Almost two months we’ve known each other—six bloody sennights! And sometimes I think all I’ve needed my whole life is a checked list of what will or will not offend your bloody-minded pride.”

I picked my teeth with a small bone and rolled my eyes at him. “I have no pride. What does a man like me need with pride?”

He started laughing so hard he choked on his dinner. I took a patient breath and waited until he was done choking and resumed speaking.

“No pride!” he chortled, wiping tears from his eyes. “No pride! My *gods*, Naef, if I didn’t know better, I’d say your pride alone twisted your spine! No *pride*? If you have no pride, what in the hells is it that’s holding you back every night?” Suddenly his voice grew... broken. Hurt. Sad.

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“Holding me back?” I asked, my own voice small.

“A month we’ve known each other. I haven’t taken any pains to hide my... my affection for you. My desire for you. I wanted to give you time and choices... but you won’t take any choices. You tremble when I touch you... I....” Oh gods. His hurt was unmistakable. “I know you want me. Is it my form?”

“No!” I could at least interject that bit of sanity into the conversation.

“Then what is it? All I ask is that you ask me to stay?”

“It doesn’t seem like much, does it?” I asked him, but myself mostly. “It doesn’t sound like much. Certainly doesn’t sound like a reason to stay apart, when we don’t have forever, do we?” He’d said less than a year. Now it was less than ten months.

“Then why?” he asked, and I could tell he was trying very hard to keep his voice reasonable.

“Do you think,” I asked him, feeling naked, “I feel any more worthy of love today than the day you walked up to me in the woodworker’s shed? You, Aerie-Smith. You deserve... the world. You deserve lovely boys, in the flesh, who are bright and can talk and can read and can play chess and music. I don’t know what act of pity drove you to seek me out, but asking you to stay? It’s like asking you to settle. It’s like... like setting that fucker lying dead in the forest on my sister. She deserves no less than Klyn. You deserve no less than—”

He’d left his seat now and was kneeling before me,

which made me seven hells of uncomfortable because he should kneel before no one. He took one of my hands in his and raised it to his lips, and I closed my eyes and felt his humanity against my palm.

“I deserve no less than you,” he said softly, and I wiped my face on the shoulder of my new shirt and refused to meet his eyes. With my eyes averted, his hands felt narrow-palmed and long fingered and capable holding mine.

“I’ll ask you,” I told him in a voice that cracked and wept. I shrugged, trying to move away from the moment. “I won’t know what to do with you, there in the dark, but I’ll ask you.”

He smiled (showing long canine teeth, if he knew it) and let out that cat chuckle of his. “You ask me to stay, Naef, and I guarantee, I’ll figure out what to do with us in the dark.”

I refused to look at him until he sat back in his chair, and when he did, I still couldn’t meet his eyes. “You’d better be good,” I muttered. “I’m so bad with people, at this rate, we’ll be lucky if I don’t end up fucking a chair and thinking I’m a lucky bastard, getting me some sex.”

Aerie-Smith choked on more of his dinner, and I scowled at my plate and let him.

That night, I spent some extra time getting ready for bed. I felt like a virgin girl, and the irritation that thought brought on sustained most of the extra effort. Dark curls combed around oval face: done. Perfect, beautiful stranger’s body scrubbed, inside and out: done and done. Black silk scarf, cadged from disapproving parrot: done.

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Clean body, dried and sliding between those richly colored sheets?

Yup. There I was. Ready to be done.

I was terrified.

Not of pain. I figured, whatever we did in this bed, my body could handle.

Not of pride. Whatever Aerie-Smith said, I had no pride, not with him.

Not of Aerie-Smith. Even if I didn't find his lion-form beautiful, I had felt his human flesh under my palms and fingers, and that's what I would feel this night. The man had been nothing but kind to me, when he wasn't trying not to throttle me out of sheer exasperation. He would not hurt me. I might have trusted nothing else about the world, but I trusted this.

I was terrified of my weakness, of my sharp tongue, of my every flaw. I was terrified that this moment, my chance to live in happiness for however short a time we may have had, would be ruined because I was simply not carved out of the same wood as happiness, and that my grain was too twisted to ever take its form.

But perhaps even such as I, sour, twisted creature that I was... well, I had tasted a little bit of power today. I had tasted my own self-defense. I had tasted Aerie-Smith's hurt at my hands, however well intentioned. Maybe it was time to taste a little bit of happiness, and see if I could share it. I certainly couldn't hate myself more at this point. Maybe if I could make Aerie-Smith happy, I might hate myself less.

So I was sitting up in bed, shirtless, the blanket pulled up to under my arms, when he walked in for his customary good-night. He sat, as he had been, on the stool by my bed and set down the lamp and started telling me about the plan for the morning as he did often as well.

“Would you like to go to the swimming hole again?” he asked, and I shrugged and caught the bed sheet as it slipped.

“Would you like to come with me?” I asked hopefully. I had been back in the weeks since, but... well, I would like to make this next visit end less bitterly.

Aerie-Smith blinked. “Yes,” he said, sounding surprised. “I would, very much. Perhaps in the afternoon we can work on reading.”

I rolled my eyes. “If that’s what you want,” I said, trying to keep my skepticism to myself.

“It is,” he replied in his mild way. He stood then, keeping his eyes on mine, and reached for the lamp.

“Wait!” My voice squeaked like a changeling boy’s, and I cleared my throat. “Don’t pick up the lamp yet,” I begged him, feeling foolish.

He kept my eyes and set the lamp down, and waited, blinking, for his next move. Oh gods. What to say?

I was always better with actions. I took up the silk scarf that was lying by my hands and tied it around my eyes, hearing a surprised catch of breath next to me.

“Stay,” I said, now that I was safely in the dark. “Blow out the lamp and come to bed. Stay.”

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I could not see much through the black silk, but even that faded as he blew out the lamp like I said.

“What’s the scarf for?” he asked, his voice and breath coming from my temple.

“I want to see you. The real you,” I told him, hoping I made sense. I wanted to feel him under my hands, taste his skin with my mouth. I couldn’t do that when my eyes were open. This particular leap of faith had to be taken in the dark, so to speak.

There was a pause and a rustle: his clothes hit the floor at his feet. His hands came to my shoulders, smooth skinned and a little soft, and slid down my biceps, resting there, strong and sturdy, while I felt his breath on my face. “This could be frightening,” he cautioned, and I knew what he was talking about.

“I’m always safe with you.”

“Gods, Naef...”

“Knife.”

“No,” he breathed. “Not in my bed. Not naked in my arms. Not tonight.”

His lips were so near mine, and I wanted that kiss so badly, I might have agreed to let him call me Cordelia or Grace. “Naef,” I mumbled. “Right. I can be Naef...” And then his real, human lips were there, and they were on mine and he tasted....

I groaned. He tasted like wine and like fruit and rabbit. His tongue was aggressive—well, then, so was he—and he

powered my mouth open beneath his, and I let him. He pressed me back into the pillows with tenderness more than force, and I went, pliant and sweet for perhaps the only time in my life.

I would have done *anything*, been *anyone*, just to keep the taste of him in my mouth, the feel of his hands on my bare shoulders, the feel of his smooth, bare chest brushing mine.

The fact that he only wanted me to be myself was too fantastic to be believed.

That drugging, inflaming kiss went on forever. He pulled back the covers and slid his body next to mine, and I felt the silk in front of my eyes go damp. I wanted to wrap my limbs around him and never, ever let him go. His skin in the dark was a miracle, and I was whimpering, damned near sobbing, just to be closer to him.

“Shh shh shh...,” he whispered. He pulled away in spite of my protests, and started running his hands under the covers and along my chest, along my stomach, along my thighs. I closed my eyes tightly under my blindfold and simply let him.

“That’s right,” he murmured. “For once, just let me take care of you. For once, just let me make it right.”

Still, for a moment, my absolute helplessness almost overwhelmed me, and I grasped his shoulders tightly, not sure if I wanted him to continue or to stop. He gentled me again, kissing my lips, my jaw, my neck, and when I whimpered in need, his hands went straight to my cock. Gentle and firm, he stroked from the base to the tip and I

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cried out—I think I even swore—and although that tender, amazing pressure never left off, he did bury his face in my neck and giggle softly.

“It’s a good thing my household knows who I am, Naef,” he said, chuckling, and I didn’t even have the presence of mind to answer him back because that hand was moving, moving, moving, and my whole body was fireworks, the white spots behind my eyes, the tingle of the surf on my skin, exploding in the dark.

I came, probably loudly, but that’s not what I remember. I remember Aerie-Smith’s soothing voice, sounding proud and sweet and sexy.

And then I remember crying for real, sobbing, coming unglued in his arms, naked in all ways from the wonder of his hands on my body and his kindness in my ear.

I settled down after a moment and turned away from him. He slid out of bed and came back from the privy, a wash cloth in his hand to clean me up. When he was done, he wrapped his arm around my chest and snugged his naked, still semi-hard body up against my back.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, voice clogged. “I... it’s so much better with someone. It’s so much better when someone cares. Someone else’s touch on my skin... it’s....” I trailed off again. “I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I’ll try not to be such a sniveling child. I will. I’d rather learn to make this good for you too.”

There was a weak chuckle again. “Gods,” he breathed. “Gods, Naef... you trusted me to do that to you. Don’t you see? It doesn’t *get* any better than that.”

Really? His cock was still hard against my backside, and I wiggled back against him and felt it flex. With a determined frown, I wiggled one more time, just to hear his breath catch.

“I think that’s a crock of shite,” I said after a few more experimental wiggles. “I would wager it could get *much* better than that.”

He breathed in hard through his nose and buried his face in my neck again, this time biting the place where my shoulder and neck join hard enough to make me gasp.

“You’re right,” he breathed. “Here, roll over and let me show you what your touch does to *me*.”

His hand on mine was firm and gentle and still a little damp from washing my body off. He guided me along his chest, with stops off at his nipples, and this time I did pinch them and felt his hips come off the bed. I stroked his stomach, which was lean under my fingers, and furry in a man-way, not a beast way, as I got closer to his groin. But I didn’t need his guidance to wrap my finger around his cock, which was nearly as thick as mine but a bit longer.

I didn’t need his guidance to stroke upward, to play my thumb on the edge of it, to pull back the foreskin and rub the flared head.

I didn’t need his guidance to want to taste it.

He made sounds of halfhearted protest as I scrabbled my way blindly on the bed to find him with my mouth. “Naef... you don’t have to... it’s not nece... ss... *shite*....” He gasped, and I chuckled around him in my mouth, and then he groaned.

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I was careful with my teeth. I had too many memories of the crowding in my mouth to want to subject him to even the tiniest nip with the perfect white teeth I'd seen in the mirror these past few sennights. I mostly just rolled the head around against my palate and stroked with my hand and tasted his skin right there... tasted the saltiness that emerged... felt his hands hauling at my shoulders, pulling me up when I was drunk on his taste, drunk on his gibbering, drunk on his begging for me to please, please, Naef, come up so I can kiss you....

I didn't. I would kiss him later, when feeling his thighs quiver under one of my hands wasn't making me giddy. I would kiss him when he stopped thrusting inside my mouth like he couldn't help himself. I would kiss him when his balls, soft fur, loose skin and all, weren't hardened and tender under the bottom of my fist.

I would kiss him when he wasn't crying "Ah... ah... ah... *gods... hells... Naef!*" into the darkness around us, splashing into my mouth and across my face and down my chin when I couldn't swallow or anticipate his next spurt of come.

I lay there, my cheek on his lean stomach, his cock still in my hand, dripping thickly, when he was done. He went to pull me up, and I swallowed, hard, unaccustomed to the taste yet, and went to move away.

"Gotta wash my face," I muttered, and that was the first time ever he used his strength or his size against me, and I couldn't say I minded. With a quick grab he had me by the upper arms, and with a quicker roll, he'd rolled me beneath him. I could feel the pressure of our lower bodies meshing,

his wet and sloppy, and mine growing hard again from hearing him call my name, and I could feel his hands on my shoulders as he held himself up on his elbows and peered into my face.

I turned away, knowing what I was wearing on myself, and then his fingers came and grabbed my chin, and I was angled for a kiss, but he didn't kiss me at first.

He licked me. His tongue tickled as he took delicate laps around my mouth, wiping me clean like the big cat he didn't feel like in the dark. After a few swipes, I found I was moving my mouth to meet his tongue, wanting his lips on mine.

He knew what I was doing—but that didn't stop him from chuckling and licking me anyway. Finally, finally, I was cleaned up to his satisfaction, and then, only then, would he meet me for a kiss.

This one was oh-so sweet, and when he pulled up for air, we were both hard again. The urgency, the pain of unfulfillment, that was gone. What was left was the breathless fascination of the dark, the joy of our bodies rubbing together like satin on silk, the amazing feeling of his muscular flesh against mine.

This time, we rutted against each other, finding blindly a place to thrust, a place where our cocks fit between our flesh with enough ease to move and enough friction to heat our skin until we exploded once again, in the middle of a kiss that would not end.

We pulled back, panting, and this time he rolled off of me and dragged me to his side, in spite of the sweat and the stickiness and the fact that I still couldn't see and didn't

move anywhere gracefully.

It didn't matter. Putting my head on his chest was vital and important and I wouldn't have missed listening to the pounding of his heart for anything.

"Ah, gods," he muttered. "You're... you're so perfect, here in my arms. I'd give anything to wake up to you here."

"Why can't you?" I mumbled. He'd gotten me off twice. What? I wasn't going to fall asleep in a hot second?

His kiss on my forehead was gentle. "Which part would frighten you less, Naef? Waking up to a beast in your bed or waking up to the dark of that scarf over your eyes."

I whimpered. The dark was already beginning to skitter me, and as much as I loved Aerie-Smith's beast form, it was not something I wanted to wake up and be mauled by.

I reached up then with my fingertips, sensitive from woodworking, used to being my eyes, and traced his face. "It's not fair," I muttered, feeling his high cheekbones. His hair fell in long bangs around his eyes, straight and silky, and then even longer to his shoulders. It wasn't too thick nor too coarse, but soft and feathery against my fingers. "I didn't ask for beauty," although it had served me rather well, "but this...." I cupped his jaw, a little long, and square under my palms. His chin had a divot in it, and I felt another one at the side of his grooved cheeks. I thought with wonder that for all his graveness as a beast, my Aerie-Smith had a face meant for smiling.

"There is not much I wouldn't give," I sighed when my exploration was done, "not much in the world, to be able to

see your eyes in the light.”

He sighed then, and I felt his palm against my spine as he wrapped his arm around me. It felt good, like counter-pressure against an ache, so I arched my back against him, and he kept stroking. “You will never believe this, Naef, but I feel the same. There is not much I wouldn’t do to see you as yourself, in the sunlight.”

I grunted, hurt. “Oh come now, I told you the truth....”

His voice was firm then, and unmistakable. “So did I.”

It was enough. Enough to make me beg, because I may have mentioned I have no pride. None whatsoever.

