

**Bestial Mirrors and Beautiful Shadows: Re-Telling *Beauty and the Beast*, Melding
Creative Writing and Literary Analysis**

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to form and expound upon a literary analysis of the thematic elements to the classic fairytale, *Beauty and the Beast*, and how it has changed over time. Though holding true to the traditional elements of the tale, retellings not only delve into the main characters but also portray them in such a way that they are two halves of one whole; two separate characters that come together to create one balanced entity. This is brought about by the character's acceptance of their own natures before they can accept the other's. Accompanying this paper is my own retelling, one which pulls from both traditional versions of the story as well as taking inspiration from contemporary influences.

Telling stories is a powerful component of both human nature and culture and we have been cultivating this skill for as long as we developed the sense to speak and then to write. Arguably the oldest genre of story are our myths, legends, folk-stories; fairytales. Do not let the name deceive you as fairytales are not solely for children. In his collection of short stories, *Tales From the Perilous Realm*, J.R.R. Tolkien discusses the concept of “fairy stories” and how they are not exclusively for the nursery:

It is true that in recent times fairy-stories have usually been written or adapted for children. But so may music be, or verse, or novels, or history, or scientific manuals...The value of fairy-stories is thus not in my opinion, to be found by considering children in particular...Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded. (Tolkien, 361)

Whether at age two, thirty-four or seventy-six, humans are creatures of want and desire. This is of course, not all we are but it is our desire that feeds our drive, our very will. Fairytales, though seemingly whimsical and fantastical as they may appear, feed that hunger. Perhaps in a way no other tales do. And as we grow and age, our desires change with us.

A fascinating aspect of the fairytale genre is just how many tales are retold as humanity progresses through time. Out of the multitude of fairytales, *Beauty and the Beast*, otherwise

known as the ‘Animal Bride/Groom’ tale, is truly one of the most metamorphic. There have been many retellings from multiple authors across country and time. Pick up a copy of Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*; a book I myself own and have read, and you’ll see what I mean. Carter has two versions of the classic story in her book: “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”. Though the latter tale mentioned is significantly more light-hearted than the former, these are not tales for children. Both tales, as well as others in the book, deal with and depict very adult forms of desire and sexuality. In analyzing Carter’s work, Patricia Brooke outlines this thematic twist:

While it has been argued that all of the tales in *The Bloody Chamber* involve a sort of retelling of Beauty and the Beast, the two stories that explicitly confront the eighteenth-century French twosome illustrate possible backgrounds and motivations behind this romantic opposition... in turn, destabilizing the artificially restrictive categories of Beauty and the Beast...to undermine the lingering presence in contemporary cultural presumptions. (Brooke, 69)

Carter’s work is generously peppered with the unleashing of one’s sexuality and desires. Though this is not exclusive to the animal bride-groom tale but it is an important facet of its foundation; there is something to be said about bestial desires, ones that we often curb or repress for fear of judgement, rejection or out of a sense of propriety. In “The Tiger’s Bride” the main female character – the beauty – is inadvertently drawn to the otherwise feral qualities of the

beast; not out of a sense of novelty or to sample the exotic but because it calls to something within herself:

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (Carter, 84)

Element's of "The Tiger's Bride" influenced by own retelling: *Beasts*. In my own version of the Beauty and the Beast tale, both central characters – which flip-flop between which is the beast and which is the beauty – undergo transformations, some very physical and others more internal. They are both creatures solitude and intricacy as well as ones with darkened backgrounds. But with darkness also comes light; one cannot be without the other. That is what I hoped to represent with *Beasts*. Not necessarily that opposites attract – the jury is still out on that – but that complimenting aspects often work well together, they create balance. Equal halves of one whole. One offers something that the other may lack or desire within themselves and vice versa. I found that there are several retellings of Beauty and the Beast that hold true to this; the two characters are two halves of one whole and without the other, neither are complete. A romantic could say that this eludes to something like soulmates.

Another story that has thematic elements of the *Beauty and the Beast* tale is the Fever series by author Karen Marie Moning. Though the series itself is not so much a concrete retelling as other works, the interaction between the central female character, MacKayla, and the forefront

male character, Barrons, is a roaring echo of beauty and the beast, in which case one of these characters is, very much, the Beast. Moning does lean more towards the “opposites attract” side of the scale in this case but for the purposes of the story it works beautifully. There is the more traditional masculine vs. feminine aspect in their story, at least at first glance. As previously mentioned, this book series is not a blatant retelling, as the plot is a fantasy-murder mystery – heavily spiced with sexual tension and frightening monsters. But much like Angela Carter’s work, the character of the Beauty in “The Tiger’s Bride” goes through a personal transformation, so does MacKayla in the Fever series.

How could a peacock lust for a lion? I’d been as fancy as one of the proud males, in my useless plumage. I’d strutted around, stealing glances at the king of the jungle, denying what I felt. I’d assessed my tail and his killing claws and understood that if the lion were to lay down with the peacock—it would only be on a nest of bloody feathers. It hadn’t stopped me from wanting him. It made me grow claws. (Moning, 540)

This transformation is not a forced one, it is one that comes about because the character *wanted*. Wanting drives will. Will drives change. Mac has her own set of claws and teeth to match Barrons’. They are equals, compliments to one another. Much like the heroine of Carter’s story, MacKayla finalizes her own transformation, with Barrons – the Beast – being the catalyst. Patricia Brooke’s points this out quite eloquently in her analysis of Carter’s work.

Her offering is not that of the lamb on the altar, but rather one without fear, between equals. She does not tame the Beast...nor is she consumed by him. Instead, bathed by his 'tongue, abrasive as sandpaper', this Beauty joins a new order of existence, discarding 'skin after successive skin...In embracing the Beast, Beauty gains power, strength and a new awareness of her self – its construction and position. (Brooke, 83)

This alludes to the notion that accepting oneself, even the pieces we do not wish others to see is the key turning point in accepting and loving another. We are not all beauties and we are not all beasts but something in between. And when we can share who we are with another without fear or the desire to change one another, then we are free. Two halves coming together to form the whole.

It is important to explain that the traditional stories of the Animal Bride/Groom did not deal with explicit transformations on both the side of the beauty and of the beast, nor did they focus so much on the character of Beauty's desire. It is a testament to the time period in which the stories are created that give light to the inner-inner-workings, desires and social constructions being discussed within the many different versions of one story. In the most well-known and popular version of the thematic tale, written in the mid-eighteenth century by Marie-Jeanne Leprince de Beaumont, the French story was, in truth, one big metaphor about the constraints and trials of arranged marriages amongst the upper class as well as the place of the female in a

male-ruled economical society. In her work on the aforementioned tale, Tatiana Korneeva discusses and debates the aspects of desire and desirability in Beaumont's tale.

The issues of desire and desirability actually run parallel to the question of power, where the categories of masculine and feminine belong to an economic and ideological order. According to this perspective, the abduction of the right to exercise their desires in their tales enables women to disrupt their subordination within males and to manipulate the male economy. (Korneeva, 247)

Beaumont's tale was written during the French Enlightenment, which factored heavily into the more modern – for the time period – concepts expressed in her tale of gender identity and sexuality. Once again, the story of Beauty and the Beast changes in tandem with human society and culture. Contemporary retellings delve deeper into the fantastical aspects of the story as well as focusing on *not* sacrificing one's own desires to fit but present the seemingly simple concept that a being can still be their individual self while also being with another. This particular aspect seen in contemporary retellings seems to be in juxtaposition with their traditional ancestors; it is no longer about setting free the beautiful visage trapped behind the mask of the beast to fulfill some notion of an ideal, but rather accepting the beast and all other aspects are part of the complete package and still having them regardless. But before all that, one has to look at their own beast and love it for what it is.