“Stay with me.” I was falling asleep as I said it. “Stay with me until I’m sleeping....”

He kissed my brow, tender gesture in my enforced black cocoon. “Yes, beloved. Of course.”

“Beloved,” I murmured. If only. Silly me, to wish so high, but I was in his arms now, wasn’t I? Perhaps, when this “regrettable task” was done, he would let me stay.

It was on this thought that my consciousness left me. I did not feel him slide out from under me or climb out of bed. I didn’t feel him pull off my blindfold before he draped it over the little table at the end of the bed. I didn’t feel him pull the satin coverlet over my shoulders to stave off the chill of cooling sweat.

All I felt was his benediction on my cheek as he left, and the dying warmth where his body had been.

PART VII

MIRRORS

There were mirrors all over Aerie-Smith's house. I refused to ask him to take them down.

Still, it was disconcerting. I'd be running up a hallway or through my room or across the dining room, and there he'd be. That lovely, blue-eyed stranger with the dark, curly hair and the beautiful body, quickly tanning in the tropical sun.

He always looked startled. He always looked worried. He always looked innocent and unaware of the world around him, just a chubby bunny, sitting in an open glade, ready to be run down by any predator worth his salt.

I was really starting to hate that git, mostly because I did not hate him at all. He was just so damned pretty. How could a person *not* want to look like that? I mostly hated him because I wanted to be him, inside and out, and I wasn't. And even if I became like him, what good would it do me when I left this island and my body and face warped, twisted, blurred like melted wax, and became the thing I had been when Aerie-Smith had first walked up to me and offered me a deal.

A great beast appeared behind me, a lion-god with a princely mane and sage, wise amber eyes. He wrapped his

paws around my waist and squeezed, and I leaned back against his shoulder and closed my eyes and became me in the darkness there, with a kind man behind me.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked softly. “You’ve been standing there for quite some time.”

“I was thinking that if I’m not careful, my inside may match my outside, and then I’ll be defenseless against the world.” Truth, without bitterness or sarcasm: amazing what three months running around as a chubby bunny might grant you.

Aerie-Smith chuckled. “Oh, I think you might still retain the core of yourself, Naef...”

“Knife,” I said out of habit.

“Knife.” We had reached sort of a middle ground on this issue. If he called me Knife everywhere else in the world, I would let him call me by my given name when we were naked in the dark. Of course, that didn’t stop the pushy bastard from giving it a go when he thought he could get away with it. “But you don’t need the name to keep your edge, you know,” he continued, looking earnestly into the mirror with me. I met his eyes because it was easier than meeting my own.

“Oh, and how would you know? I’ve been nothing but sweetness and fucking sunshine these last months, and you know it.”

He was getting better at keeping his incredulity at some of the things I said to himself, but that didn’t stop him from near deafening me with his sudden snort of surprise.

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“Fucking? Almost,” he agreed, his whiskers twitching suspiciously. “But sunshine? No. And don’t roll your eyes at me. You’re the one who made Lot cry this morning.”

“He did not cry!” I protested. Bloody little tosser. “He invaded my damned work shed!” Aerie-Smith had promised me that this was the one place, of all on the island, which was mine!

“He did too!” Aerie-Smith protested. “He did, but you’re right. It was his fault. He promised he wouldn’t go in there....”

“I don’t even know what he was doing in there this time,” I groused, although I had a pretty good idea. Most of the time the damned parrot went in to clean, which was ludicrous, but yesterday... oh gods.

“He was getting the toys you were making for the Parker children.” Aerie-Smith’s voice dropped, and I looked away from both of us.

“Aye, I figured after I chased him out. Did he think I’d be stupid enough to go trotting over to their house at this moment with an arm full of wooden balls?” I kept the sourness in my voice so the hurt wouldn’t seep in.

Ah gods... so much time spent looking in the mirror, so I wouldn’t have to relive the ugliness this pretty face had seen.

The Parker children were the goat family I had enjoyed so very much. Funny, how a creature that looked so unearthly could hold the hearts of the most human family in the village. They ate grass, yes, but Mama Parker had forced them to plant the grass seed special, had even managed

potatoes and carrots. Don't ask me how, I think it had to do with her sharp little hooves and some judicious use of the horns on the heads of parents and children.

But the emphasis is on "had." One of the leopards had... had simply awakened yesterday morning as a leopard in a village, instead of a human as a leopard. It was storm season, and we'd been in the middle of a morning thunder strike. He had been frightened, threatened, and enraged. He'd torn a swath through the village in general, and poor Mama Parker in particular. When I had arrived, long minutes after Aerie-Smith had raced down in his lion form, Mama Parker had been dead. She had lain there, a savaged farm animal in the muddy—and yes, shite-encrusted—street of the village, and as her body cooled, so had the spell that had governed it.

I had been the one to pick up the bloodied, naked human woman and take her home to her grieving family. Me and my opposable thumbs had dug the grave in the far back of their little hut, and planted grass seed over it. The family had approved, but they had bleated their approval and not voiced it: grief had made them more of their animal than their human sides, it seemed.

Aerie-Smith had run down the leopard himself, picking up the poor thing by the neck and giving it one terrible shake. I had dug the other grave as well, but Aerie-Smith had spoken at the service. He had begged them, his voice humbled with tears, to please, please hold on. On the summer solstice of the next year, he promised. Just eight more months away.

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Just eight more months, and I would complete my “regrettable task,” and then I would leave the island, and all of this would be but a dream.

“Maybe I will want to stay,” I asked irritably, the week before. “Has it occurred to you that I like it here? Never before have I seen such wood!” It was true. My selection had greatly improved here, and my woodworking had been superb.

“I would certainly not object if you did,” Aerie-Smith said soberly. “But please believe me when I tell you that will probably not be the case. This thing I’m asking you to do... it becomes”—he had closed his eyes—“more regrettable with every day.”

So now I was in a quandary, because that day... that terrible day that held so much dread, it wasn’t just *my* terrible day, it was the day of salvation for the people of the island, and I was starting to like them, even the sheep.

It was also the day Aerie-Smith would get to reclaim something he was losing by incremental degrees.

“It was so easy,” he had sobbed in my arms the night before. “So easy. He’d been my friend for years, Naef. We’d learned our letters together...”

And Aerie-Smith had killed poor Jep, and the man he had killed had not been in the body that Aerie-Smith had placed at my feet.

“How long?” I finally dared to ask. “How long have you been like this?”

If he’d been a man, his face would have been bleak. As a lion, it was puckered and perplexed, like a cub whose dinner

had just run away. "Ten years," he murmured. "I was a little older than you are when it happened."

Ten years. Ten years of living like a beast with the heart of the kindest man who ever walked the earth. The thought of it made my stomach churn.

"You said you thought you might not have lost any time," I said now, looking at the two of us in the mirror. "How old do you think you are?"

Aerie-Smith shrugged. "I've been on the ship at least once a year as we've passed out of the island's influence. The sailors who live on the island have not aged ten years. Three or four at the most. I think the same might be for the rest of us."

I nodded. It didn't matter much, really, not if I had to leave as soon as he turned human, and probably not even then. At least, I thought with a grim sort of relief, he wouldn't have to see my twisted body, my deformed face, those things I hated about myself, at the very least, he wouldn't have to see those again. He might say he would want me as I truly was, but this face and body I was wearing now, they would soften a man or a memory, of that I had no doubt.

"Naef, what's in the work shed you don't want anyone to see?"

My reflection in the mirror grimaced, and I pulled away, not liking this game anymore.

"Nothing," I lied shortly. "I'll apologize to Lot." I turned away then, to go running through the villa. Lot was usually

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in the kitchen at this hour, fussing over a dinner that was unfailingly wonderful.

“Naef...”

“Knife!” I snarled, feeling suddenly naked. We were naked every night in each other’s arms, even if it was just to whisper skin across skin before I fell asleep, and he left. “I’m Knife! I’m no better than I was four months ago, when I looked like a disease and spat venom like a snake and would as soon bleed a man as look at him. I’m a twisted, bitter little man and if that mirror doesn’t know the truth then I do!”

“Stop it!” he growled, catching up with me and shoving me back against the wall with his paws. He was usually very conscious of his size and his strength—and of my potential fear of being held down. Not this time. This time he was puzzled and furious and hurt, and I didn’t blame him.

An empty apology was on my lips. Anything, anything, to get away from this conversation, from the horrible, horrible cavalry charge of time that would make me what I had been before, and take Aerie-Smith away forever.

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” Aerie-Smith grumbled, and I snapped my mouth shut and glared at him. “Just tell me, what’s going on in your mind? You... you take toys to the children of the village every week. You... you help them garden and run tasks that they can’t anymore, you tell stories, you carve plates and cups to remind them they’re human.... Naef—and don’t you dare correct me—all that is wrong with you is that you cannot see the good on the inside for all the beauty on the outside....”

I bared my teeth. It was true. These villagers seemed to accept me, and I loved them for it. No jeers, no taunts—probably because I was beautiful, but very possibly because I was human, and that was good enough for them. I had been given great kindness from them. I wouldn't deny it. But....

“All that is wrong with me is that, once again, I'll serve the whole place better by the leaving of it than I will by the staying.”

With that I dodged out of his arms and into the kitchen to steal some fruit and apologize to Lot.

Aerie-Smith found me in my work shed and, unlike Lot, I couldn't just order him out. He'd never ventured here before. It was a tidy little space, actually. I liked order in my work things. My tools were hanging on their pegboards. My workbench was wiped clean. There was a sweeping of sawdust in the corner, but it wasn't yet big enough to put into a burlap sack and take down to the village to use in the garden, and so it stayed, but it was not enough to make the place anything but orderly and, for me, restful.

He knocked, because he would never be less than courteous, and I jerked up from my work as though I'd been doing something wrong. Clumsily, I tried to place my body between his line of sight and the shelf behind me, even as he opened the door and came in.

“Naef....”

I held up the lathe in my hand and twisted my mouth. “Aerie-Smith, of all places....”

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He let out a breath of laughter. “Yes, of course. If you are Knife anywhere, it’s here.”

A grin escaped me before I could catch and kill it. “You’re forgiven. What did you need?”

He licked his whiskers. “You,” he said softly, and I dropped the lathe on the workbench and just looked at him, uncertain. We... we saved all of our touching for behind closed doors at night. I looked at him again, and he glared at me in a way that seemed familiar.

I almost laughed. Of course it was familiar. It was the expression I wore when I most expected to be brushed away. I didn’t laugh, though. I gave him the same look back and stepped into his arms, and he folded me next to his heart. I didn’t close my eyes. For the moment, this form was a part of him, and maybe he needed me to see that.

“Knife, your sister is very beautiful, is she not?”

I grunted, pleased. Gwennie was a lovely as a sunrise—I’d always thought so.

“Your mother, too, and graceful, the both of them.”

“Uhm-hm.” They’d sent me letters in the past months: good letters, full of excitement about moving to a new place (albeit for only part of the year) and about planning Gwennie’s wedding. I wished with all my heart I could be there, but at the same time, my place was more and more becoming right where I was standing.

“You may recall, beloved, that on the only night we’ve actually spent in company, your sister pulled a knife on me

and your mother ordered me ‘the fuck out of her fucking house, you arse fucker’.”

I snickered. Those had been Mum’s exact words. “I do remember. You won them over eventually.” I smiled up at him, and he returned the look fondly.

“Knife, they are strong women. They know how to protect their own. That doesn’t make them less beautiful. You’ve learned to protect your heart. It doesn’t make you less beautiful. Not to me.”

I groaned. “It’s too late anyway. Look at me. I’m as naked as a kitten in your arms as it is.”

Truth; probably more now than when we were flesh to flesh, my eyes blinded by black silk, my heart trying to learn the curves of my lover by feel alone.

And then Aerie-Smith made a surprised noise. I looked up to see where his eyes had gone and realized that I was wrong. I could be so much more naked than I had been a moment ago.

“Na—”

“Don’t say it,” I whispered, trying to run. This new body was gazelle-quick, and now was one of the times I blessed the fact. He knew me, though, after four months in company, three as lovers, he knew me, and his arms tightened around my shoulders.

“You made these?”

And that damned near earned him my foot in his shin. “Do you know anybody else on this rock who can wield a

knife? Tell me you hate them, if you like, but don't ask thick, stupid questions."

"Don't make light of this!" he snarled, and I yanked out of his arms and huddled in the corner.

"Right! Of course! Because I was laughing fit to shake my arse before!" It was the barbed comeback of a frightened child. Wonderful. I'd not only changed bodies, I'd gone back in time.

"Ye gods... Naef... do you... did you see any portraits or sketches before you carved these?"

He picked up one of the several figurines on the bench and stroked it in wonder. It was him, of course, naked, because that's how I felt him, but standing, sitting, laying on his side with his hand tucked under his ear. I'd sculpted him as I'd felt him or held him, as I'd seen him sitting cross-legged as a beast and knew he would choose to sit as a man. There was Aerie-Smith, as I imagined him, in all of his humanity. He had shoulder length hair with bangs falling into his cousin's eyes, a narrow face, a square jaw, and high cheekbones with grooves and a dimple at the sides of his mouth. His chest was broad but his frame was rangy, and he had long muscles in his stomach, long arms, long limbs, long hands and long feet. He was not perfect, but he was the man under my fingers, under my hands, under my mouth, and my body as we moved in the dark. He was the man who had first held me as I came undone in his arms, and the man who had taught me to make him come. The man I fought with, the man who comforted me, the man who tried

valiantly to slay my inner dragons on a daily basis, in spite of their preference for the tender flesh near his heart.

He was beautiful.

“There’s not a picture in the whole damned villa,” I snapped. “Do you think I didn’t look?”

“They all disappeared the day of the spell,” he whispered, stunned. “How did you know? How do you know this is me?”

His voice was thick, and he didn’t seem to be throwing any of the figures at me, so I took that as a good sign. “How would I not know? I feel you under my hands every night. Do you think I don’t wonder about the man in my bed? You... you’re so damned.... I love you like no other, Aerie-Smith. Is it wrong that I want to know more about that man? Even if it’s just how he looks?” And now my voice was shaking, and I could not seem to leave my corner.

He gave a strangled laugh and pressed the heels of his hands hard against his eyes. “Why did you hide these? Naef, I’ve needed to see myself as a man for so long... do you have any idea what these mean to me?”

“Well, yes,” I muttered. “They’re wonderful now that you think they’re right. What if I’d been wrong? What if I’d slaughtered what was under my fingers with colossal ineptitude? Then I’d be right fucked, now wouldn’t I?”

He scrubbed his eyes hard with his hand, and then turned to me, the expression of his face hard to fathom beyond an unbearable pain mixed with a sublime patience for his foolish, damaged lover.

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“Not. Yet.” His voice held all of the grim humor of a lover who had not yet breached the final barrier of flesh in lovemaking, and I managed to pull myself out of my corner long enough to stick my tongue out at him.

“You said we had time,” I replied pertly, and he shook his head.

“Of course. And what made you think that anything you did... anything you made, any attempt you took at your craft would end in anything but perfection?” He didn’t hold out his arms, so I didn’t go into them.

“It couldn’t be perfect,” I said miserably. “It had to be better than perfect. This wasn’t some low bugger off the street, Aerie-Smith. This was *you*.”

“Gods... Naef, are you going to make me beg to hold you?”

I ran into his arms then, where I’d needed to be. “You shouldn’t have to beg for anything,” I mumbled. His fur stuck out from under his waistcoat and tickled my nose. I sneezed twice and closed my eyes, and it ceased to bother me.

That night, though, he didn’t show up at my room.

A storm blew up during dinner that night. We were in the middle of storm season, it wasn’t rare, but this one was a real gorilla of a blow. The windows were rattling and the rain pounded the frames as if it wanted to get in. I sat for a bit, with my arms wrapped around my legs, and wondered despondently if he had lied about the figurines, if I had hurt

him in some way, and he decided he didn't want me this night.

Then I pulled my head out of my arse and padded down the hall in my linen drawers. "Aerie-Smith?" I asked, knocking on his door. "Aerie-Smith? I know you're in there!" Although I knew no such thing.

"Go away!" he snarled. "I'm fine. Leave me be in here!"

"Oh fuck that!" I snarled back and tried the door latch. I was surprised when it gave under my thumb, and it flew open with a little more force than I'd planned. The door whipped back with a flash of lightning and revealed Aerie-Smith crouched in a corner, wearing nothing but his fur. He roared at me, and I snapped right back.

"Oh right! I'm the bloody-minded one here. 'Let me hold you, Naef, let me love you!'" I mimicked, stalking over to where he crouched and grabbing his paw. "But no, the great Aerie-Smith, prince of every-damned-thing has a problem, and it's 'Go away!' Bloody nice of you, that. What—I'm good enough to fuck but not good enough to quiet you during a storm?"

It sounded tough and mean, I hoped, but while I spoke I hauled him to his feet and pulled the covers back, using my small, tight little body to leverage against his big one. He was actually surprised to find himself lying full-length, and even more surprised when I climbed in next to him.

"We haven't fucked yet, and you weren't invited," he said crossly.

"Bollix," I snapped, wiggling backward into him. "Do you think I want to be here? Your sheets are yellow—ugh! Really?"

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Aren't you supposed to be the king of something? The jungle? The kitchen? Couldn't you have managed purple?"

I heard a reluctant chuckle into my neck and a part of me relaxed. "Well," he murmured, "why do you think we keep ending up in your room? The appointments are nicer."

"Bollix," I muttered again. "This room is half the size of that ship that brought us here." I wasn't far off, either. It seemed to take up nearly a quarter of the top story, vast acres of cream carpet, dark wood, and brass fittings. "The only reason you show up in my room is because the staff will think I'm a randy bastard, and you don't have to own up to getting off yourself, you big tosser. It's all about whose sheets get cleaned the most, that's all."

He chuckled again, until a thunderclap hit and then he tightened his hold on me and grunted. The windows stopped shaking, and he replied in a weak voice, "That's right. You're my scapegoat. Before you came along I had to toss off in the privy, or the staff would have known I had a pecker and all would have been lost."

"Damned straight," I told him, stroking the paws against my waist with soft, sweet little strokes. "Can't have anyone knowing their big bad lion-god tosses off, can you? Do that, and the world will come to an end... sh... sh...." Because that last thunderclap felt like it would bring down the house, and his arms tightened convulsively, and he buried his face in my shoulder and trembled. Shite. I couldn't do this back to front, as much as I wanted to give him his dignity. I rolled in his arms then and took his great head against my chest. I had to close my eyes for my arms to fit, and there he was, a

human man with a simple child's fear, trembling against me and trying not to be embarrassed about it.

I held him like that until the thunderclaps drifted off to terrorize someone else or threaten some poor ship or something, and when they were gone, he lay still, exhausted and limp, in my arms.

"Bloody great arse," I muttered into his hair. My eyes were closed, of course. "How do I trust you to slay my dragons when you won't even admit you have your own?"

"Lesson learned," he mumbled against me, but I somehow doubted it.

We fell asleep like that. When I woke up in the morning, I felt the man in my arms, the slender muscles, the narrow, almost sharp nose against my chest. I closed my eyes tight and pretended I could see him, pretended I could know what color his hair was, down to the last strand, pretended it would be his eyes that would meet mine when I looked at him fully.

But I was a realist, and I wasn't a coward, so I opened my eyes and looked tenderly at the lion-god in my bed. The feel of him changed against me, and what had been an erect cock prodding at the bottom of my thighs became a penis, emerging from its sheath. That might have given me the shudders a few months ago, but I knew that if I closed my eyes it would become what it was, and at the moment, meeting Aerie-Smith's eyes was a thing far more important than my squeamishness.

"You stayed," he muttered, blinking up at me with his amber beast's eyes.

I shrugged. “You were warm.”

His lip curled up, revealing those long teeth close up. It was a slow smile, and I warmed. I could make him smile at me in the morning.

“I’m not normally a morning person. Aren’t you afraid I will rip your head off?”

I rolled my eyes. “As opposed to any other time of the day? It may have escaped your notice, you bloody arse, but I bring out the beast in you in sunshine and in shadow. If you haven’t killed me yet, I figure either you need me so badly for that ‘regrettable task’ that you don’t dare, or that you at least tolerate my presence. Either way, I’m safe.”

He rumbled against my stomach. “Close your eyes, Naef.”

I grimaced. “Fine.” The sunshine poured through the great window at the head of his bed, making my vision red through my eyelids, but his body became human in my arms, and a part of me relaxed.

“I love you. More than any person on earth, I love you. I’ve never had a lover who I said that to—not one. This regrettable task is going to hurt you... so badly. I never intended that. But when you’re performing it, I want you to remember this moment. I love you. Can you remember that for me?”

“Yes,” I said shortly, feeling my eyes grow damp and hating that. “I’m not likely to forget it, am I?”

“I hope not. Now keep your eyes closed. I’m going to kiss you before we get up, and I want it to be good.”

It was good. His lips were soft, and his taste was sweet, and the sunshine through the window warmed our skin. His hands framed my face and the temptation to look was nearly overwhelming. He must have seen my eyes flicker, because he kissed each eyelid softly.

“Keep them closed. You see me like this. I trust that you see me.”

The kiss resumed, and there was a fumbling next to him. He came back with what felt like the satin sash from his robe and the room darkened around me, leaving me and Aerie-Smith in our black cocoon.

He kissed his way down my body, and for the first time I chafed against being passive. I had to be, to an extent. I could not see, and we had butted heads more than once because I had been going to pleasure him, and he'd been doing the same. Now I let him take charge, just to minimize the bruising, but I wanted to see him. I wanted to take his cock in my mouth while his sober brown eyes were on me. I wanted to see them flare open when I shoved him to the back of my throat. I wanted... oh gods....

He had me.... I was thrusting in the heaven of his fist and his mouth, writhing under the twisting of his tongue, and now, as they always did, my words deserted me. My hands knotted in the fineness of his hair, and one of his hands came up to lace fingers with me. I clung to him like a child clings to a blanket and rocked my hips.

“Want to....”

But he ignored me, and I was powerless against him. He let his teeth graze me a little and I trembled... a little bite, a

little nip, the sensitive, nerve-open head of my cock back in the velvet of his throat, and I was done for. Lights exploded behind my eyes, and I let out a roar.

“Gods, Aerie-Smith! Why won’t you let me touch you?”

I surprised him I think, because he sputtered (unpleasant) and choked, and the next thing I knew he was up next to me in bed, laughing in his quiet way and burying his slick, sticky man’s muzzle into my neck.

“Little fishes, Naef...,” he said, giggling, “I guess if the staff was under any illusions about me, they’re not anymore!”

I rolled my eyes under my blindfold and rolled my body into his. He was longer than I was, and I tucked under his chin. His hand went to my back. There was one place there that he worried and rubbed with his hand, and it seemed to soothe me when he did it. “I’m sorry,” I muttered, not particularly feeling sorry. “I... I was hungry for you, that is all.”

He laughed and grunted at the same time, and thrust his hips against my stomach. He was harder than hard, a slick sheen of pre-come making him like wet satin against my skin. “I’m here to be devoured.”

I growled and felt my way down his body, and took him into my mouth without a hello or how are you. I loved his taste: very animal, but also a little sweet, from fine soap, and musky and salty. I loved the feeling of fullness in my mouth. I loved the way he lost his composure—hell, lost his words and his intelligence—when I squeezed his base and licked his head and....

Hello....

His hand had been resting on my flank, squeezing my arse and, truth-to-tell, making me arch against him. The hand left for a moment and returned, and his finger, wet now, traced the cleft of my bottom. I “Mmlllffdd,” startled, and thrust him deeper inside my mouth, and then that teasing finger grazed my ring, and my head came up, and his cock slipped out, and I let out a long, hissing sigh....

“Ahhhhhhh....”

I thrust backward against his finger and, as he made a grunt of surprise that he popped in, I made a groan of satisfaction. I dropped my head down to business, but it was a harder business at hand. Something about that burning, stretching feeling, something about....

Oh gods... he’d just touched something down in there, something... my own cock had been growing hard, and now it filled with blood. “Gods, Aerie-Smith....”

“Don’t you have something to do with your mouth?” he gasped, and that wicked, wicked finger kept doing wicked, wicked things. I thrust my mouth over him and down to the root, no mean feat, and he groaned loudly. I took a cue from him and let a little spit slip through my lips, rubbed my finger in it, and traced a similar path that his finger had taken. He whimpered and I took it as a good sign. For once, I blessed the dark, because I was skating around, literally trying to figure his arse from my own elbow, and I could hear him growling in frustration behind me.

Suddenly I was lifted and manhandled, settled squarely and awkwardly with my cock hanging over his mouth and

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my arse in the air, his finger buried securely in it, and my vision black behind the blindfold anyway.

I had nowhere to go with the frenzy that threatened to take over my body, nowhere to retreat in the nakedness of passion, so I threw myself into pleasuring him back. I took him down to my throat again and finally, *finally*, found the divot that would make him crazy, and thrust my finger in.

I'd just come, and he hadn't, and that was the only reason he came first. I tried to swallow it, I did, and I'd gotten good at it in recent months, but he added a second finger and took me so deeply into his mouth he could probably feel me in his stomach, and stars exploded behind my eyes. He flopped out of my mouth in a mess, and I muffled my scream against the back of my hand and screamed some more.

He didn't release me until I was drained and dry and my knees damn near buckled. It took some manhandling to get us back face to face, and I spent some time rubbing my face up against his satin coverlet and then taking a cotton cloth from him to use, and eventually we were back where we began with the sunshine fighting its way through the blindfold at my eyes.

I didn't want to take it off just yet. "Gods," I panted, still undone. "That was... gods... why have you not done that before?"

"Mmmm...", he murmured, stroking my chest. "You... you don't have a wonderful history with being... invaded."

I was surprised to say the least. "You and me here, Aerie-Smith, this doesn't have anything to do with what

happened when I was a child. This... this is magic.” I heard the simple faith in my voice, and was too honest in this moment to wince. So what if I was a child in this matter? He knew it. He’d always known it. I’d been the one too blind with my own anger to see.

There was something... dark, something unhappy in his voice when he said, “Magic. Indeed.” I fumbled for the blindfold, and he stopped my hands. “Don’t, Naef. I’m simply... simply yearning. I wish... I wish that what we are now, we could have been before the curse. Simple to say, something you probably already know. But still... something that darkens the heart.”

I grunted. I didn’t want to think about the dark... I was living it at the moment. “Aerie-Smith, am I still a virgin?” I asked, the thought having burned at me like a finger in my arse since I could think again.

“Since I’ve heard you beg for my mouth on your cock more than once, I’d say no.” He laughed, and I sighed happily.

“Good.”

“You yearning for more?” He asked it with such studied casualness that I knew that only his own consideration for my feelings had kept him out of my arse for these months.

“Wouldn’t mind it,” I told him truthfully. “Mostly I was just wondering if I had to look over my shoulder. Samhain’s gone past, but solstice is coming up. Didn’t want to be grilled on anyone’s fires, if you know what I mean.”

That last bit was meant to be funny, trying to lighten the moment as it were, but he made one of those sounds...

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one of those sounds that said he'd just thought of something he hadn't before.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you can't get roasted as a Beltane virgin," he said, trying to make his voice light. "But we'll have to make sure there, won't we?"

I snorted, letting the sun and the lovemaking and the dark and the feeling of safety beguile me to falling asleep again. "Absolutely. Since you're the only mooncalf stupid enough to have me, it'd be a shame if I had to leave you with nothing to show for it."

I couldn't see the expression on his face then, couldn't read the line of his shoulders. I knew that he kissed me with his heart on his lips, and I opened my mouth in return, and we were practically still kissing as I was lulled off to sleep.

My last thought was that I'd give much of my soul to see his eyes in the sunlight.

PART VIII

CAVE

The thunderstorm had blown up so damned fast that I hadn't had time to get to the villa from the village, and I ended up out in it. As much as I loved a good blow, I wasn't prone to storm madness these days. The lightning and wind were still something fierce and not to be trifled with, which was how I ended up in the cave.

Aerie-Smith had asked that I make carvings of the villagers, the ones who seemed especially despondent or close to turning. It turns out, I could touch their real faces, too, as long as I shut my eyes, and so it was easy enough. The figures weren't nearly as detailed as those I made of Aerie-Smith, but they were worth it.

That morning, I'd visited the little tortoiseshell tabby cat who ran the village store. She'd found a way to knit, bless her, and had greeted me in the first week of the village with a sturdy pair of socks. "Not good for these climates, I'm afraid," she'd told me cheerily, "but when you leave, you can take them back with you and remember us." (As though I'd forget a sleek little tabby cat walking upright in a dress, dustcap and with knitting needles tucked under her foreleg, but still, the thought was kind.)

In the seven months or so since Aerie-Smith had seen his own carvings, poor Miss Bridget had become taciturn,

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staring into space at dust motes, forgetting the needles in her paws, and lashing her tail in predatory glee if a spider so much as crossed the wall. The carving I'd done of a surprisingly young woman with a leanly beautiful face had made her weep.

The first time someone had wept over my carvings (the Parker family father, and his three kids) I'd been appalled, mortified and contrite beyond reason, until Aerie-Smith told me that a beast couldn't weep, but a human could. It meant that the time spent closing my eyes and putting my fingertips to a stranger's puzzled face had been worth it. It meant that my obsession, my craft, the thing that kept me sane when I'd hated the human race, now made me a part of it.

I'd even learned to comfort them when they cried. Miss Bridget had stood on the counter and wept against my shoulder, and I'd closed my eyes and stroked a tangled mane of long hair (she told me it was brown in life) and missed my sister.