Fairytales may be appealing to children but that does not mean they are no less relevant nor valuable to adults. Nor does that mean they are not subject to change as time goes on and social conceptions in human beings transform as well. In her book, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tale and Their Tellers*, Marina Warner points this particular characteristic is very prevalent in the Beauty and the Beast tales.

One dominant curve can be discovered in the retellings from the seventeenth century to the present day: at first, the Beast is identified with male sexuality which must be controlled or changed or domesticated through *civilité*, a code chiefly established by women, but later the Beast is perceived as a principle of nature within every human being, male and female, young and old, and the satires affirm beastliness's intrinsic goodness and necessity to holistic survival. (Warner, 280)

Warner means to explain that the character of the Beast no longer represents traditional aspirations and notions about being "bestial". And just as well, she points out that with the changing of the perception of the Beast's character, his counterpart, Beauty, is also seen in a different light as well. Again, driven by *want*.

The attraction of the wild, and of the wild brother in the twentieth-century culture, cannot be overestimated; as the century advances, in the cascade of deliberate revisions of the tale, Beauty stands in need of the Beast, rather than vice versa, and the Beast's beastliness is good...Or at least, this

has become the drift of the story...Her need of him may be reprehensible, a moral flaw, a part of her carnal and materialistic nature; or, it can represent her understanding of love, her redemption. He no longer stands outside her...but he holds up a mirror to the force of nature within her, which she is invited to accept and allow to grow. (Warner, 307)

My own tale of *Beauty and the Beast* was a result from my own experience of developing my writing skills as well as my extensive research – both intentional and by chance – of many different versions of the fairytale as well as other fables. I developed it further with this gathering of knowledge and my own budding understanding of what the story really was. Everyone takes away something different from a story every single time they hear it or read it. Both Angela Carter and Karen Marie Moning's works were fantastic inspirations for the tone and voices of the characters I began to create. In my own retelling, the two main characters find themselves changing not simply for one another, but *alongside* one another. They bring out pieces of each other that they may not have been able to see or acknowledge prior to meeting. In doing so, they find that perhaps they needed one another after all for without them they are incomplete. I wanted to merge this newer perspective of the classic tale while also paying homage to the traditional traits. I didn't want to write a cookie-cutter romance; I wanted to develop a story about two separate beings with their own problems and baggage who not only learn from one another but make each other stronger in body and mind. For me the tale of *Beauty and the Beast* is not about domesticating a feral nature, it is about finding the someone whose beast compliments your own.

It seems very simple and yet it's a struggle to cultivate and accept yourself for who you are. It's even more frightening to hope that someone else, whom is under no obligation to want or love you, would accept and understand all of you as you are. To want to not only share in your beatific qualities but the bestial ones as well. And as Tolkien mused in the beginning of this paper, *desire* is the foundation; for both fairytales and humans as well as beasts and beauties alike.

Beasts
Leandra Bombace

“Desire makes life happen. Makes it matter. Makes everything worth it. Desire is life. Hunger to see the next sunrise or sunset, to touch the one you love, to try again.”

- Karen Marie Moning, Shadowfever

She ran. Behind her, the shouts and thuds of stones being thrown were far too close for comfort. If they caught her, they would kill her.

The wound in her side burned, the free-flowing blood soaking her thin dress and trickling down her side, her thigh, making her foot slippery. She was dirty, her face streaked with dust, tracks of tears running down her cheeks. She kept running. She did not want to die.

Stones and twigs bit into the soles of her feet, sharp edges cutting into her tender flesh. The shouts clamored on, the men of the village in hot pursuit. The pounding of their feet were lessened by the roar of her pulse in her ears. She could not stop.

She crashed through the trees and brush, one hand pressed to her side to try to staunch the blood. The knowledge that she could bleed out loomed in the back of her mind, its din almost as loud as the cries for her blood echoing behind. Her feet did not pause.

Away. Get away.

Her marriage had been arranged in the spring. Isha was a wealthy man, ten years her senior. He was a merchant and a friend of her father's. He was handsome, seemingly polite and came from a promising background, his heritage rich with influence. Her two elder sisters, Radha and Sati, were envious of her husband-to-be. Though both married, their husbands were not so well-liked nor as pleasing to look upon as Isha. But they promised her that her life would be good and filled with fortune if she did as her husband bid.

That is all anyone seemed to say; obey and your life will be easy. There was an unspoken warning behind that simple advice, flashes of wariness and shadows of reassignment in once bright eyes.

"Tamasa," her sisters cautioned. "hold your tongue and mind your husband. He is master and his word is law. He will provide for you well. What is there to be unhappy about?"

Despite his wealth, looks and shrewdness in matters of business, Tamasa often found the dark look in Isha's eyes were not one of passion. She could have dealt with the embers of physical want. But when her betrothed gazed at her, there was a murky current of covetousness drifting on the surface. Such that it seemed that no one else saw, or wished to see.

The possessiveness in his hands when he cupped her arm to escort her home made her on edge and uneasy. The fine hairs on her nape and arms prickled in warning and she smothered the urge to jerk away from his touch. His fingertips left a residue on her flesh without leaving a single print.

As the youngest of three daughters Tamasa had been granted much leniency as a child. She had grown up in her mother's garden, in the stories her aunts told when the

men went to the market or gathered for strong-scented drinks in the comforts of smoke filled rooms that smelled of sweet, rotting leaves.

Her sisters doted on her and she had run barefoot and free. She climbed the massive roots of trees and hid amongst the branches, scrambling up the trunks like a hairless monkey, giggling all the way. Her mother wove flowers in her wild curls and sang songs of heroes and fantastical creatures the likes of which danced in Lona's dreams.

This was her world until her first bleeding. The change from girl-child to woman was abrupt and strange. Almost unwanted. She was expected to follow her sisters' examples without question, learn to be a bride of grace and docility. A lovely flower; delicate and fragrant for the world to cultivate and examine. Her sole purpose had narrowed down to wedding a man from a wealthy family, preferably one that would strengthen the ties of her father's business.

Napping in the crooks of trees and running free through the garden seemed like a whisper of another life. A child's innocent dream.

Do as you are told and no trouble will befall you.

It had been a grand ceremony. The entire village had partaken in the celebration. There had been a fantastic feast and her sisters, mother and aunts had sewn her a beautiful wedding gown, a *lehenga*, in the color of buttery marigolds. Her hands and feet had been painted with henna, the designs delicate and intricate. The bangles that clinked with the tiniest of movements had felt heavy on her arms and around her ankles.

They were beautiful shackles.

For Tamasa, the entire ceremony had passed in a blur of words and prayer; all of which held little meaning for her. There had been a faint buzzing in her ears throughout, and her eyes, had been dark and unblinking.

Still she smiled demurely.

As she was told.

The beatings began shortly after the wedding night. She was expected to be obedient, docile, even-tempered.

Hold your tongue.

I am master here.

You are mine.

Obey.

Obey.

She suffered through in silence, making the mistake of trying to run only once. Isha had beaten her so badly she could not move from bed – the bed she so despised – for nearly two days. His sisters taught her how to cover the bruises and welts. When he

forced himself on her, inside her, they wordlessly brought her tea in the morning and did not comment when she stared off into space when Isha was otherwise occupied.

They told her she was lucky never to scar.

Tamasa hid herself away in the corners of her mind, silently screaming at them. She wanted to shake them, rail against them. But she did none of this, for she noticed their darting, downcast eyes and subtle flinches when Isha was mentioned or was simply in the same room. His sisters knew what their brother was capable of.

Tamasa kept quiet.

Mute.