Aerie-Smith had made good on his threat to teach me to read a bit better. Contrary to what the books *we* now read told us, the magic decoding formula of symbols on paper did not automatically guarantee that my gnarled beastly soul would now drip with philanthropy, but it was nice to read Gwennie's letters:

"We married in the spring, Naef, like you said. Kyn wore a cream and brown colored suit, with epaulettes as befits a young lord—and a ship's captain as he is now. Mum and I will live here, in his mother's home, during the winters when

he's in port. (It's a castle, I won't lie, but calling it a home makes it less terrifying to the both of us.) I've decided, however, to go back to our home village with Mum in the summer. He will see us more often that way, and since he's added a couple of rooms to our old cottage, we will probably have more privacy there, with Mum, than we will have in this bloody great monstrosity full of strangers who want to press my bloomers. I'm sorry... I mean 'home'."

I had to read my mum's letters to see what Gwennie wore: cream as well, with yellow and pink roses in her strawberry blond hair:

"Your sister was the loveliest woman on that island, sweetheart, and if she tries to tell you different, you give her the flat side of a lathe on her backside, would you? Damned modest little chicken. She'll be the death of me yet. As long as she gives me grandchildren first."

I read these out loud proudly to Aerie-Smith, who laughed quite a bit, it seemed. When I asked him what was so damned funny, because if he wasn't careful he'd choke on his damned beastly drool, he laughed harder and shook his head.

Arse.

Be that as it may, I had left Bridget purring happily over her little wooden figure just as the clouds thundered up like a herd of furious horses. I'd run as fast as my body would let me (and after running and swimming for much of my days in the past ten months, that was damned fast, and don't think I wasn't proud of that!) but still, the first crack of lightning

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had taken out the tree in front of me as I'd reached the deepest part of the forest between the village and home.

The tree had gone over, my heart had tripped triple time, and I had gone for the bluff that divided the island, knowing there would at least be an outcropping to shelter me from the elements.

That's when I saw the cave.

Caves aren't necessarily good places to hide, usually because other things hide in them first. But as far as I knew, most of our wildlife was still trying to walk upright, and those that had never known how were prowling the far side of the island, probably the most puzzled creatures under all the gods' mezzanine sky. I crouched in the mouth of the cave and looked unhappily out as rain pounded down on the glossy green palm fronds like a drunken cow in heaven pissing on a flat rock down here. Aerie-Smith was back at home, probably worried about me here in the storm, and terrified himself.

I asked him what had happened, after the last storm had him practically diving under the kitchen table during dinner. He looked at me sourly and talked about being caught on the wrong side of a cannon salute as a child. I figured that would be about enough to put anybody off his whiskers in the face of a thunderclap. Oddly enough, telling me about it had soothed his nerves. I hoped his nerves would be all tranquil and serene this go-round, because from the shelter of the cave it looked like one hell of a light show.

Another lightning crack lit up the sky, and I turned my head in time to see it brighten the inside of the cave.

There was a woman in here with me.

I was so surprised I sat down in the dust and offered a rather crude expression of shock. She laughed and flung aside her sunset orange hair.

"I don't think you'd know what to do with me even if I took you up on that, Naef," she said pleasantly, and I said it again. She laughed again, and I scowled. I didn't like being laughed at.

"Right then, so don't fuck me. How about 'get fucked'. Will that make you less happy about scaring a man out of his drawers?"

She sobered then and looked at me kindly. She had lovely purple eyes and pointed ears.

"I didn't mean to frighten you. I just thought you should know that while you're here, we've got business to attend to."

I stood up and looked at her with far less kindness. "You're the one," I said baldly. "You're the girl who had a kiss stolen. You're the reason Aerie-Smith's a lion, and I'm here."

Her eyes closed briefly with pain. "Oh, gods, you don't trim any fat, do you, Naef? You just bite into the meat of things, gristle, bone, and all!"

"More filling that way," I snapped. "What is it you want from me? I'm not likely to steal a kiss, you know."

She laughed then, gaily, and it sounded like bells and violins and sunrise. "Hardly!" she said, still laughing. "No," she sobered abruptly, "one stolen kiss has done far too much damage, I am well aware. I wished to talk to you about the breaking of the curse."

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“Why would you want to do that?” I was far too suspicious and far too hopeful to even sound like my bitter self.

She looked me in the eyes and told what seemed to be an earth-solid truth. “My beloved was hurt, Naef, what would you yourself do, if your beloved was hurt?”

My beloved *was* hurt. He was hurting now. Every dispute that ended in animal noises instead of words, every rogue animal, every carved figure that ended up kicked in the dust, these things bled his heart like no knife of mine could.

“I’d slaughter the world,” I muttered. “I’d pull down the moon, just to bandage his wounds.”

She nodded, her mouth drawing in at the ends as though she heard what was in my heart and not just the rashness of my words. “You do know, don’t you?”

I nodded, without words. I didn’t want to feel sympathy for the people who had done this, but I did. Chubby bunny, waiting to be eaten, that was me. Where had my edge gone?

“Well, it was too harsh,” she admitted plainly. “That terrible lash-out that my beloved and I gave, that wrath of power we let loose on this island, it wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair to Aerie-Smith, who only flirted with a pretty girl at night, and it wasn’t fair to his people. It wasn’t. None of it was fair, so we tried to make it right. We tried to give him an out, but....”

She was wearing a diaphanous green dress. It whirled about her ankles as she swung her dainty little sandaled foot

and kicked the rock she'd been sitting on when she'd about scared me pissless. "Damn him. Damn him and his pride and the parrot who came with him. This is not what we had in mind."

"What is not what you had in mind?" I asked, my stomach beginning to gnaw in me like a rabid rat.

"Here. Come here." She softened the first order with a wry twist of her lips. I was starting to like her. She and I seemed to share a similar sourness, and it heartened me. She led me to the back of the cave and cupped her hands, a silver light coming from them that showed me the cavern was low and shallow. The back walls were covered in pictures, with a few scattered symbols here and there. Even my recent lessons couldn't help me read them any better than I would have a year ago.

"Well?" she asked impatiently, and I scowled some more.

"Well what?"

She stamped her foot. "Well, read this. What do *you* think it says?"

I glared at the pictographs on the wall and gasped. "I think it says we're fucked!" I cried. "Did you really think this would help us?"

The pictographs showed a progression of things. Animals: pigs, sheep, and goats, upright and going about their business in the village. Then it showed them falling to all fours and behaving like animals. That was not so hard to see. Then it showed... well, sort of a me, girded in white.

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At first I thought it *was* me, a virgin, but I wrinkled my nose at that. No. Flesh was flesh. Sex was lovely—it was sublime in fact—but the sweet slick and burn of Aerie-Smith’s cock inside my body, the visceral shudders of splashing come upon us both, these things did not account for nor negate the burning light that seemed to encompass the perfectly shaped man-boy in the picture on the wall.

“A man of pure heart,” I muttered, and the girl made a positive sound.

“Yes, that’s good. Aerie-Smith got that, too, but the parrot seemed to think it was a virgin. Aerie-Smith said something about how he’d make sure to keep Lot away from virgins from that moment on. Lot said that virgin boys were Aerie-Smith’s thing, and Aerie-Smith said that boys, yes, virgins not so much, but....”

The lightning flickered, and she must have gotten a good look at my expression. Some other time, this recounting of Aerie-Smith and Lot would have been riveting. In fact, as I thought about the story, it explained much. Two nights after the lightning storm that led to me staying in Aerie-Smith’s bed all night, every night since, he’d brought a bottle of olive oil to his bedside and proceeded to make sure there wasn’t a definition of “virgin” in any language that would apply to my thoroughly used body. It had been a lovely moment, and I wasn’t complaining, but, well, it appeared as though Aerie-Smith had a higher purpose than just fucking me unconscious on a regular basis.

He was trying to save my life.

Not that I’d want it saved after I killed him.

Gods and bollix! I looked at the pictographs again and shook my head.

"I need to spill blood," I said, looking at the pictures of the boy with the pure heart on the mountain top with the lion-god. There were two different conclusions for that picture.

In one, the boy spilled his own blood. I could see it, droplets raining down from all around his crudely drawn body, and the blood melted the lion away to leave only the man.

In the other, the boy spilled the lion's blood, and the beasts watching below them became men and women again.

"Don't say that," the fairie girl cautioned, and I turned to her, furious.

"This? This is your way of atoning for your curse? You give him a choice of killing a boy with a pure heart or giving his own life up? You know which one he'd choose! The way out of this mess is his own blood?"

"Don't say that!" the girl cried again, going so far as to put her hands over my mouth. "Don't you see? Damn you, Naef, and your turns of rough poetry. Don't you realize that it is words like those which sculpt your world? It was supposed to be tears!"

I frowned at her. "Tears? It looks like blood!"

"Tears!" She stamped her foot, but this time in tears instead of temper. "It was supposed to be tears. But Aerie-Smith saw what you did. He saw blood! And so did his damned parrot! And now you!"

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“Well if it’s supposed to be tears....”

“But it’s not anymore! I brought you here so you could say it was tears, and then it would be! But you didn’t. That’s three voices, three people who saw what they wanted to and what they wanted was blood. And now the geas is locked in stone, locked on this fucking wall to be exact, and now it *has* to be blood. He wasn’t supposed to *die*, Naef! He was just supposed to repent in full view of his people. Aerie-Smith has no pride. Neither do you! It would be easy! You would stand on the mountain and cry out your love and your sorrow. Look at you... it’s written all over your heart. But no! The two of you look inside, and you see something so flawed it calls for blood, and now that’s all that will do!”

The girl sank to the floor, distraught, and I could only look at her, destroyed.

Eventually I found my hand patting her shoulder. Why I was comforting her, I don’t know. After all, she was, on the surface, the one responsible for this mess, but I couldn’t blame her. Not entirely.

She was right. This body, this stolen time as a lover, I’d felt I didn’t deserve these things. It had not occurred to me until I saw the pictures on the cave that Aerie-Smith could feel the same way about himself.

“He won’t die,” I told her, my voice rough. This was my regrettable task. Every moment of Aerie-Smith’s self-recrimination, every time he said sorrowfully that I would want to leave at the end of my stay, every wistful moment when he wished I could stay forever. I could trace them all,

all, to this thing that I was supposed to do in little more than a month.

But there were two ways out of this, and his death was not an option. Not for me.

“I was a rabid animal, crouching in my den, before he came for me,” I whispered, squatting before her and trying to give her some solace. “I was a twisted soul, as ugly inside as I was out. Don’t worry, girl. I won’t let this happen to him. This regret is one I won’t carry, I promise you.”

She wiped her face on the hem of her skirt and shook her head. “Gods, Naef, you still don’t understand. You’re the boy with the pure heart. There should have been no reason for you to spill anyone’s blood, much less your own.” Her face crumpled, and she keened again, and I found I was holding her to my chest and rocking her softly.

“I don’t know what tea leaves you’ve been reading,” I said gruffly, “but my heart is no more pure than a privy ditch. If I do this thing it’s because I cannot live without him, so I may as well not live at all.”

She wept some more, and I found that it comforted me to give her comfort. It also gave me some time to firm up my heart. It had once been a twisted, secretive sort of place, and I found I still had a few dark chambers to myself.

This time on the island with Aerie-Smith had been precious, beautiful, flawless, soaring by on eagle’s wings. Like Aerie-Smith’s name implied, he’d built a place in the clouds for me, apart from the cares of mortal men.

I was not really made to spend too long in the clouds.

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But I could keep this time sacred for Aerie-Smith. I could. I knew I could. I would keep this moment locked in the cave of my heart, and he could continue his plan of sacrifice. He seemed to have made peace with it.

He didn't have to know until the end that when you put a knife in my hands, the knife did my bidding, that was all.

Her sobs eventually stilled, and I lifted my head and listened.

"The storm's 'bout passed," I murmured. "I need to leave. He'll be looking for me."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, her voice clogged with weeping, and I dropped a kiss on her sunrise colored hair.

"Free his beloved village," I said nonchalantly, "and maybe, if I'm lucky, see the color of his eyes by day."

"Naef!" she called after me as I started for the mouth of the cave. "Naef, don't despair... we can find a way...."

"Sweetheart," I said, turning so the sunshine through the rain was at my back. "After this, I think it's pretty well destined. My name here is Knife."

And then I went running through the last of the storm, rain washing me clean of the reek of despair. A false sun flew its colors over what I'd learned to think of as home.

Perhaps I should have been angry with him. After all, I was lord and master of the hostile response to the noble motivation. He had brought me to this island with the cold-blooded intention that I should murder him. Not once did I

think he'd thought to kill me. Not once. He'd promised my mother and sister that I'd return, and I knew he loved his cousin. He wouldn't break that promise, of that I was certain. But still, I should have been furious: he'd made love to me, broken through the briar patch of my heart, and made me care for him in a way so bright it shamed the sun, and all so I could blacken that light with mourning. I should have been angry.

I wasn't. I could see it all, as though I'd been there.

Aerie-Smith and Lot, discovering the cave, seeing the pictures just as the sweet little elf-woman had planned. I heard the conversation she'd recounted, and I saw the wheels turning in Aerie-Smith's great lion head. *Blood will buy their freedom*, he thought. *I did this to them. I'll take it away.* And then, all he'd needed was a man with a pure heart.

Of course, Kyn hadn't known. If my sister's husband knew what Aerie-Smith had planned, he'd be here to stop him. It didn't matter. He told Aerie-Smith that I was a good sort, and maybe could use a year away from my home, and Aerie-Smith... well, my lover had seen me.

That's all I could say. He had seen me. Something inside of me had seemed pure to him. I cannot take credit for it. I still did not know what it is that he saw. All I knew was that I was not going to let him die for it, and I was not going to ruin the month we had left with grieving.

Halfway home, Aerie-Smith greeted me, a terrible wet fluffle of lion's fur and wool waistcoat and trousers. I ran into

his arms anyway, and closed my eyes, feeling his slick skin under the fur.

“I’m sorry I worried you,” I told him. *I’m so sorry. So very sorry.*

That night, I got ready for bed in his room, as I had been doing, and slid between the sheets (purple now—mostly to humor me, I think) completely naked. I had made use of the olive oil by the side of the bed, and a fluffy towel was under my bottom as I slid in. I lay there, waiting for Aerie-Smith, thinking about a man’s body versus a woman’s.

A woman’s quim made itself slick for a man. I’d heard the village boys talk. Slippery, warm, soft, those were the words they used.

A boy’s backside didn’t do that (or any backside—it’s not like women had a magic lubricating arsehole, now is it?) Anyway, a boy’s backside was tight and hard. Every invasion needed gentling, coaxing, kindness, in order for the act to be sweet. Every time Aerie-Smith took me (and by now, he’d taken me plenty) he had to coax my body to accept him.

He should be used to it by now. Every soft word he gave me, he had to coax my soul to take in the same way.