She made her husband tea, cooked his food. She cleaned their home – *her cage* – she smiled when expected and spoke only when she was spoken to.

Tamasa became the quiet, unassuming wife that the man who was her husband and everyone else expected her to be. She did not ask why, she did not question, she did not wander.

Tamasa *waited*.

As a child, her mother's garden had been a place of wonder and magic. All of their village was awed by Anoushka's gift was caring for plants and flowers. A kaleidoscope array of colors, textures and fragrances, it was the closest thing Tamasa had had to the wilds of the jungles across the river. She learned much about what flowers bloomed best in the sun and which faired better in the dark of night. Her mother taught her to observe which birds sought out and which ones they avoided. Some blossoms could be used to heal wounds, ease womanly cramps and pains, others could bring down a fever when crushed and boiled into a tea.

If consumed or inhaled some plants and their spores could cause paralysis, hives and sores. Limit the breath.

One of the most unassuming of the plants in her mother's garden had green and purple leaves with tiny, prickly looking flowers the color of fresh blood. Anoushka had cautioned Tamasa to never eat any part of the flowers or its little seeds. Tamasa had noticed that no animals fed from the little plant.

She waited until a day when she could take one of Isha's sisters - the youngest one, for she was easily distracted - and visit her family. Her father was at the market but the house was filled with many faces. Her sisters, nieces and nephews and aunts roamed the large house. Her mother was cooking the midday meal in the kitchen; the heady spices and tangy scent of simmering stew were mouthwatering and achingly familiar.

It was easy to pretend her life was a happy and joy-filled one. The bruises had finally faded into nothingness so there was no need for the heavy pastes of makeup or kohl. She wore a golden *saree* that her sisters cooed over in envious delight.

"Your husband spoils you Tama-li!" Sati exclaimed, using her baby name as she fingered the silk of a sleeve. Tamasa smiled easily, making sure it reached her eyes.

She waved off their expressions of disbelief with an elegant hand.

“It is a simple thing.” She assured the surrounding women.

The dress was indeed of beautiful make; hand stitched, finely woven and dyed a brilliant gilt that made her own deep bronze skin glow. Isha knew his wife was beautiful. He reveled in the knowledge that she belonged to him, that he possessed such an exquisite treasure that others would envy. Having her dressed in his choice of clothing pleased him, especially when covetous eyes followed her as he escorted her through the market on rare days.

Tamasa would never have chosen such a loud color or pattern herself. As a child she had preferred loose fitting tunics, had chafed to don the dresses and shawls that females wore in place of more free-moving clothing. She could never suggest such a thing now.

“You are radiant as ever dear sister.” Radha observed politely. There was a grudging edge to her tone, veiled behind a smile that did not reach honey-toned eyes. She was the eldest of the three sisters. Her husband was a dull, over-weight man who liked to indulge in too much smoke and cared little for his three children. Radha’s children were sweet enough but the mere thought of bearing any children of Isha’s filled Tamasa with such an indescribable horror that she refused to dwell on it. The very notion made her ill.

While the women sat and ate and talked about all manner of things; the weather, the heat, the local priest and the ever-present gossip. Tamasa quietly slipped out the kitchen door, taking the small footpath to the garden. Immediately she disappeared under the draping fronds of the trees, a silent shadow. Her golden dress was garnish in comparison to the earthy, lush greens and bursts of blooming colors of the plants and flowers. She took a deep breath and allowed her carefully constructed mask to slip for a few precious moments.

She could have taken the path blind, her feet knew it so well. The coolness of the trees and shelter of the various blooms and ferns brushed against her skin like tiny hands offering welcome and solace.

Rounding an almost-hidden corner, her chartreuse eyes landed on a familiar shrub. Resembling a small tree, it was six hands taller than Tamasa herself. The flowers were mixed; the yellow-green were the male and the red were the female.

So unassuming and innocent.

Taking the tiny knife she’d pilfered from the kitchen, she carefully cut off a flower bloom and their joining stems, delicately folding them into a small swatch of cloth, taking care not to squeeze the little capsules that held the seeds. Folding the little bit of fabric into a tiny pouch, she wedged it into a snug layer of her saree wrapped about her waist. Pocketing the knife and enjoying the feel of cool metal of the blade, Tamasa gazed at the little shrub. Its flowers bounced and swayed minutely in the sticky, summer breeze.

She smiled with her teeth.

A creature beaten is not a docile thing. It is patience. It is rage; rage that churns under seemingly still water. If one hopes to tame a creature, one beats it until the animal suits to the more powerful being. It will let you stick your hand in its mouth, it will lay in its cage. But it does not forget.

It waits.

Isha was careless in his assurance that his wife was a tamed creature. He did not expect her to know anything at all, certainly not the various uses of plants. Not that horticulture interested him in the first place. Isha believed that women were simple-minded dull creatures and should they hint at the slightest interest or curiosity of any pursuit, it must be quashed immediately.

Tamasa hid the seeds where she knew her husband would never find them, let alone think to look. For the first and only time in her life she was thankful she was the only one to clean the house.

The following morning before they sat down to breakfast, she added the finely cursed seeds to his tea and sat opposite him at the low table. She ate her meal quietly while Isha chewed noisily and complained about one of the spice sellers from the market. Tamasa sipped her own tea and ate neatly, not a crumbier marring the beauty that was a vibrant ruby-hued dress. She kept her eyes on her plate and silently counted how many times she refilled his cup.

It took four days,

By the last day, Isha did not go to the market. Before the sun had fully risen, Isha's once rich, golden-brown skin had taken on a chalky pallor. The luxurious, thick locks of his hair were drenched with sweat. His flesh became feverish, his bowels did not obey him and his waste came out bloody. Tamasa watched as his chest rose and fell harshly, his lungs seeking breath they could not find. She sat by the bedside, scrupulously dabbed at his heated brow a cool, damp cloth as his sisters did whatever they could think go to try and ease his suffering. They chattered and shrieked like frantic monkeys, wringing their hands and flying in and out of the room in a flurries of panic.

Her husband did not have the energy to scream at them as he normally would have.

"Send for the healer!" She cried. One ran out of the front door to do as they bid. Tamasa knew the doctor would not arrive in time.

Isha moaned nonsense and in his glazed eyes Tamasa saw fear. There as no joy nor sorrow in her, only cold relief. After what seemed like a small eternity, her husband's body broke down into convulsions. The sheets of the bed were twisted and thrown to the floor and Isha's sisters cried out as his wild flailing. Lona put a hand to her mouth, jerking back from the bed as foam bubbled from Isha's lips.

By the time dawn had peaked over the horizon Lona's husband was dead.

She knew it was only a matter of time before one of Isha's sisters accused her. Tamasa knew that his sisters' loyalty and empathy for her would only go so far. They were as dependent as cattle in the field and without a master to herd them they did not know how to gather themselves. When they brought the entire village down upon her, Tamasa knew she had to run. Her family could do nothing for her, even if her father and sisters had found it within themselves to try to help her.

The only one who had offered any form of assistance had been her mother. Anoushka had called to her daughter amidst the screams of the mob, her eyes bright and silver-lined. She had been immediately silenced by her husband, her face lost in the crowd.

Tamasa fled, with no time nor capacity to take anything with her as what seemed like the entire village pursued her. She even thought her heard Radha's and Sati's voices amidst the howls and curses of outrage, the demands for retribution.

She refused to die by their hands.

A rock barely missed her head, flying past in her peripheral vision like a dull falling star. Her hair was unbound and tangled, her dress ripped in places when some of the villagers had managed to grab her before she'd broken free.

A woman did not kill her husband, not for any reason. Even if he beat her, tormented her, jailed her. Took everything from her save or her life.

But, if she could make it to the river, Tamasa knew none would dare follow.

The river was wide and deep and she ran the risk of drowning or being taken by crocodiles. But Tamasa would try, had to try. For if she didn't, they would beat her with hands and sticks and stones. Then they would burn her, alive or dead.

But they would not catch her. She had run wild as a young child and now she put all her energy and memory of being fleet-of-foot into making her pained feet fly across the earth. The blood trickling from her side made her fingers slippery and her once white dress was streaked with crimson and brown. Her lungs burned and ached, her heart thundered in her throat and the flesh of her soles cut and bled on sharp little stones but the river was in sight.

All she had to do was jump.

The shouts congregated into a singular, outraged cry as she found herself from the steep bank. The wind rushed to meet her, whisking her hair back from her face in a long flag of dark locks. A few seconds felt like an hour and she narrowly missed an outcropping of jagged rocks before she hit the surface of the water, the cool of it a shock and a grim relief as the current closed over her head and Tamasa heard nothing but the dull roar of the river.

Tamasa was a good swimmer but the river was a different entity entirely. On a whim it could change its attitude from life-giver to indifferent destroyer at the change of

the current. And perhaps some God decided to take pity on her for if there were any crocodiles waiting for an easy meal, they did not touch her.

As she coughed up lungfuls of river water on the silty bank, Tamasa concluded she had just been lucky.

Glancing down at her side as she knelt in the shallows, she noted the blood had slowed to a faint trickle, her dress now a tired, washed-out pink. The loss of lifeblood made her head light and her eyes heavy. She was so tired.

“Where were the Gods when I lay beaten and bruised in bed?” Tamasa asked, gasping. “If they had ever taken any pity on me, they would have struck Isha down the moment of his birth.” She slurred as she rose from the waters. Slowly trying to regain her balance, she made her way up the bank towards the shadow of the trees several feet away. There were different sounds here; the calls of the birds and deer and the murmuring of branches in the breeze. New scents in the air; the musky, rich smell of earth and creatures hidden beyond her sight.

There were no sounds of people, no calls for fresh fruit or bolts of fabric. No odor of man-made smoke or perfumes. Here, man did not dare to venture.

Man was outcast in the jungle, for it had not been open to the naked, two-legged creatures far longer than any could remember.

Tamasa recalled the old stories of the jungle from her childhood. Stories of lands untouched and unseen, of waters that could heal any wound. Her mother had told her bedtime stories of the beautiful and terrible snake people, the *naga*, who dwelled in the waters and caves, guarding the entrances and depths to their hidden kingdoms. Depending on their moods, it was said the naga would either grant you a wish or devour you whole.

And then there were the tales of the *Khan-ral*; the god creatures. Great animals that were given reign over the land from which the gods had deemed man unworthy.

As Tamasa limped to the tree-line the sounds of the jungle quieted, as if every living being dwelling within and beyond the trees paused to consider this battered and bleeding thing struggling forward. She glanced back up the river from whence it had carried her from.

She could not go back, would never see her family again. Never again could she live amongst human kind; there was no place for her there. Perhaps there never had been.

She turned to the jungle, could feel it staring back at her. Watching.

Waiting to see what she would do.

Tamasa pressed a hand firmly to her side and limped forward. The jungle swallowed her up.

The thought later occurred to her that it was fairly dangerous to be traversing through unknown jungle while wounded and tired, but desperation and resignation made for fine tools of motivation. Tamasa knew it was imperative that she take care of the

wound in her side. She searched for familiar plants that could lessen the pain and help clear any infection. She took care not to disturb any snakes in her search; the last thing she wanted was a snake-bite atop her already precarious physical state. Coming upon a plant she recognized, she plucked a few of the bright green leaves and chewed them. A mild painkiller, it would pungent and slightly bitter. The effects would wear off before the sun set.

Tamasa knew she would need to find shelter before full darkness descended. Humans did not fair well in any jungle at night, much less ones that were closed off and home to strange creatures.

On and on she walked, her feet shrieking in pain with every step. There was a tiny trail of blood in her wake. No doubt there were things following her. She had no faith in any gods, even if they should be so inclined to watch and listen, so she offered no prayers. Instead, she thanked the jungle and its unseen residents and hoped for safe passage. Several times she heard the chitter of little grey monkeys overhead and the distant call of a peacock.

She ate nuts and berries and shuffled along as best she could. By the time the midday sun reached its peak, the air was sweltering. The wound in her side had finally stopped bleeding but the flesh was raw and tender. If she moved too sharply, the skin pulled, threatening to reopen. Gingerly, she sat at the base of a tree that had taken root atop a dried up ravine. It offered her a view several miles away down into a grassland filled with tall, golden blades of grass as high as her shoulders.

Large, hulking shapes in shades of darkened grey and brown lumbered in the distance. A trumpeting call reached her eyes. Tamasa smiled faintly.

Her mother had always been fond of elephants.

Watching as they moseyed along in a line with their young, Lona thought of how her mother had cried out as the mob had rushed to tear her apart.

“Run, run my little Tama! Do not look back!”

It had not been anger nor horror in Anoushka’s eyes but deep sorrow and love, even as her own husband struck her to keep her silent. If she had been unhappy in her marriage, she had never let her children see it. Tamasa’s memories were filled with her mother laughing, dancing with she and her sisters, baking sweet-scented bread and tending her magnificent garden.

Perhaps it was in those small moments where her mother had been content to live the life of a subservient wife, as long as she had her children. Tears pricked the corners of Tamasa’s eyes, a lump forming in her throat.

There was nothing she could do now. She had made her choice. She only hoped that her mother would not suffer for it.

Going to rise, she hissed between her teeth as she pressed down on the soles of her feet to lift up and carry on. This was the hottest part of the day, the very air thick and oppressive. If she moved slowly she would be alright. Her next task was to find water,

and soon. The monkeys that had found her so intriguing before had journeyed off to find shade and a cool place to rest. Most animals would be slow and still during this time, for it was in this type of crushing heat that any creature could die.

Tamasa kept to the shadows and shade of trees and plants, taking one footstep at a time. After some time, she realized the land was changing. The jungle grew more dense and green, the trees denser and taller so that she had to tilt her head back to see their leaves. At least they offered more shade than the previous, sparser forest. Here there were thick, waxy leaves hanging from plants with large, bright blooming flowers that she did not recognize. The moss that dappled the ground was a mercy for her feet and Tamasa found herself very tempted to lay down and simply sleep on a bed of it. Rocks nestled beneath massive, protruding roots.

It would have all been very beautiful if Tamasa had not felt eyes on her.

The fine hairs on her nape slowly stood up in warning and she knew that this time, it was not the curious monkeys. She paused and glanced about, slowly turning. Her human eyes were poor compared to most creatures who dwelled in the jungle but she knew if she betrayed the slightest weakness, whatever watched her would see her as prey.

She had not come this far to be eaten.

Forcing her spine straight and tall she glared at her surroundings and continued on, compelling her aching feet to walk with purpose, limping as little as possible though the pain made her want to whimper. Still she pressed on; she had endured far worse at Isha's hands.

Judging by the tinges of brilliant orange that the light was beginning to turn, the sun would set within another hour. Tamasa was sure that unlike herself, whatever followed her through the dense jungle would have no problem seeing in the dark.

The sudden, faint sound of trickling water nearly made Tamasa break into a run. Quickening her steps minutely, she delved further ahead. Half hidden behind the cover of tall trees were the ruins of an ancient temple. The curves and whorls of stone and carved faces of long-forgotten royalty and deities had been overrun by the jungle. Vines, leaves, moss and brush blanketed much of the clay and rock structures. In some places, the earth had torn down the ruins' walls entirely while in others it had made itself at home within ancient doorways and halls.