It must be difficult, I thought now, propping my head up on my hand. It must be hard to love someone and have to sweet talk them, open them, gentle them, every minute of every day. It was time I gentled myself, and let Aerie-Smith love me. Yes, yes, it made me a chubby bunny, waiting to be eaten. What of it? Better be devoured by my lover, who had given me nothing but kindness, than devoured by my own bitterness, which had never been kind.

And we only had a month. By the time this would be over, oiling my body up and stretching myself out, lying in anticipation with a hard cock and an open arse—these things would still make my prick throb with novelty alone.

Aerie-Smith walked in and saw my naked chest, a sure sign I wanted him, and raised his whiskered leonine eyebrows. “You have plans tonight, Naef?”

I smiled brightly and did the silk up around my eyes. “I’m just ready to be loved, that’s all.”

I heard the sound of his robe being laid out on the chair, and the light around the black silk dimmed as he blew out the lamp. I knew this sound and this light. I knew the firm feel of his human lips as they pressed against my own. I knew the slick of his hands as he ran them over my perfect chest and then framed my hips, rubbing his thumbs in the crease of my thighs. I knew the feeling of his body settling in between my thighs, rubbing up against my groin, as I welcomed him in for a kiss.

His gasp at finding me open, dilated, and ready for him, was new. The excited keen he made as his cock slid into me with just enough resistance to rub him right—this was new. The gentle rhythm of our bodies as they undulated instead of fought—not so new, maybe, but the tenderness with which I accepted it, that was a change.

I’d known before that his hands on my body, our skin in the dark, I’d known that these things were precious.

This night they became holy, because I let him worship me and I gave him my worship in return. Sex was lovely. Sex

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was sublime. Sex was flesh and cock and suck and fuck and come.

This night, sex was starlight. Sex was oxygen. Sex was us, and we were beautiful, beautiful and perfect in each other's arms.

This night, I could believe I was the beautiful boy with the pure heart. This night, I was everything Aerie-Smith deserved.

PART IX

BLOOD

Funny thing about time, isn't it? When your life is full of fury and bile, it cannot move fast enough. Every day is an attenuated hell, poisoned sugar-taffy, stretching between your first putrid shite in the morning to your last vomitous belch of consciousness at night.

Time is a slow-bleeding bitch, then, isn't she? She's a big, slime-oozing slug, taking her sweet disgusting self to travel glorb-glorb-blargh across the span of your days.

Of course, when you're happy and your days are numbered, she's still a bitch. Now she's just a fleet-footed predator, a racing cheetah, tearing across the plains dripping the heart's blood of your slaughtered dreams.

Either way, this bitch was not my friend, and trying to grab her tight would only get me wounded. Even I knew that.

I didn't start any arguments with Aerie-Smith, didn't pick any fights, didn't do anything that would make time move slower, just so I could have more of it in his arms. I took the time in his arms and pressed it to my heart, and for all I kept my tart tongue and "turns of rough poetry" as the elfin woman called them, I did what I could to not turn that roughness on Aerie-Smith.

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I wanted him to remember, above all things, that he made me very, very happy.

He grew sad as the day of the summer solstice approached. I had to pretend I didn't know why, and that was hard. I had to chivy him out of his sadness when I felt the same way myself. That made me want to chase that time bitch down and make her give me back my still-dripping heart, that's what it did. But I did it.

Every time he spoke of, "You should try not to hate me too much, when your task comes due." I'd respond with, "I hate you now, you big daft beastie. How's that going to change!" And because I greeted him every night with a slicked up body and an open heart, he knew it was a lie, and it made him laugh.

I wrote letters to my mum and my sister, saying goodbye without saying it. I didn't want them to blame Aerie-Smith, and I dearly wanted him to visit them to tell them that he saw the best of me in this year. They should know, I thought, that someone did. They deserved to know that their faith in me hadn't been all seen through the filmy shadows of their love alone.

One afternoon, Aerie-Smith caught me in the study, playing secretly on the guitar. I had gotten good enough to keep up with him—sometimes—but I would never be in high demand.

"What is that?" he asked, when I put the instrument down quickly.

"Yours," I said quickly. "Are you in such a hurry to have it that you can't wait until it's done?"

“When’s it going to be done? The solstice is in three days?”

“Then it will be done in four,” I said calmly, setting a notation down on the parchment in front of me.

“Naef...”

“Are we in bed? Are we naked? You keep trying to ease one in there, like a girl getting her quim fingered, but you know the rules.”

He growled, irritated, and I flashed him an evil little grin. I’d learned that there was irritation and annoyance and then outright anger. Irritation and annoyance were like kissing to get your cock up sometimes... and sometimes, they got your cock up without the kissing.

“*Knife*,” he said deliberately, “you will have left by then....”

“Perhaps,” I said vaguely, “but you’ll still be here.”

I had him then, and without meaning to, getting caught in the study with my heart on a page became a test of wills. He looked at me, brows lowered, big whiskered lip curled back, and I looked levelly at him. *Go ahead and do it, Aerie-Smith. Tell me why you don’t think you’ll be here in a week, and I’ll tell you why you will be. Whose hand will you put that knife in?* I’d seen the cave drawings, same as he had. Truth was, only one man’s hand could wield that knife, and whether he knew it or not, it was not going to be wielded in his flesh.

What—he thought by catching me by surprise, I’d be angry enough at the deception to shed his blood? Well,

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maybe. Maybe when he'd first walked into my rabid little shithole of self-loathing, I might have been. But that man had faded with his twisted little body. The man who stood in his place maybe, just maybe, had a heart that could do a fair imitation of the one needed on the solstice.

"Perhaps," he answered back, cleaving the thick silence, "but perhaps I'd dearly love to hear it from you instead of seeing it on a parchment."

And damn him, he'd won.

"Let me practice it," I said through a dry throat. "I'll play it for you tomorrow."

On any other species, his smile would have been sad. "That easy? Really, Knife, I'm surprised at you."

"I'm not a fool, Aerie-Smith," I said, cutting as close to the bone of honest as I could. "I'm aware we don't have much time. What I can do to make you happy in the time we do have? It's done. If I have to splash my heart on a page, so you know it beats for you? Well, why not? It's only my heart. It's stronger than I thought. It will carry on."

"Carry on?" He sounded vaguely disappointed. "Is that all you plan to do when you leave?"

I grunted and pretended great interest in the parchment before me. He ventured around my back and rested gentle paws on my shoulders. "What more did you want?" I closed my eyes at his touch.

"I wanted you to live," he said wistfully, and I couldn't look at him.

“I could say the same for you.”

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders then and rested our cheeks together. “Of course,” he murmured. “If it’s at all within my power, of course.”

I believed him. But it wasn’t in his power anymore, was it? It was in mine. I could make it happen, and I would.

The night before the solstice and my “regrettable task,” we did not make love. We lay together, but my eyes were open or closed as I wanted, not masked with a blindfold so I could see the truth with the palms of my hands. I wanted to read his expressions, to see the way his lip curled when he was being dry, and to imagine how these things would look on him when he was a man again. That’s not what I told him, of course, but he didn’t seem to want to make love, either. He wanted to hear my voice, he told me, and remember the way my eyes would narrow, when I was myself again, in my old body.

He claimed to like my eyes back then, and I believed him. For this night, I believed him.

The next day we rose like any other. I put on the old suit my mother had dressed me in instead of the pleasant, cotton and linen things that Aerie-Smith had made for me since I arrived, and watched as Aerie-Smith dressed in his usual formal waistcoat, shirt, and trousers, as befitted the leader of a people. We ate breakfast and commented that the thunderstorm season seemed to have passed. I told him I was heartily tired of venison, and he offered to have a rabbit brought for me on the morrow.

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I told him not to bother, if I was to leave as he anticipated and all.

Then he rose and waited until I closed my eyes so that he could kiss me. I did, but it cost me. I almost let my tears bleed through, and that would have been disastrous.

“Please don’t hate me when this is done,” he pleaded against my lips.

“Please don’t think I would,” I told him back, my eyes still closed, my fingertips stroking the corners of his jaw.

He nodded, and I could feel the fine tremble of him against my palms. When he spoke, though, he was as cool as ever, as composed as though he were asking Lot a special favor for the dinner table.

“It’s really very simple,” he said, using the voice he used to instruct me in the guitar. “You take this knife”—he pressed it into my palm—“and venture up the path to the top of the bluff—you know, the one you almost hurtled yourself off of that first day?”

“I recall,” I said dryly. We had been up there many times since then—always together. He seemed to live in fear of me hurtling myself off of things.

“Good,” he said, and nodded. “When you get there, you will see a poor beast.” He licked his whiskers furiously for a moment. “It will be no one you know. He will lie still for you, as though enchanted, as he is, and you must kill him. And that is all. When you are done, come back down here, and Lot will have everything ready for your departure the next day.”

He licked his whiskers some more and blinked rapidly, and I wanted to kick him. Did he think that story would fool a child? Did he think, even not forewarned as I had been, that I would see a lion that looked like my beloved and slaughter it as it lay at my feet?

Perhaps not, I thought, watching him watch me. Perhaps he was aware that he was fooling nobody.

“Please, Naef,” he begged quietly. “Please. For my people... the people that I wronged... would you do this for me?”

“I’ll do this for you,” I told him honestly. “I’ll do this because I love you above all others, and for no other reason.”

He nodded and swallowed. “You have been the happiest time of my life. I shall be sorry to see it come to an end.” With that he bent and kissed my cheek and turned to leave. “Give me a half an hour to prepare the poor beast, then start up to the bluff.”

I did. First, though, I went to the study and brought out the song I had been working on. I had left out a pertinent verse when I’d performed it the other night, and this version had it included. I scrawled, *I love you, you dumb fucker. Did you think I could kill you?* on the back of it before rolling the parchment and putting it at his place setting at the dinner table.

When I was done with that, I went to the chess board and took the figure of the black king, the one he wouldn’t let me play, the one of my other body that had wrought so much pain, and set it aside. I had put off carving a new piece, and he always ended up playing that one. In the place of the old

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one, I left a figure of the perfect body I inhabited now: the curling dark hair, the big eyes, the sweetly shaped mouth, all of it. While it was not me, any more than the other shape had been me for this year, it was, I hoped, the way he would remember me.

Then I took the knife and tucked it into my belt, and sauntered on wobbling knees up to the top of the bluff.

It was a lovely day. Bright sun, a light fog lifting from a blue sky. The surf crashing at the foot of the bluff was like gruff music, my favorite kind.

Aerie-Smith lay spread out at the top of the cliff in the form of his enormous, full-blooded beast, as obedient and as docile as that chubby bunny I loathed so much. I sighed and walked up to him with a grim smile on my face, then knelt before his great head.

First I stroked his mane and his ears, then placed the flat of my hand against his nose. Then I used one hand to grasp his mane below the ear, where he couldn't see what I was doing with it, even as I brought the knife up level.

"You bloody great lummoX," I told him, making a quick cut with the knife. "Did you think I didn't know?" I switched the knife to my other hand, now slick with the blood pumping from my wrist, and drew the blade across the clean and tender skin under my palm.

"I told you," I whispered, while his ears twitched and his nostrils flared, and he smelled the blood and realized it was not his own. "I would do about anything to see your eyes in the sun."

And with that I stood and let the fine arterial spray of my heart's blood patter across his fur. The fur melted, the pelt dissolved, even as Aerie-Smith roared his great lion's roar and scrambled to his feet. By the time he was a naked man, blinking wide brown eyes from a fine crimson coat of my own life force, the screams were coming from his raw human throat.

"NO!"

I grinned at him, or at least I thought I did. My vision was getting funny, and the bright blue and gold day had gone the color of an old silver bell. "They're brown, like you said," I babbled, feeling cold and peaceful. My knees gave, and he was there to catch me. I smiled into his face, as happy as I'd ever been.

"You miserable arse," he cried, "can't you even follow one simple direction?" He gave my shirt a rude jerk and took the resulting strip of cloth to wrap around my wrist. It was immediately soaked.

"Of course I can," I told him, feeling loopy and, truth be told, just a little bit queasy. "I can follow lots of directions. But you give a knife to a man named Knife, and then I'm the one in charge, aren't I?"

"Shite," he muttered. "Buckets of shite, you bloody-minded fucker." He ripped another cloth and tried to wrap my other wrist. Not enough cloth and too much blood, and he ripped the damned thing to shreds off my body trying to make up the balance.

"Did you think damned near cutting your hand off would impress me? Damned awful way to bollix a job!"

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“That’s a lie,” I muttered. “I never bollixed anything I carved. I carve up my flesh, then it’s all to make an improvement.”

“Talk about a fucking lie!” His voice broke, and I could tell he was losing the battle against my life force. *Sorry, Aerie-Smith, can’t win them all.*

“*Gods!!!*” He was screaming now, weeping, and that would not do. *“Sunrise, dammit, this wasn’t our deal! I read the damned cave for you, and I picked my road!”*

“Tears,” came a sweet voice. My vision was black now, and all sounds were blending into the roar of the ocean. “Tears, and you’ve paid them. Give him to me, Aerie-Smith, and Thistle and I will see if we can pay you back better....”

“Gods, Naef... gods... don’t leave me, dammit. What’s the use of looking at you with a man’s eyes when you’re not alive to look back?”

I had no answer to that. Perhaps I should have, but I didn’t. “Aerie-Smith, why aren’t you holding me?”

I don’t know if I spoke or not, but I don’t think I was around for the reply.

PART X

GLASS

I was incredibly surprised to wake up, that's for certain. My eyes wouldn't open at first. I heard two women's voices: the girl with the sunrise hair and another one I didn't recognize.

"He should recover, but make him take it easy for a week or so." The first voice. Sunrise, I would assume. She sounded anxious, and the words were accompanied by a hand on my forehead. Mmm... nice. But I wanted a harder hand and a voice that rumbled.

"Make sure he eats." This voice was sharp and short. "We worked our arses off to keep him alive. He needs to replace that blood volume, dammit, no letting him run around the island."

"Thistle...." Sunrise's voice was... warning. Surreptitious, almost. She was looking at something, I could feel it. When Thistle spoke next, she sounded embarrassed.

"You know what I mean." There was a pause, one that had met and averted eyes in it, and I tried hard to pull myself into consciousness. "Another thing," Thistle muttered. "He's not going to like... it... at first. If you're any sort of a man, you'll find a way past it. But keep him away from... glass, for a bit."

“Glass?” Aerie-Smith sounded surprised, and I was so happy to hear him that I actually stopped concentrating on waking up. Waking up didn’t matter. Aerie-Smith was here.

“Do I sound like I understand this clairvoyant shite? Glass. That’s what I said.” There was an irritated huff and then a gentle hand on my shoulder. “We’re going, then, Mister Pure-heart. Next time, maybe look for tears and not blood.”

Right then, it was a deal. The women’s voices faded away, and then... ah, I could not mistake that touch. Aerie-Smith’s hard hands took mine, and his human lips kissed the back.

Finally, a thought worth waking up for. My vision was gray-scale at first, but I managed, and it was worth it.

“Naef?” He sounded anxious, but he looked wonderful. His eyes were different from Kyn’s, I thought at first. Kyn’s were a little wider, with fewer crow’s feet in the corners. Kyn’s eyes didn’t tilt up at the ends, just a little. Kyn’s eyes didn’t look sleepless or worried.

“Those aren’t your cousin’s eyes,” I said hoarsely, and he took my hand to his face and wept.

I stayed awake just long enough to feel his kiss on my forehead. A human kiss, with stubbled cheek, but no fur and no fangs. I watched his face as his lips touched my skin, and it didn’t change, not once. It stayed long, with a square jaw and lean lips and those wonderful deep brown eyes.

His hair, which fell into his eyes, was brownish gold, with just a tint of strawberry in the streaming sunshine of the window.

I dreamed of him for a few hours, just as he was.

I woke up again when he was trying to shove some vile-tasting broth down my throat, and all of that happy fuzzy feeling got a little thin. “Pfaw,” I sputtered, and he snapped at me.

“It’s special, has protein and salt and all of the shite you bled all over the damned mountain. Now stop struggling and drink, dammit.”

I let my shoulder muscles collapse and allowed him to dump that shite down my throat. “Are you sure I’m not being punished?” I mumbled.

“Yes,” he said back, his voice holding the familiar note of exasperation. “You *are* being punished. You stand on top of a mountain and bleed all over me, and you think I’m not going to be furious at you? One simple direction, that’s all I asked.” His voice clogged, choked, and the horrible concoction disappeared to be replaced by a tender hand, wiping my mouth.

“You picked me,” I told him, comforted by my irritation. “If you don’t like the way things worked out, I’d say you know who to blame.”

“Yes,” he sighed. “Yes. I did pick you. You’re right. But...” My hand, scarred and battered, was taken in his, and he kissed the back of it. “But you... you would have been the worst thing I ever did, if you had died yesterday. Human form or no human form... I would have been no better than a beast without you.”

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“Bollix,” I grunted. “You’re a gentleman born.” I grunted again and shifted. “Yesterday, you say? Have I been drinking that piss-water since yesterday?”

Aerie-Smith grunted back. I could tell he had plans to lecture me more about how necessary I really wasn’t when I was feeling better, but now, he knew what I was thinking.

“Bet you have to go to the privy like no man in history.”

I managed a weak grin. “Didn’t know there was a history book to keep track of that. Be sure to list me in it.”

He stood, and I marveled for a moment that his long, rangy body was really his. Feeling it under my hands was one thing. Seeing it for real? That rated right up there with waking up from death as special. Then he came to the side of the bed to help me as I swung my legs around and planted my feet on the ground.

And crumpled in pain when I tried to stand.

“Gods...,” I whispered tonelessly, looking down at my twisted foot. “Oh gods. Aerie-Smith....” I looked up at him, searching his eyes, hoping to see... see *anything* to show me he saw that I was different, that my body was mine, twisted and disfigured as I was. I went to straighten my back, to get a look into his eyes, and the lump in my spine kept me up short. I swallowed and batted Aerie-Smith’s hands away, fighting tears, fighting nausea.

“Go away,” I muttered, meaning it. “Go away. Just... I’ll piss in a jug... I’ll....” I flailed for a minute, and then caught sight of a looking glass Aerie-Smith kept next to his bed. I

grabbed hold of it in desperation, needing to see if it was really true.

I pulled it to me and glared at the man inside. His sand-colored hair was cut, not much longer than it had been when his sister had cut it, a year ago. His skin was tanned, and the pockmarks had receded a little, but they were still there. His mouth was still twisted, his nose, teeth, and jaw were still not straight, and his eyes were still narrow and....

“Stop it,” Aerie-Smith growled, and I glared up at him, my vision blurry. “Stop it. You look at yourself like you’re something to hate....”

“Well, I won’t be something to pity!” I snarled, gesturing with the mirror furiously. It caught the edge of the table, shattering, and I looked at that sharp edge for a moment and remembered the way out of despair.

“Don’t even think about it!” Aerie-Smith seized my arm and dragged my wrist, still bleeding through the bandages, away from the jagged edge of glass. “Don’t you do it, Naef...”

“*Knife!*” I roared through a raw throat. “*Knife!* Look at me! If I’m not sharp and bitter, I’m nothing!”

“You’re the man I fell in love with!” he snarled, and I was distraught enough to question even that.

“Bollix and shite! Only my mother can love this face, and that’s because she’s too good a soul to know better. You know better, Aerie-Smith! You’ve seen me at my worst... and... oh gods....” I reached for the glass again, my intention unmistakable, but I was weak, weak and wobbly, and he might not have had the mass of a lion-god, but he was still a

big, broad, rangy man. I was pressed back against pillows by my shoulders, where I looked determinedly to the side.

“Leave me alone,” I begged. “I’ll lay here and wallow in my own piss....”

“Shut up,” he shouted, and I recoiled from him. Something wet hit my face, and again. “Shut up! You gods-benighted-fuck-shite of an arse....” One hand left my shoulder and shoved rudely under my lower back to the lump in my spine. “Do you feel that? Do you? Because I felt it—I felt it under my palms every night, and it was still a part of the man I loved. Your foot, yes, I felt that too!” His hand moved from under my body, where my lower back fell into the habit of aching fiercely, and then it moved to my face. I flinched away from him, but he caught my chin in his fingers and stroked my scarred, stubbled cheeks, my lumpy jaw, the savage divot near my mouth. “All of this... all of this was under my fingertips.”

He bent his head and pushed his lips to mine, opening my mouth whether I welcomed him or not. He ran his tongue over my teeth and pulled back. “That too, Naef, that is the mouth that I possessed, night after night... oh gods, beloved.” His choked voice dropped humbly. “Did you think you were the only one who closed his eyes and felt truth in the dark?”

I couldn’t look at him. I just couldn’t. “You said nothing,” I whispered.

“They didn’t change the man, Naef. They didn’t change the person I fell in love with, not in any real way. All the gods did was....”

“Was what?” I snapped, finally able to face him.

“Take away the pain. All they did was take away the pain.”

The tension drained from my body, and I sniffled. “It was good,” I said at last, no sharpness, nothing clever in my words. “It was good... so good, to live without the pain.” I ventured a look at Aerie-Smith, and he was looking at me like I’d kicked his favorite puppy.

“Yes,” he murmured, acknowledging the hurt. “Yes... I know, beloved. It was good to live without the pain. But for me... for me, please, Naef? Please?” Some more of those hot tears, falling on my face. “Could you try to live with it?”

He was so beautiful. Angular jaw, big brown eyes, lean lips and all. I found myself nodding without knowing it. “I’ll try,” I told him. “I’ll try.”

Some of the tension drained out of his body, and he collapsed a little on top of me. “Good,” he whispered against my throat, and my hand came up to stroke his hair.

“You know,” I said after a moment, “I still have to go to the privy.”

He gave something like a sob into my neck. “Of course. Silly me. Let me assist you.”

“Damned nice of you,” I muttered, and he stood up from the bed, pulled back the covers and manhandled me into his arms. “What happened to walking, you big arse?” I was wearing fresh linen small clothes, I realized, and I was happy for it.

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“Last time I was going to let you walk, you almost slit your wrist, you dumb tosser. Like I’m going to trust you to go to the privy for a month after that.” His voice wasn’t so deep now, but the level of disgust—and affection—was even more trenchant.

I lay my head against his chest for a moment. “You would have survived,” I told him, knowing it was fact.

“You couldn’t have called it living,” he said back, his face taut. “Please... please... don’t try to take yourself away from me again. You, angry and bitter, that’s better than no you at all.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I said, as he stood me up in front of the commode, supporting me from behind. “I have the feeling you’re going to be seeing a lot of me like that.”

Aerie-Smith grunted as I fumbled with my body so I could pass urine. “Yes, well, there are some parts of you that are definitely a lot to see.”

I blinked and looked down at my cock as it hung there, doing what those things do when they weren’t fucking. “Yeah, well, I’m glad you’re impressed, because the only beauty you’ll be seeing for the next six months or so is going to be in my pants.”

“Six months?” He bent and pulled my drawers up and tied the string, all while I put a hand out to balance on his shoulder. I remembered, now, having to lean against the privy wall to do myself up. Oh gods... small pains. They seemed bigger now.

"I figure that's about how long it'll take you to decide you're better off without me and unload me like an albatross at the next port," I told him, thinking it was true.

He swung me up again and growled. Oddly, it was almost as impressive from his human throat as it had been from his lion-shaped one. "Shut up."

"I'm just saying." I wasn't saying much else, because my eyes were closing and my body was telling me that once you got rid of most of your blood, you felt like shite until you replaced it.

"And I'm just saying I love you, and if you want to desert me, you'll have to swim off this fucking island, that's what I'm saying."

I grunted as he set me down in the bed again. "Like I could get that far with a club foot," I told him contemptuously, and he sat down next to the bed and took my hand in his.

"Best news I've heard all day," he said, and then, as an afterthought, "besides the news that you were going to live, of course."

Well, I thought, he had me there. "Of course," I sniffed, before drifting off to sleep.

It was hard. That's all there is to it. Anyone who says things like "Happy Ever After" as though that end to a love story is a given, is cooking up a right stinking cauldron of shite and trying to serve it as soup.

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It took a week before Aerie-Smith would let me out of bed without him by my side. He couldn't be there all day. His village had been thrown into chaos by the sudden appearance of hands, feet, and opposable thumbs. Things that had seemed of no importance for many years, like whether your neighbor wanted to piss on the grass or eat your flowers, were suddenly a big seething mess, and Aerie-Smith was needed to walk up and down the pathways of the village, to greet the next ship that came in and help facilitate communication among families that hadn't written letters in years for fear of what to say.

He feared to leave me alone, though, and probably with good reason. I was not in the best of spirits, and the first day he left, he came home to find yet another bedside mirror flung against the back wall of our room, the sunshine dancing rainbows off the glittering shards.

He sighed and called Lot in to help him clean up the shambles. Lot, as it turned out, was a compact little man with ginger hair (instead of his flaming plumage as a bird) and what might have been a permanent sneer if he hadn't seemed to have a soft spot for me.

"I'll just make sure there's no more offending mirrors left in the room, sir," he said with a bow, and I waited until he left to say, "You do that," sourly to the spot where he'd stood.

"Be nice," Aerie-Smith said mildly, and I looked at him sideways.

"I was nice. I waited until he was gone."

"Ah... I remember. Contempt. Your most pleasant virtue. So glad to see it again, will it sub for you in chess?"

“Shut up,” I muttered, cheeks flaming. “So you’re right. He was perfectly pleasant to me, and there’s no need to be an arse. I’ll try to do better.”

“You’re already doing better,” Aerie-Smith said, kissing my temple. “Last year you would have thrown the mirror *at* him, and *then* insulted him. Don’t let anyone say you haven’t mellowed. Tomorrow when I leave, you will have a guest. Try not to throw anything at him. He’s had rather a rough year.”

Parker, the ex-goat, had, indeed, had a rough year. So had his three motherless children: two girls and a boy, all of them dressed in rough trousers with hair that looked like star thistles in the dry season. None of that kept them from being anything other than kind and grateful. Master Parker sat, reading to me from one of Aerie-Smith’s books, and his children played on the floor with one of the chess sets I’d carved for Aerie-Smith in the past year. The set was carved in full court regalia: the queen really *was* a queen, and the knight really *did* sit a horse. The children weren’t necessarily playing *chess*, they were playing *people*, and that was charming to listen to, in all truth.

Lot came in with lunch for them, and none of us were surprised or disconcerted that the children tried to dive into their sandwiches face first before their father reminded them they had hands. He looked at me with a certain grim humor. “They wouldn’t even have remembered how to play together, you know, if you hadn’t made those little wooden balls and that tic-tac-toe set. ’Bout saved our lives, saved our humanity. We thanked you, but... I don’t know. Next time you come into the village, if we look a little better than this, if

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I've managed to plait the girls' hair or one of 'em's wearing a dress... well, you know you did that."

I shrugged. "I enjoyed it," I said truthfully, and Parker looked at me with a thoughtful look on his plain, bucktoothed face.

"You're a good man, Knife. I don't know what brought about those wounds on your wrist. I don't know if they were the magic that saved us, as some folks say, or if they were despair at leaving our Aerie-Smith, as the other story goes. I don't care. You're a good man. It would be a shame if you left us any way but kicking and screaming. I'd think you'd shame what the gods gave you if you went through a couple of slices of flesh, yeah?"

My face burned, in spite of the fact that these particular wounds had truly been the magic that saved them. The day before I'd had the bad grace to try to turn them into something else.

"Heavens forbid," I said quietly. "If I left you any way but shrieking fit to beat down the sky, Aerie-Smith would never forgive me."

Parker smiled at me gently. "True, all very true. You remember that the next time you're around mirrors, would you?"

I gaped at him. I had no idea he knew *that* story.

"Peasants talk, Knife, especially when we love the people in the big house. Your lives are better than storybooks to us. No more thrown mirrors, aye, my friend?"

My face flamed. Bloody wonderful. Now it was not only Aerie-Smith I had to please, or my mother and sister I had not to shame, it was the whole bloody godsbedamned island.

"I hear you," I mumbled, and thought to feign sleep. As it turned out, I didn't need to; it came at my bidding, and when I woke up, Parker and his family were gone, and Aerie-Smith was there with his vile broth to help me gain strength.

"Did you have a nice visit?" he asked sweetly.

"Do you have another pillar of virtue to beat over my head?" I asked, not so sweetly.

"One or two." He put the broth down when I refused to have any more of it. "I could always hold you down and put a funnel over your mouth."

"You could always feed me something real, dammit. You bring me up some stew, and I promise you I'll get better right quick. Lot's venison stew. I swear, I'll eat it."

He looked at me soberly. "That's a promise, Naef. You... you'd probably throw another mirror at me if I tried to show you, but you... you're practically transparent. I'll never forget... your lips turned blue...your skin was gray. I swear, you stopped breathing in my arms. If you're not going to eat the broth the elves left, the least you can do is eat what you promise."

I shifted in the bed, uncomfortable, and reached out to pat his knee. "I've promised to live, right? I've promised to not be such a bloody tosser. The least you could do is feed me proper if I'm going to go to all that other trouble, you think?"

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He covered my hand with his and gave me a precious, real smile. On his human face, it was so beautiful it almost stopped my heart all over again. "I'll go tell Lot."

"Will you sleep with me tonight?" I blurted. I wasn't sure if he had been in this bed, the one we'd shared these past months, or not. I'd been sleeping long and deeply, that was truth. "I want to feel you when my eyes are open." My face flamed. Heavens knew what those words sounded like, coming from my misshapen mouth, but he was the one who kept saying he cared for me. At the moment, my stomach was not nearly so hungry as my skin.