"Beautiful." She murmured, her fatigue forgotten in a moment overcome by wonder.

Tamasa followed the gentle murmur of water, careful to keep to the sturdiest of the stones and statues. The air was cool as she ventured further in, placing a hand upon the stone wall to steady herself as she descended the ancient steps. Beyond the vine-laced doorway at the bottom of the stairs, a courtyard opened.

This place has not been explored by human hands in a very long time, Tamasa mused, taking in the way moss and grass and roots had reclaimed the riles and stonework. The courtyard had been encased by intricately made lattice walls at least twenty hands

high, draped with climbing wild roses. In its center was a large, crystal clear pool. Large flat stones seemed almost artfully placed on one side of it, its surface glittering in the sunlight.

Soul sighing with relief, Tamasa ran to the side of the pool and dropped to her knees on the moss. Cupping her hands, she scooped up the clear water in her palms and lifted them to her mouth. The cool liquid soothed her parched lips and throat and she made an appreciative sound as she swallowed. Tamasa felt some of her anxiety lessen with the knowledge that she was likely not die of thirst. Sighing, she allowed her shoulders to relax just a tiny bit, bending forward to scoop more water into her hands.

The water was clean and cool and Tamasa shucked off her dirty dress, lowered herself into the water.

Careful not to upset the wound in her side, she found she could sit on the silty, moss covered bottom. Barely grazing her shoulders, the pool was a pleasant shock to her heated flesh. Inhaling, she submerged herself below the shallow surface, the momentary feeling of weightlessness refreshing.

Reemerging, she smoothed her hair back and away from her face, the locks heavy and dripping. Tamasa tilted her head back, allowing herself a soft sigh as her lashed fluttered closed. Even if it was just for a moment, she could breath freely. Birds trilled far off and Lona trailed a hand through the water, the gentle sound a balm. The sun had heard the stones of the ruins, their warm, earthen scent mingling with the lush, green smell of the surrounding jungle.

It was peaceful.

Opening her eyes, Tamasa meant to begin to try and clean herself as best she could. Her eyes fell on the opposite side of the pool.

She froze.

Watching her, perched on the large, flat stone set on the lip of the tank was a tiger.

Tamasa felt her heart give a stuttering kick against her ribs. The great cat was huge, its pelt a deep golden amber artfully painted with stripes of deep black and splashes of bone white. The creature's tail was curled neatly around its massive paws; paws bigger than her head that could easily disembowel her with one swipe.

Eyes of bright, green-gold stared at her out of a broad, powerful face, unblinking.

It was magnificent.

Tamasa felt awe rise up to war against the spidery tendrils of terror that turned in her gut. And she knew, deep in her bones, that this was no ordinary tiger. Some inherent part of her, some instinct prickled in warning even as a part of her felt the unfamiliar urge to pay severance to such an entity.

The tiger made no move, simply continued to stare at Tamasa with an intensity no human could ever possess. The fine hairs on her arms and nape stood up. But despite that unwavering gaze, the great cat remained relaxed, still as the ancient statues she'd marveled at.

Tamasa returned the animal's stare, willing her breath slow and steady even as her heart beat hard behind the cage of her ribs. Gooseflesh broke out on her skin. The cat blinked and -

"You are either very brave or very stupid." The tiger drawled. Tamasa started, her mouth opening to form an O of shock. The cat made a low sound in the back of its throat, tail swishing to one side lazily. "Not only do you invite yourself into my home and sully my water," it continued mildly, "but you have the audacity to look me in the eye with such boldness." The great cat flexed its massive paws, its lethal claws unsheathing just a fraction.

The voice had indeed come from the beast's maw, its tone deep and guttural. *Male*. The weighed down upon her, around her. It weighed against something behind her very eyes, a ringing forming in her ears. But Tamasa heard the warning, the threat, for what it was. And it was that tone that forced her back into herself.

She rose out of the water until she stood straight and tall, her spine proud. Folding her arms across her bosom, not in modesty but in defiance, she did not break the tiger's stare, even as her eyes narrowed and she arched a brow.

"Forgive me," she said, not sounding very sorry at all, "I sought water and shelter and after the day I've had I'd say I deserve a bit of a reprieve before nightfall. Any slight against you was unintentional."

"So bold." The tiger mused. "You are a fierce little thing, no better than a wayward cub bearing its uncut teeth." There was a gleam of sardonic amusement in those gold-green eyes. Fear and ire warred in Lona. She was small and soft compared to this creature's might. But she had not come this far to fail, to die. Even by the claws and teeth of one of the *Khan-ral*; a god creature. She should show deference, she knew she should. It was probably the smart thing to do.

"If I am correct," she began. "I am speaking to no ordinary tiger. Do I have the good fortune to be in the presence of one of the *Khan-ral*?" Tamasa asked politely, though her stance remained just this side of defiant.

Those wild, depthless eyes darkened slightly and the tiger let out an odd coughing sound, its upper lip curling.

"You," The tiger began. "will leave this place, in one way or another, before you find out. It is by law and my right to dispose of any man ignorant enough to venture into my kingdom uninvited and take from my lands." That gaze, flicked down to the water pointedly. The implication was clear:

Thief.

Tamasa felt her heart drop into her stomach. She was going to be killed for taking a bath, of all things.

Had he seen her drink from the pool as well? The feeling of being watched had been secondary when she'd been presented with the gift of fresh water. Something about his wording though snagged her attention. In the tales her mother had woven for her,

there was always a way out, some tiny clue to beat the monster. Some odd grain of cleverness that could be easily overlooked.

Her mind ran over the tiger's words.

Instead of trembling in fear Tamasa lifted her chin and met that mighty stare with one of her own.

Cleverness.

"I trust your eyes can tell you that I am no man." She said pointedly.

The tiger was still as death, a sudden quiet falling upon the ruins. Even the far-off birds had stopped their afternoon songs.

Then those glittering eyes of green fire narrow in peculiar delight. Tamasa felt the little shred of confidence waver at the sudden gleam. Wisps of trepidation curled around her throat.

The great beast rumbled deep in his chest.

"I suppose rules do tend to have loopholes."

“Should a man intrude upon my domain and take without invitation, it is within my right to end his life.”

“And if the trespasser should be a woman?”

“Well, seeing as I have little use for man other than an occasional snack, I suppose a woman is more useful to me alive than dead. You will stay here with me until I see that the compact is complete.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You may, but I don’t think you will.”

“You assume much.”

“I will offer you a deal. Choose to stay with me for three of your human years and when that time is complete I will release you and you may return to your own people.”

“I do not wish to return to my own people.”

“What do you want then?”

“Teach me to live here.”

“I can teach you to survive, that should suffice.”

“And what are the conditions of my imprisonment?”

“I’d like to think of it as a stay of execution. The terms are this: you will not stray more than a mile from myself nor my domain, you will listen to my instructions, you will join me at every meal and upon the end of every yearly cycle you will do combat with me. Those are the terms.”

Truthfully, I did not expect her to agree. Particularly to the last requirement. Not many would have complied and I was inclined to believe that should she, there was a chance that she was out of her mind. But she had been such a unique little thing from the moment she’d stepped foot in my forest that I could not help but wonder just how much of a spine there really was under that all that giving flesh.

When you’ve lived as long as I have, you stop expecting to be surprised. Life beings to suffer from the ennui of time and after a while, it becomes dull, monotonous. You can go mad, particularly a being of my predicament and disposition.

I did go mad.

It was interesting.

“Get out of that water, I have no desire to drink your filth.”