That smile stretched, and I saw one of the dimples in his cheek pop in. I stared at him helplessly, awed by that angle-jawed, grooved-cheeked beauty, and when he lowered his mouth to kiss me, I almost wept. "I would love to share a bed with you tonight, Naef. I would love to share a bed with you the rest of our days."

A part of me almost shrugged, sniffed, and said something rank and sardonic, but apparently enough of the chubby bunny was left to be naked in front of him again.

"Only say things like that when you mean them, Aerie-Smith. Apparently, I'm damned hard to kill."

Those lips trembled against mine in a familiar chuckle. "A thing for which I'm forever grateful."

The next day my escort was Miss Bridget, who looked as delicate and dainty as a lean-faced woman as she had as a tabby cat. Her hair was a rough plait down her back, very near a tortoise-shell brown.

She came in with her knitting and sat by my side and told me the gossip from the town. Apparently the sheep kept running around naked and everyone was afraid the children would catch cold, even in a tropical island paradise. The remaining two leopards fought like cats and dogs now that they were brother and sister, and there was an emergency hut-raising to keep the two of them from killing each other now that they had to share a privy. Also, it seemed there were only two families of pigs on this side of the island. Everybody thought there had been three, but one of the families really *were* natives to the porcine identity, and nobody knew what to do with them. Not a word was mentioned about bacon, for which the entire populace was profoundly grateful.

I listened to her stories avidly, hearing about Aerie-Smith's people. My friends.

"We look forward to you coming about again, Knife," Miss Bridget said eagerly. "You have a way with you. There were a lot of squabbles we didn't take to Aerie-Smith because you gave them the tart side of your tongue. Makes a body ashamed of being petty, that it does." She put down her needles for a moment and held up a small band about three fingers wide, done in sharp, bright colors of orange and blue and green. "Here, give us your hand, there." She slid the band over my wrist, and I saw that it covered my bandages.

"Thank you," I said quietly. Such a small thing, and yet, it made the blinding white of the oft-changed bandage less glaring, less obvious. "That was kind."

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“A kindness would be if you read to me while I finished the other one,” she told me briskly. “I’m about done, and you’re not up for conversation.”

“I’m not great at it as it is,” I muttered, and she laughed. It was a warm sound, and she did it with an open mouth, like a cat.

“You’re lovely at it,” she said, surprising me. “You just need to forget that you’re talking to a person, that’s all.”

I looked at her, sweetness and sharpness, like the best of cats, and I sighed. “People aren’t always kind,” I told her truthfully, hoping I wouldn’t get eaten as a mouse instead of a bunny.

“No,” she said, looking at me levelly. “But you’ve done enough kindness on this island. I think you can count on kindness being our best currency at the moment.”

I gave her a shaky smile, perhaps my first of the day. “It’s shinier than gold,” I said, and that was the truth.

Good moments, yes. Aerie-Smith’s hands rubbing over my back or chest in bed at night: also good moments. Giving him the same and knowing he’d welcome the touch: that alone was sublime.

Getting out of bed and having my leg buckle because I’d forgotten the trick of walking on it: not such a good moment. The spasms in my back the first day I was allowed out of bed: another moment sooner forgotten. Catching glimpses in the various glass surfaces of the house and gasping because I was not prepared for the truth of me: a thousand tiny cuts,

like the shards of the mirrors I'd broken in our room, tiny bleeding moments I forced myself to ignore.

The moment Aerie-Smith greeted me in the morning with a shaft of wood?

It *could* have been one of the worst.

"What in the fuck is that?" I asked, out of sorts. It was my fourth day on my feet and my body was remembering the taste of pain with a vengeance. The night before, Aerie-Smith had worked an hour on the knotted muscles in my back before I'd finally begged him to stop because he needed his rest as well.

"That is going to help you," he snapped. "Did no one give you a walking stick when you were a child, Naef?"

"Of course they did," I snarled. "And I spent a month having it kicked out from underneath me. I figured it was better to learn to walk without it. If it wasn't going to be there when I needed it, then fuck them all!"

His chest heaved in once, then twice, and then again. He didn't whuffle like a beast, and his chest was not nearly as deep, but his brows furrowed in as they couldn't before, and he was almost as fearsome.

"Well, nobody here will kick it out from underneath you," he said, keeping his voice even with an effort. "And the only one who's fucked without it right now is you."

I turned my face away and hunched my shoulder at him, a familiar, protective gesture, but one I hadn't used in quite some time. "I do all right," I mumbled.

“*Gods*,” he burst out. “You really *have* twisted your spine with your own bloody pride!”

“Explain that?” I snapped, and he growled.

“Has it occurred to you that the twist in your spine is because you *don’t* use a stick? Has that even trickled into that thick skull of yours? The foot is going to hurt. I can’t change that. The cobbler is making shoes that might help, and I look forward to seeing his work, but I can’t change it. But your back... dammit, Naef, it’s not only the gods who can take away the pain.” His voice wobbled for a moment, and I straightened my shoulders and looked him full in the face like a man.

He was nearly in tears. For me, of all people. “Damn you, Naef, won’t you even try to let me take away some of your pain?”

It was my turn to breathe deeply, and I did. I snatched the damned tree branch from him and sneered. “Have we not covered the name thing, Aerie-Smith? Do I not have the scars to prove it?”

“Fuck it all! *Knife*—have you heard a word I said?”

“I heard you,” I told him, thrusting my lower lip out. “I heard you. Do you really think, if I’m going to use a walking stick, I’d be caught dead with something like this? Are you being serious here? If you want me to use this piece of shite, let me do what I do best. Take me to my knives.”

“Fine,” he muttered, wrapping his arm around my waist and helping me walk. It would have been easier for him to carry me—I was still slight and he was still quite tall—but he

didn't. Together we hobbled all the way down the stairs and to the back of the house to my wood shop. He brought me my stool, and one for himself, and he kept watch while I worked.

But he'd had little sleep, and I'd been in bed for a week. I looked up, done with my work, and he was fast asleep, his head leaning against the doorframe. With a sigh and a wobble, I hopped down from my stool and let my new project take my weight.

Damned bugger, did he ever get tired of knowing what was best? I limped over to Aerie-Smith and kissed his cheek. He woke up in the middle of a snore and turned to me, taking my mouth by surprise, kissing me deeply, with all of his strength.

I returned the kiss. It was our first with passion since the night before I walked up that bloody hillside, carrying a knife, and it was... ahhhhhh... oh gods. It was worth living for. My mouth opened beneath his, and his tongue came to taste me. One big, long fingered hand came up to frame my throat, and the other spanned my back, and I kissed him back. My appearance, my pain, it was forgotten in the hunger for his touch and his taste, and I must have eaten enough in the past week or so because I had enough blood to rush to my cock, and I found myself grinding up against his thigh helplessly, wanting him like I wanted my next breath.

We parted, breathless, aroused, and leaned foreheads against each other.

"That was a surprise," I panted, and he chuckled. From this angle I could see the line of his nose, a bit Roman, if

truth be known, but it fit his face. Still beautiful, I thought besottedly. Still worth it all to see his face in the fading twilight.

“I don’t know why,” he replied, in the same state. “I’ve been wanting to do that since you woke up.”

“I’m not bright,” I told him, rubbing my temple with his. “You’re well aware of this.”

He snorted. “Here, let me see what my ‘not bright’ lover has created in his magic shop, yes?” He pulled away and held out his hand, and I handed him my walking stick. It was smooth, from the handle to the base, and there was a wrapping of rubberized sailcloth on the end to protect it and keep it from skidding. I’d coated the thing with a fine sheen of oil, and sanded it clean. Of course, that was not what had taken me hours. What had taken me hours was the carving at the handle, and his lips pursed in that dry humor I loved so well.

“Really? You’re really going to do this to me?” he asked, but his lips were quirking up, and I knew he was pleased.

“I liked this shape,” I said with studied indifference. The lion’s head I’d put as the handle of the stick was just like him, right down to that curl of his whiskers when he was amused.

“Do you like this one?” he asked with a surprising diffidence.

I nodded at his beautiful face, his fine shoulders, his long, lean, rangy strength. My throat closed, and I wanted to

scowl because I didn't *want* to be moved, but I was. "I like it very much," I said softly. "It was worth dying for."

He looked up at me with wet eyelashes and the expression of a hurt child. "No," he said, his voice as choked as mine. "It truly wasn't."

I swallowed, feeling for the first time how frightened he'd been that he would have had to walk this earth without me by his side. "Have I mentioned—?" I choked and gulped, unhappy. It was one thing to say this when I was beautiful and even commonplace shite sounded like it had a swelling orchestra at my feet. But he... he looked sad, and afraid, and I could make it better.

"Have I mentioned that I did it because I love you?" I said, when the only sound was the struggle of his breath as he mastered his emotions.

His breath caught, and he wrapped his arms around my middle and buried his face against my stomach, and his body shook, hard, in one big sob. Oh gods... oh gods... I had hurt him... so many times, I had hurt him. By trying to hurt myself, I had hurt him. By trying to push him away, I had hurt him. Every time I opened my mouth and belittled myself with my "turns of rough poetry," I had sliced his heart as fine as my wrists. I did not know why he loved me as he did. I might never know. But as I stood there and held him, my back nagging at me and my leg screaming in protest, I realized that the least I could do was welcome his love with an open heart.

And part of doing that was loving myself enough to want to live.

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“Can we love each other tonight?” he begged. “I want so badly to touch the whole of your body. We can leave the lights off....”

I nodded and kissed his hair. “Absolutely.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “We’re good at seeing the truth in the dark, right?”

He nodded and wiped his cheek against my shirt. “Nobody better.”

I shifted, not wanting the moment to end but hurting just the same, and he took a big shaking breath and let it out. “Shall we go up?” he asked after a moment, and I nodded as though the muscles in my backside weren’t screaming in agony.

“Let’s test my new friend’s mettle,” I said simply, and leaned on it as we approached the house.

Aerie-Smith was right, of course. I should have learned by now that he was often right. The stick helped my back immeasurably. I made it a point to tell him so. It was only fair he knew.

PART XI

SUNSHINE

Healing a twisted soul—not an easy thing to do. Never an easy thing to do.

We managed. Aerie-Smith, mostly, but I had to open up my soul to be healed, and that was hard too.

Our first try making love sat somewhere between a disaster and a success. Probably closer to a disaster, when all was said and done.

My body hurt; there was no two ways about it. My limbs were awkward, and bending and moving was difficult and sometimes painful. We finally settled for me lying on top of him and simply grinding against each other until we achieved some kind of release. An apology, a half-strangled attempt to vow never to try it again, sat on the end of my tongue, until I felt Aerie-Smith give a hard, shuddering sob beneath me. I settled for rubbing my cheek on his smooth, bare chest instead. For once I kept my words locked in my throat, and my tiny, bloodletting knives with them.

He nuzzled the space between my ear and my neck and said, “Thank you,” and I mumbled “Any time,” and meant it. If Aerie-Smith wanted to touch me, if that’s what made him happy? Well, I was seven kinds of fool, but I was not the kind

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of fool that would turn that down. Not out of pride. Not anymore.

The next day, after dealing with the village, a thing that seemed to have gotten easier in this last fortnight as the people remembered they were human, he and I sat down at the chessboard.

It was apparently the first time he'd seen it since that morning on the mountain, and he looked taken aback—and then furious—at the perfect figurine of the body I'd borrowed for less than a year.

I grimaced sheepishly at him and put it aside, taking instead the twisted one it was meant to replace.

He snarled, just like a lion, except with more vowels in it, and then screamed with a sound that was pure exasperated fury. With that sound still echoing through the study, he snatched both figures from me and snapped, “Stay there,” before stalking off.

He returned in five minutes with a pile of splinters and a plain block of wood.

“You’ve been to my workshop....” I sputtered.

“Shut up!” he snapped, throwing the splinters in the brazier where they crackled and burnt blue. They were, I realized with a bit of surprise, the remnants of both the dark kings.

“That was my handiwork!” I protested, and he snarled again.

“Shut up and play. Just leave the dark king plain until you come up with a design that doesn’t make me want to throttle you or weep, will you?”

He asked so little of me, really. I shut up and we played in silence.

That night we tried to make love again. I managed to find his cock in the dark this time, and taste him, strong and hard and thrusting in my mouth, and then the bitter-salt-cream of his spend. When I’d wrung him dry, I shoved myself back up to lay my head on his shoulder, and he stroked the fine lay of my hair with his long-fingered hand.

“Proud of yourself, are you?” he panted.

“Immeasurably,” I told him, meaning it. He chuckled then, and I realized I loved the sound coming from a human throat and a human chest even more than I had when he was a lion. I hadn’t thought it was possible, but there you were.

“That was your handiwork too.”

I grunted. “You couldn’t leave it alone, could you?”

He turned and kissed me in the dark, his intention of moving down my body unmistakable.

“Not on your life,” he whispered as he made his way to my cock.

Turns out, his handiwork wasn’t bad, either.

The next day he let the villagers fend for themselves and walked me to the cove to swim. It was a little depressing to need an escort and a walking stick to a place I’d run fleetly

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to for nearly a year. It was even more depressing to realize I was winded and aching by the time we got there.

We arrived, though, and Aerie-Smith set out the picnic, and then stripped to his swimming costume. I stood and watched him, standing all loose-limbed and lovely, and he looked at me pointedly.

“I know you have it on,” he said patiently, and I sighed.

“It’s one thing in the dark....”

“If you make me throw you in there fully clothed, we’ll both regret it. Now shut up and get in. If anyone needs some time in the surf, Naef, it’s you. Think... think about how it will feel on your back, your leg... please, beloved? I’d never thought to accuse you of vanity.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Of course that’s the one thing he knew would prick my pride. My lip thrust out sulkily, I stripped off my outer clothes and set down my stick. He was by my side in a moment, and I leaned on him, vanity be damned.

Ah, the surf was lovely. As I rode the swells my body was weightless, and my leg ceased to matter. I could tread water. I could swim, albeit not as quickly nor as strongly, and I could lose myself in the surf as I had the entire year before. The sun on the water was enough to lift the heart, and the glossy foliage against the blue sky beyond us was a pretty sight as well.

“You really live in a lovely place,” I said to Aerie-Smith as we waited for a swell, and he flashed a fragile grin at me.

“We,” he said back, loud enough for his voice to bounce off the swell. “We live in a lovely place!” and then we rode the wave in home.

He made me get out after that. Fair enough, since he’d be the one rubbing the cramp out of my limbs if I stayed in too long, and I leaned on him to shore.

We sat and ate a picnic, much as we had done our first day, and he asked me if I’d like to visit my family.

“Yes,” I said, surprised and happy, “but not....” I flushed.

“Not at my aunt’s island? The one with the castle?” he asked gently.

“Right,” I murmured. Better the tossers I knew than the royalty I didn’t.

“We can start on your home island if you wish,” he said happily, and I could tell he’d anticipated more of an argument than this.