The human females I’d witnessed by chance over my years were flighty creatures, fickle and afraid of their own shadows. But this one was almost as feral as a jackal. She was young, had not truly began the decay of age, but there was a hardness in her bright eyes that one only acquires with maturity through circumstance. I wanted dig inside and claw out what it was that made her so fearless of me.

“Forgive me for wanting to be somewhat clean.” She snapped, placing her palms flat on the rim of the rim and lifting herself out. Despite her injury, she stood straight and tall. My eyes fell on the raw, pink wound on her left side. It was jagged, the flesh raised and though she betrayed no weakness, it must have been painful. The skin was just beginning to heal over but without proper care it would become a hindrance.

It would scar.

“Humans are usually much more self-conscious in their nudity.” I commented off-handedly, my eyes adjusting effortlessly to the diminishing light of the afternoon. “Are you not the least bit embarrassed? Afraid?”

One dark eyebrow rose in an expression of dubiousness.

“To be frank, I’ve become rather tired of being afraid. It doesn’t sit well with me. It never has.”

I snorted and stretched languidly in the setting sun. Dropping silently from the alabaster stone I padded towards her.

“Perhaps you’ve never been properly afraid then. Reckless child. But if you feel so inclined to strut about in all your naked skin, be all means. I don’t care either way.” I glanced at the limp pile of ruined fabric she’d worn; in an instant it was gone, the shift dissolving into fine ash in the blink of an eye. The girl went very still and I watched an assortment of emotions flitting through her eyes. Shock, trepidation and finally curiosity.

“However,” I continued. “if we are going to be so stark with one another, I feel it would only be appropriate that I learn your name.”

She blinked and eyed me warily.

The sun began to set through the trees, the dying light kissing her shoulders and for a moment she appeared wreathed in flame.

“My name is Tamasa.”

My tail twitched as I circled her silently.

“And what am I to call you? My Lord?” The words sounded as if they were being wrenched from her mouth, bitterness lingering in her gums. I stepped close, enough so that my breath blew her long, dark hair in a warm huff as I stared down into bright green eyes.

“Names have power and I am not so inclined as to give you such sway over me.” Her brow furrowed and her hands balled into fists.

“I have given you mine!” She hissed vehemently. I hummed.

“Well that was your error now wasn’t it?”

That first night was one of the most entertaining.

She stared at me over the steaming carcass lying between us. My rules held true, she was required to join me at every meal; there would be consequences if she did not.

“You expect me to eat this?” She asked incredulously. For the first time, she looked a little sickly. She had waited and watched in the tall grass while I’d brought

down the deer, a large *chital* buck, without any complaint or plaintive plea in favor of my prey.

“You agreed.” I reminded her, pulling off a chunk of steaming flesh and exposing the white of bone beneath. Tamasa seemed to choke on her own inhale.

“I never said I would eat raw meat.” She snapped, gesturing to the dead deer at her feet. It was somewhat amusing, her standing in all her ire, face flushed with indignation. She was so very much alive.

Crunching the bone between my teeth, I cleaned out the marrow and stared at her in the darkness, the night sky filled with the lights of billions of stars. I did not need their luminescence to see but the way she seemed to glow beneath the light of the moon was fascinating.

Still.

“It is of no fault of mine that you did not take into consideration that you might have to squash your base, human squeamishness in order to survive.” I rumbled. Her eyes narrowed.

“I cannot eat raw meat, I will become ill.” She insisted, folding her arms across her bosom, gripping her arms so hard it was a wonder she didn’t crush her own ribcage.

I cocked my head and snapped the bone I was gnawing on clean in half. The resounding snap was loud and short-lived.

“Are you quite sure?” I asked mildly. Gripping the carcass in my claws, I eyed her as I continued to gnaw at it. I half hoped she would look away.

“I cannot digest raw meat, I’m not like you. I can grow sick from uncooked meats, you must know that.”

The still-warm blood dampened the fur around my mouth. I continued to watch her as I ate, daring her to give in to her human reservations and flinch. There was a part of me that was bent on scaring her, on forcing her to show that terror I had never seen, to be lurking under the surface.

“If you will not eat with me, then you have two choices. You can either leave my forest right now or I can substitute for the *chital*.” I explained smoothly. A half truth. Tamasa went completely still and for a long moment the only sound was the crunch and crackle of bone and cartilage, the rip and tear of warm flesh between my jaws. I waited.

I could wait forever.

“Are you threatening me?” She asked quietly, head tilted in a way that shielded her eyes from view. I chewed thoughtfully on a particularly gamey piece of cartilage.

“No.” I replied slowly, as if speaking to a particularly difficult child. Swallowing audibly I eyed her rigid stance. “I am merely stating your options and remind you that dining with me is an essential part of the rules of our engagement. Shall you prove to be an oath-breaker Tamasa?”

She was so angry she was twitching.

“You are a being unfair.” She hissed through her teeth.

I laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

“Fairness is not a requirement of our bargain.” I purred darkly. “But frankly, I’m somewhat confused as to why you would have such trepidations upon eating raw meat. Are you squeamish because you witnessed its death? You yourself are no stranger to it.” Luminous eyes rose to meet mine, so wide I could see the whites as clear as day. “After all,” I continued, “you sat at your own husband’s bedside and watched him die. And a painful death at that might I add. Was it not you who said you were not afraid? And now all of a sudden you fear contracting sickness?”

“I am wary about the state of my own life!” She shot back.

“There is always a risk.” I snapped, temper flaring. “Without risks we gain nothing. You risked death by poisoning your husband, yet here you are alive and well.”

Her dusky gold skin had taken on an intriguing gray hue, her full lips pressed into a thin line. She lowered herself onto the grass opposite me, spine straight and rigid.

“How-“ She cleared her throat. “How did you know all of that?” She whispered. I licked my lips.

“Have a care to hide your thoughts Tamasa, they are written all over your pretty face.” I considered her. “Do you feel guilty?”

I was genuinely curious.

“No.” Her response was immediate and sharp. I could taste the sincerity. “Isha was cruel. And I would not be his slave.”

My tail swished lazily along the ground as I rumbled thoughtfully.

“So you chose to survive.”

“Yes.” Her small, slim fingered hands were balled into fists atop her knees, the knuckles turning white with force.

“By any means necessary.” I stated.

She gave a jerky nod. I scoffed.

“You asked me to teach you to survive in the jungle. Did you think that would be as simple as poisoning your husband? Did you think you would not have to make more risk, more choices?”

The following silence between us was tense.

I think I wanted her to try to run then, if only to give me the excuse of letting her go. Or chasing her down.

Whichever came first.

“And If I become ill. What then?” She asked finally, softly, eyeing the cooling meat between us.

“Then you must overcome it. Or die.”

Her eyes flashed and her mouth opened to spout some for of retort. I cut her off.

“I am not forcing you to eat. I am forcing you to choose. You may leave if you wish. You have always had a choice Tamasa, regardless of their limitations. Fear is not a viable limitation. So choose.”

I will give credit where credit is due; she did eat.
And only vomited once.

“What is the purpose of this?” Tamasa asked blearily. It was early morning and the girl’s voice was still muffled from sleepiness. Ignoring the question I continued on through the tall grass. The stalks reached over her head, the golden tips brushing my shoulders. The sun had not fully risen, casting the horizon in a lavender-tinged hue. The birds had only just begun their morning songs and calls.

Tamasa had slept through the night, curled on her side with one arm draped over her waist while the other rested by her brow, long fingers curled gently. In sleep she appeared painfully young, her features slack and peaceful. The nights were warm enough to sleep outside but she deigned to bed down in the doorway of one of the moss-covered temples.

“You’re to greet the day by climbing trees.” I told her.

“And what-“ She cut herself off mid-speech with a yawn. “-*why?*”

“It’s useful to learn to climb.” I answered. “It’s a practical skill.” She snorted, the sound surprising me.

“What makes you think I don’t know how to do that already?” She asked me.

I paused and glanced at her over my shoulder.

“Have you climbed trees before?” I inquired dryly. Her answering smile was smug. I chuffed, tail curling. “And are you quite good at climbing?”

She nodded, smile growing.

I flashed a sharp grin of my own. Her lips faltered.

“Then this will be over quickly.”

By the fifth time she’d slipped down the trunk and landed flat on her rear, I’d begun to grow bored. She seethed in the early morning light, a colorful array of language and phrases flying out of her mouth.

“That’s an attractive look.” I commented, basking in the sun. “And here I thought you couldn’t be more dazzling.”

She hissed at me.

“I’m so glad I entertain you.” She snarled. I lounged in the grass, one eye opening to consider her.

“Would you like some help?” I inquired. Her head whipped around so fast I was sure she’d given herself a crick. I stretched leisurely, one paw at a time and yawned hugely. Tail swishing, I turned and began to walk back into the tall grass. I heard Tamasa scramble to her feet behind me.

“Stay there.” I warned her, before she could think to follow.

“What are you doing?” She called as I disappeared from her sight.

“I’m helping.”

I let her stew for a while. At first, she ventured a few feet into the tall blades of golden grass, her untrained eyes searching for me. My form had become familiar to her over the past few months but her human eyes were dull in comparison to my own. Her weak gaze could not find me.

I, on the other-hand, had no trouble seeing her.

After some time her frustration gave way to unease. Green orbs darted about in a guarded display. She was well aware that she could be made into easy prey out in the open; and she did not like it. I had put her in a vulnerable position, having her wait on me without knowing where I was or where I'd gone. It was fascinating to watch her sit, then pace, then sit again. Had she possessed a tail, it would have been lashing to-and-fro in agitation.

The wound in her side had healed over by then, the skin there pale pink and shiny. I could tell she was tired and no doubt hungry. Once she'd taken to eating meat, it seemed as if she discovered a hidden appetite. Much to my mingled irritation and reluctant pride, she no longer blanched at a steaming carcass or turned away less pleasant choices of meat.

Insects buzzed and hissed in the heat of the day and I watched as a bead of sweat trickled down the center of her spine.

I crouched low to the ground, letting loose a soundless growl as my lips curled in distaste.

This fleshy creature was a conundrum.

Dependent.

Inferior.

She had already begun to complicate things. Was it not better to be rid of her rather than humor her with this imitation of a fair game?

I paused.

A game. Yes.

My muscles tensed, body coiling for a single purpose.

"Run." I murmured.

Her head jerked in my direction, those bright gold-green eyes searching. I snarled softly. Those same eyes widened minutely, her body locking. I could hear the sudden spike of her pulse. I spoke again.

"Run." I crooned.

She took off.

I gave her a moment head start.

You must understand, there is nothing else to do except succumb to the chase.

Tamasa was fast enough, fleet-of-foot and agile. She was not the most quiet of runner and what she lacked in distance, she made up for in speed. But for all her effort and admittedly strong legs, I kept pace behind her.

She crashed through the tall grass, her wild mane of dark curls streaming behind her like a tangled banner. Her sweater watered the earth, the soles of her feet flying across the dirt. My massive paws made no sound as I bounded after her. I could keep this up for as long as I wished. What was this girl to me?

Unexpectedly, she veered sharply left, so swift that I nearly slammed into a young sapling. Like a sambar, she took off, her arms and legs pumping as I snaked. Tricky girl.

She seemed to glide over rocks and protruding roots, debris that I was sure would trip her up. She did not know this terrain as I did. She was bound to make a mistake. But her scent had changed; it was sharp and clear and *bright*, reminding me, oddly enough, of the streak of golden light that lines the horizon at dawn.

It was a scent I no longer had a name for but it made my lip curl and the fur along my spine prickle.

Her arms pumped rapidly at her sides, pushing herself harder. I leaped over a large stone jutting from the roots of a gnarled tree before I realized she'd skirted the edge and scrambled up the side. I skidded, cursing and snarling as I spun round between one breath and the next as I sprang upwards, paws outstretched and claws unsheathed to catch her by the ankle.

I missed.

"You know," she commented some time later, when she found me wading in the pool of the my ruins. "If I didn't know any better, I would say you were sulking."

A twitch of the ear was all the response I dined to give her.

She huffed and I pictured her cocked a hip to the side, arms crossed.

"Oh come on now don't be that way. Aren't you the least bit impressed?"

I took my time turning my head to look at her, eyeing her flatly. She waited expectantly, eyes gleaming. I snorted.

"Am I impressed that you managed to perfectly imitate a monkey? Not very, no."

She frowned, unamused, planting her hands on her hips.

"Perhaps I'd have been more impressed if you'd spontaneously grown a tail to match your simian qualities." I mused. "You're quite an agile little chit after all."

"Well, I'm not learning to be a monkey am I?" She answered smartly. My eyes narrowed.

"You're not learning to be *anything*." I snapped. She frowned.

"I'm learning to be like you." She pressed. My ears drew back and I bared my teeth, suddenly livid.

"You should never want to be such as I. And you shall never be!" I snarled savagely. Tamasa stilled and eyed me wordlessly as my mind seemed to recoil in shock at

my own words. Ears still flat, I turned away from her, tense. We were silent for a time, the the air heavy. Finally, she spoke.

“Petulance is not a very attractive quality.” She retorted primly. Distantly I knew she was baiting me, purposely going back to our game of ribbing and jabbing at one another. I seized upon that turn in conversation.

“Having attractive qualities is not particularly high on my list of accomplishments. And the last time I checked, I am not here to be amiable or aesthetically pleasing for you so if I seem petulant, you’ll just have to grin and bear it. Like everything else you’ve found trying in your little life.”

Tamasa simply laughed. My muscles relaxed.

I rose, water slewing off my fur as I climbed nimbly out of the pool. Walking past Tamasa, I shook myself, – effectively spraying her with water – and sprang up onto the marble slab. Tamasa eyed me in consternation but kept quiet. I had no wish to speak any more. Yes, she had done what I wanted – even if I’d provided some incentive – but that paled in comparison to the words that had wrenched themselves out of my own throat. It made me *uncomfortable*, that I had spoken such a thing out loud.

She was just a human girl, simultaneously lucky and unlucky enough to be tied to my presence. Three years was a paltry amount of time and when that time was up it would be as if she had never existed, one way or another.

I could feel her watching me, even as I purposely ignored her, draping myself across the stone and closing my eyes. I listened as she sighed and padded into the doorway of one of the ruined temples after a few moments of consideration. She’d taken to gathering fleshy leaves and springy moss, building herself a little nest. And despite her nakedness, she never complained of a chill.

The scent of her irritation was evident but her profound bewilderment overshadowed that scent sharply. I could not find it within myself to care to comment on it.

I listened as her breathing and heart-beat eventually slowed in the familiar rhythm of sleep. My eyes slowly opened, vision perfect in the darkness of night. Tamasa lay on her side, one hand curled to her chest, her hair pillowing her head. The encompassing night was filled with the sounds of night insects and calls of nocturnal creatures, the stars overhead gazing down in wakefulness.

I myself had lost the need to sleep ages ago but that did not deter my mind from entering a dream-like state. Some mortals could call it meditation but it was not so simple. It required a substantial amount of energy. In truth, it was something else entirely. I lay still as a statue, eyes open but unfocused on my surroundings save for the curled up shape in the crumbled doorway. Everything else faded away.