“You know,” I said, munching on a rather lush mango in perfect equanimity, “if I was a bloody-minded bastard all the time, it would stop being quite so much fun.”

He threw back his head, his hair shaking back from his long, square-jawed face, and laughed, and I stared at him with so much hunger in my eyes he probably felt devoured from the inside of his skin out. He must have felt it, because he met my eyes with a gaze that could melt sand to glass.

“You can kiss me if you like,” he murmured, and the mango fell from my nerveless fingers.

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“Right,” I muttered. It was a thing I would not have dared a year ago, a thing I would not have dreamed of. But I had lived without pain, and I had lived with love, and that sort of thing gives you courage of an unexpected mettle. Awkwardly I scooted back until we were shoulder to shoulder, mindful that he was watching me soberly as I went.

There was nothing wrong with my arms, and one of them held me up just fine as I turned my body into his. I felt his skin, warm from the sun and gritty from the drying surf, rubbing with mine at the shoulders, and I kept that contact until he lay back on the blanket, and I leaned over him. In the shade from my body, he was beautiful, and his brown eyes were wide and shiny as I told him so.

“So are you,” he told me, and I shrugged.

“I’ve got the sun at my back. It’s easy to be beautiful when you can’t see for shite.”

He smiled at me gently. “I’ve always seen you, Naef. Now shut up and kiss me. A man can’t wait all day.”

His lips were sweet from the fruit and warm from the sun, spicy from himself, and his mouth was open to me as our bodies moved and twined in everything that beauty was.

And so time passed. There was still pain, but there were warm hands and tart words to soothe it. Thanks to Aerie-Smith’s care, and my ability to lean on him and his walking stick, and the clever shoes he’d had fashioned for me, there was even less of it as time went on. There were still moments I couldn’t look in a mirror, but there were moments when I did, and my beloved was behind me. There were still

memories of taunting voices and brutal cruelty, but there were good times to be had on our island and kind folk who made those other memories distant and less harmful than they had been.

We planned our visit back to the top of the archipelago. The week before we were to leave, Miss Bridget gifted me with lace cuffs to hide my scars. Mr. Parker gifted me with a brace he'd crafted, using the same ingenuity his wife had used to garden, that would support the weight on the knee of my twisted foot, that took the pain even more. Even Lot gifted me with the recipe for venison stew that I still adored, even after a year of eating it.

I had a wealth of friends, and gifts overflowing, and so it was my turn to gift somebody as well.

I gifted Aerie-Smith.

I gave him the missing chess piece, the dark king. It was a figure of a man with a walking stick. The pits in his face were almost all sanded smooth by sun and good health. His hair was still short, but thicker with health and, although the piece did not show this, white-gold from the sun. His back was still a little twisted, but not grotesquely so, and he could look any man in the world square from his narrow green eyes.

He was not a paragon of beauty, but he was a man, plain, it was true, but nothing less than any other man on earth.

Aerie-Smith took the figurine from me and wiped his cheek with the back his hand. "An infinite improvement," he

said with a stoic sniff. “I look forward to beating you on this board for many years to come.”

It was this man that I had carved who disembarked from a ship on the island where he grew up.

The townspeople of the little island bustled around him, and he ignored them, his eyes on the house at the top of the hill.

“Kylm added rooms,” I said, surprised. I shouldn’t have been. My sister’s letters had told me as much.

“There’s a child due,” Aerie-Smith reminded me, amused. “They will need rooms, if you and I aren’t to sleep in the garden.”

“I can’t wait to see Gwennie,” I said happily. I had commissioned one of the loveliest, most delicate lace baby shawls from Miss Bridget, and I wanted so badly to give it to her. “Mum will be over the moon.”

Together we cleared the wooden gangplank, and Aerie-Smith offered me his arm. Behind me I heard one of the men who had taunted me as a child. I couldn’t even remember his name now.

“Who in the fuck is that?”

Another voice whose name I couldn’t place answered back, “Some poofy prince and his poofy fuck-toy.”

Aerie-Smith looked at me to gauge my reaction, and I rolled my eyes. I had shed enough tears and enough blood. I didn’t owe these people any pain at all.

“Well, my poofy prince,” I said with a twist to my mouth. “Are we ready yet? I lived in this place most of my life. I can tell you, this is all there is to see of the harbor. What we’re interested is at the top of the hill.”

“That’s what you think,” he murmured. “What I’m interested is right by my side.”

Together we ventured up the main street of the village. Gwen and Mum came out of the house to greet us, and Klyn was not far behind, and we rushed up to see them.

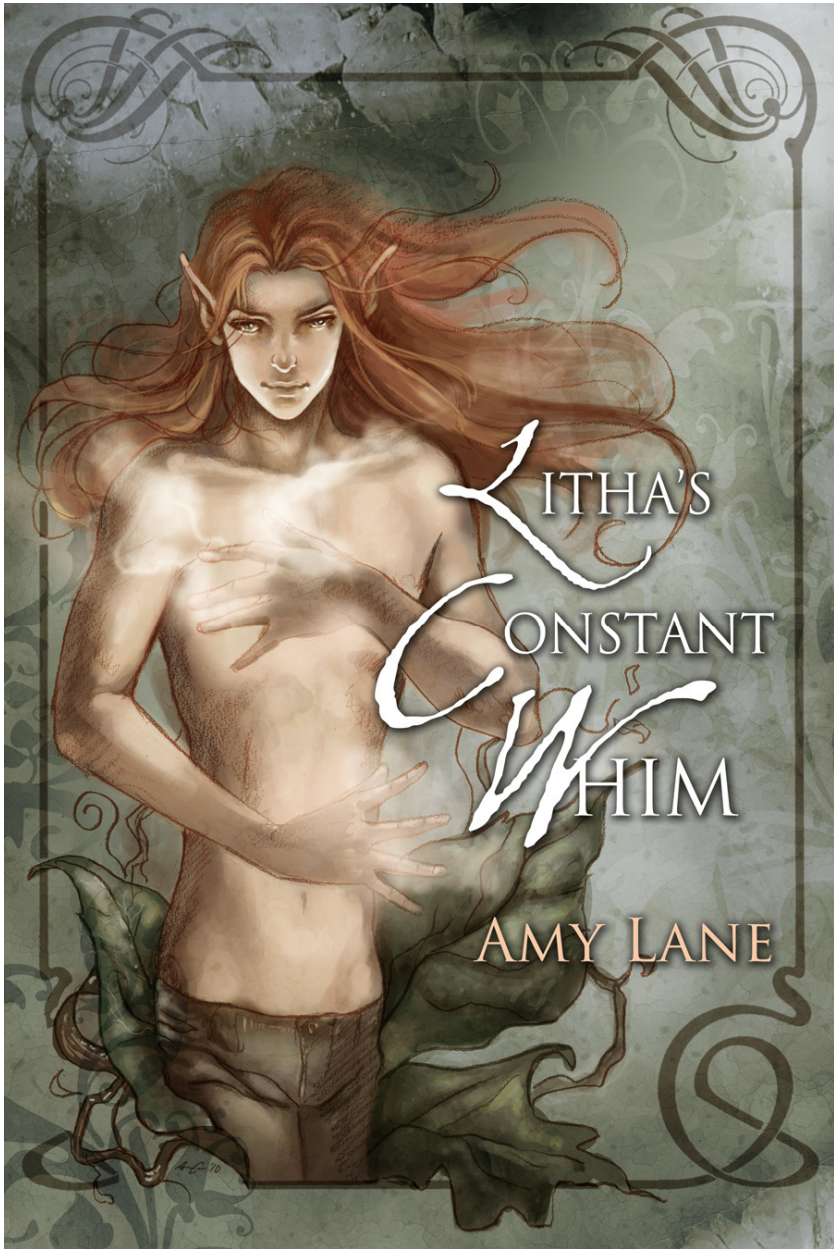
If anyone had learned that love was all the beauty the world needed, it was my lion-hearted beloved and his imperfect lover.

But imperfection was fine, I thought, seeing my sister’s ungainly, lovely body and my Mum’s happy, lined face. If it was my rough turns of poetry that forged my world, it was my rough turns of flesh that had helped to forge my poetry. As my beloved and I were embraced by the best and most loved of our family, I thought that the love bursting from my chest had made my world about perfect. I was just happy that my body could hold it. It was the capacity for love that made me beautiful after all.

AMY LANE teaches high school English, mothers four children, and writes the occasional book. When she's not begging students to sit-the-hell-down or taxiing kids to soccer/dance/karate—oh my! she can be found catching emergency naps, grocery shopping, or hiding in the bathroom, trying to read without interruption. She will never be found cooking, cleaning, or doing domestic chores, but she has been known to knit up an emergency hat/blanket/pair of socks for any occasion whatsoever or sometimes for no reason at all. She writes in the shower, while commuting, while her classes are doing bookwork, or while she's wandering the neighborhood at night pretending to exercise and has learned from necessity to type like the wind. She lives in a spider-infested and crumbling house in a shoddy suburb and counts on her beloved mate, Mack, to keep her tethered to reality—which he does while keeping her cell phone charged as a bonus. She's been married for twenty plus years and still believes in Twu Wuv, with a capital Twu and a capital Wuv, and she doesn't see any reason at all for that to change.

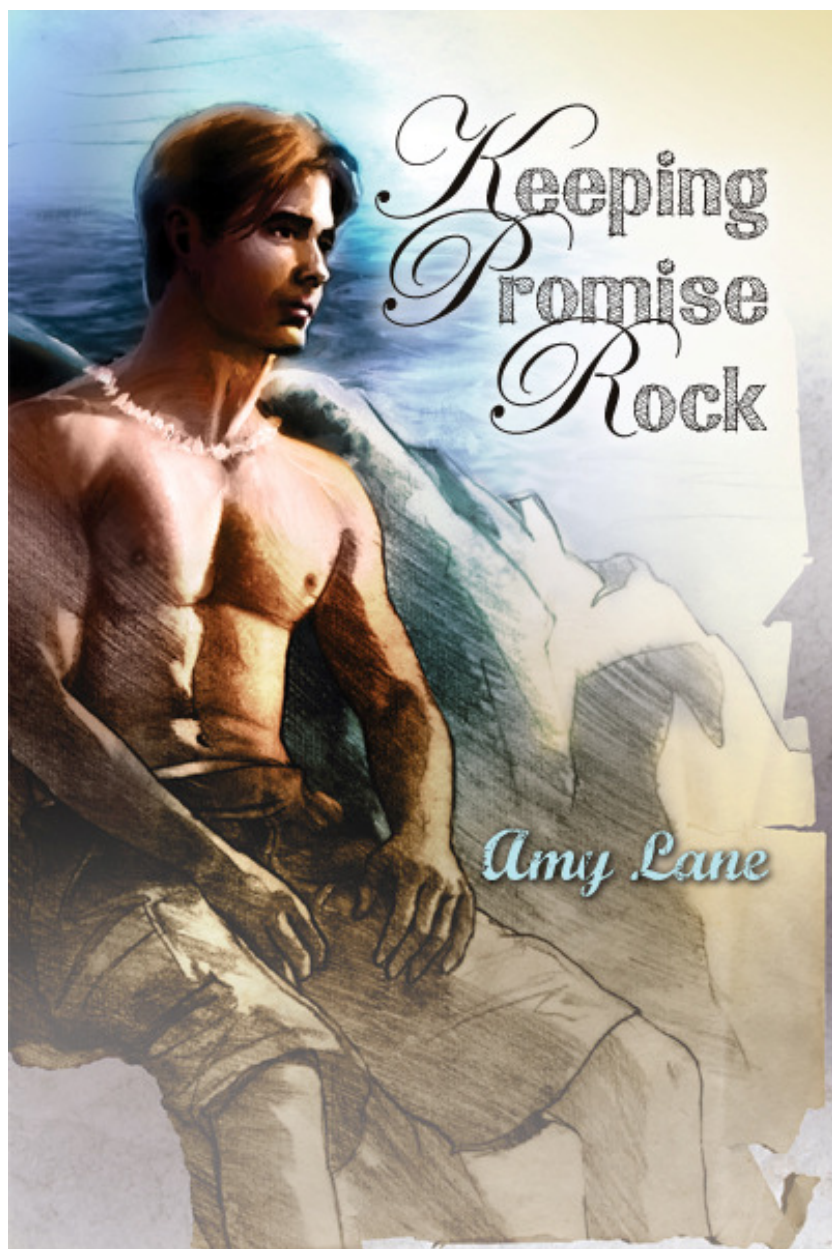
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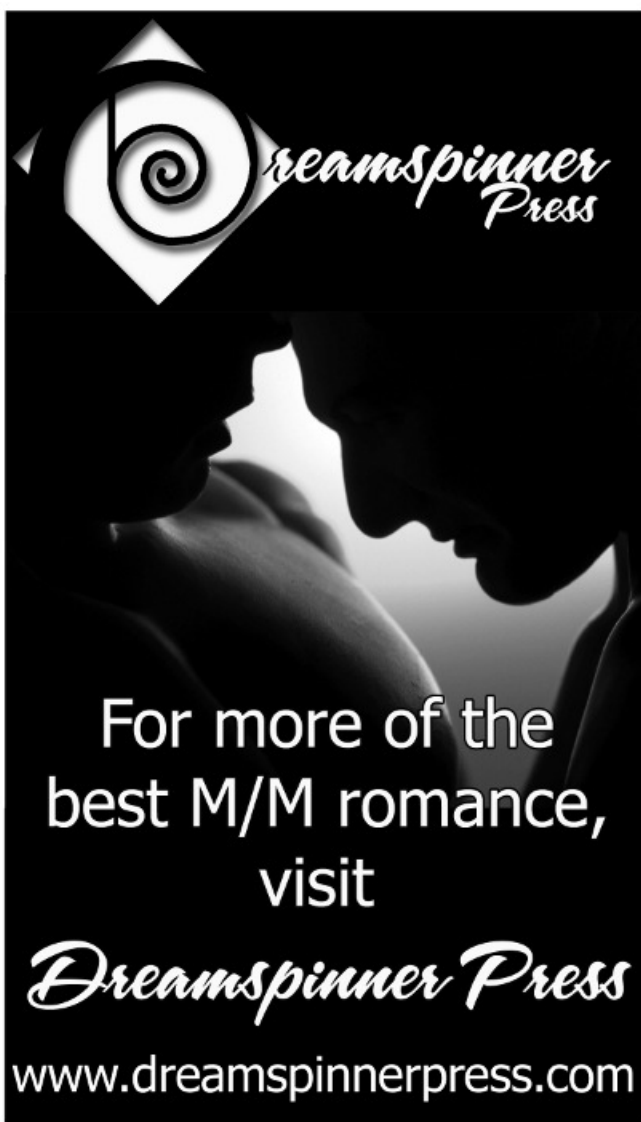


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The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's faces in profile, facing each other in a close, intimate pose. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral design.

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