The world isn't black and white. It isn't even gray. It's every color you could imagine and more that you can't. The colors you see then you are awake are the colors you know. When you dream, colors exist that don't have names.

In dreams, you can bend worlds – break them apart, create new ones – all without lifting a finger. In dreams you are endless.

And when you can walk between dreams, the possibilities are infinite.

Tamasa was sitting beneath a tall, flowering tree, the bark a brown so dark it was almost black. But not a flat black; the wood was rich and deep. The flowers sprouting in clusters along the branches were tiny and white and the cool breeze carried a sweet, calming scent that was foreign to me. Here and there, small blood-red fruits hung, peeking out from behind the leaves.

A woman walked towards her – us – her hair long and thick, her smile gentle and brilliant as the dawn. There was a resemblance there, something in the shape of the eyes and nose though the face was older with softer angles to the chin and jaw. I watched from a distance and from behind her eyes. It would have felt peculiar to some; not to me.

“Mama.” Tamasa spoke, her voice filled with relief. The woman who was her mother held out her hands. Tamasa rose. I could feel and see all that she did but remained a separate entity, a spectator unbeknownst to the sleeper.

She led Tamasa away from the flowering tree down a winding path with giant plants blocking that blocked out the light of the sun as they continued on, deeper and deeper into the forest until it became too dark for Tamasa to see. This was an unsettling feeling. I had never been privy to such darkness before. It blunted the edge of my senses, made me flesh crawl.

Tamasa went to squeeze her mother's hand but her fingers gripped empty air. I could feel the panic scuttle up the back of her skull.

“Mama!” She called into the darkness, turning and reaching out with her hands to try to feel her way to something familiar. “Where are you? Mama?” Her voice was that of a child's not a young woman. “Please don't leave me alone!”

I could feel her heart pounding in stress, and distantly I was aware of her body twitching in sleep. White noise, dull, compared to the sensations of her dream-mind. The dark seemed to press in against her flesh, slowly crawling over her. The ground was hard and cold beneath her bare feet and she navigated blindly, clumsily. Thorns and sharp branches scratched her from within the bleakness. Something warm and wet trickled down her arms. Blood.

A hand grasped her forearm, the skin of the palms rough. The grip was harsh and unforgiving. Tamasa's heart stuttered. This hand was familiar.

Twisting, she tumbled through blackness in an effort to escape but the harsh fingers grasped her hair, her skin. They were everywhere.

“Stop.” She panted, shaking. I could feel it then, a cold, oily thing pooling in her gut, crawling and worming its way down her legs and up her throat. Fear. The fear I’d sought to see reflected in the her eyes in her waking moments. It threatened to choke her and for that moment there was no separation between sleeper and watcher; it threatened to settle in my own throat, circle my own, un-beating heart.

A violent tug at her scalp had tears stinging in Tamasa’s eyes but still she struggled forward. The darkness pressed in further and suddenly there was a cacophony of voices screaming.

Obey

Murderess

Mine

Nothing

So lucky

OBEY

I roared, the sound exploding from Tamasa’s mouth and the voices were blown away, their shrieking abruptly fading. In an instant a burning light lit up the dark, blinding in its luminescence. Tamasa covered her gaze, crouched on the cold, earthen floor. The light was so bright it shown orange through her closed lids. Carefully, she lowered her fingers, squinting and blinking. I felt her breath hitch.

Twin flames were burning bright, hovering an arm’s length away. Molten gold and green whirling together, side by side. They seemed to regard her.

And suddenly they was not so blinding, but strangely familiar. She knew these flames. That oily sensation of fear seemed to crumble away in the face of them. Tamasa reached out both hands to touch, stretching her fingers. The flames wove closer, like a pair of dancers in perfect synchronization as they tickled her fingertips.

I felt an odd sense of awareness that was not my own. As if I too were being watched. I felt her lips moving, forming the syllables of a single word.

A name.

She was sweating with unease at the whole affair. I sat patiently, waiting for her to come to terms with herself. Tamasa bit her lip and rested her hands on her hips.

“Must this really be a requirement?” She asked. I flicked an ear.

“You agreed.” I pointed out. “If you’d had any qualms about this caveat you should have spoken up at the proper time.”

Her eyes flashed with ire.

“Proper time.” She echoed dryly. “Be reasonable.”

“I *am* being reasonable, as I was at the start of all of this.”

“You are being purposely vindictive. You weigh four times my weight, how am I to compete with that?” She pressed, gesturing between the two of us. I smiled in what might have been called a sweetly manner. I’m sure it looked nothing close to that.

“Aren’t you the one who boasted of your fearlessness? You’re so clever Tamasa, surely you can figure out how this will work.”

She scowled and the look in her eyes suggested she’d been caught off guard.

“Are there any other rules that I should know about?” She asked stiffly.

“Whomever draws first blood wins.” I stated simply. She rolled her eyes.

“So not a fight to the death then?”

I scoffed.

“Well, that would take all the fun out of all these past months now wouldn’t it?”

She made a rude gesture with her fingers that forced a broken, coughing laugh up and out of my throat. Those were rare.

“I hope you choke on that laugh.” She snapped but her tone held no real malice.

“I’ll have to disappoint you.” I replied. She gave a short laugh.

“I’m used to that by now.” She said sweetly. I hacked up another laugh, surprising myself. I stood and stretched, tail curling. Tamasa smiled lightly.

“Ready?” I asked. She gave a short nod. I bowed my head once. Then I lunged. She leaped out of the way soundly, jerking back when I swiped at her with one large paw, claws unsheathed. The sand beneath her feet hissed as she doubled back swiftly, ducking and dodging my blows in a haphazard dance. I followed, seeking to corner her. But she *was* clever and quick and kept herself moving, never giving me the chance. She sprang back, skipping nimbly over the slippery terrain. I rushed forward and she gave a hard kick before skidding to the side. Sand flew into my face and I snarled, wiping at my eyes. A solid force barreled into my side, jolting me in the ribs. I whirled, claws at the ready but she slipped back and *under* me, slithering out onto my other side like a serpent.

I caught a glimpse of her face over my shoulder; her eyes were bright and there was the beginning of a grin on her mouth. My gaze narrowed. Her grin bloomed. I didn’t wait.

I spun and let loose a roar, intending to bowl her over and pin her. She ducked and rolled, spraying up sand. I followed her, sand rising around us in a cloud. She scrambled backward on her hands as I swiped at her legs. Tucking them in and up at the last moment, she twisted on her hands in a flurry of movement that had her crouched on all fours in an instant. To my surprise, she dove underneath me again but instead of scrambling away, I felt her fingers grip tightly into my fur. The next thing I knew, her weight was pressed onto my back, heels digging into my sides. I roared in outrage, rearing up on my hind-legs to dislodge her. I snarled and spat and still she clung on, her fingers hooked into my fur tightly. I dropped back down on all fours, twisting my neck to try and get at her with my teeth. She leaned away and yanked hard on my fur. I seethed.

Desperate to get her off I dropped and rolled across the ground. I heard the faintest grunt beneath me but still she held on tight. I rolled again, seriously considered staying supine. Of course, that would run the risk of crushing her. Or suffocating her. And if I left

myself prone on my back there was no guarantee she wouldn't try to wrap her arms around my throat.

Rolling to my feet once more, I could hear her pained breathing. It was likely that she'd cracked a rib.

"Are you bleeding yet?" I asked scathingly. She gave a short laugh, very close to my ear.

"You first."

Teeth clamped down onto said ear and *bit down*. There was a soft tearing sound and I bellowed. Rising onto my hind legs, I twisted and her weight fell away abruptly. I spun, seething. And stopped.

Tamasa crouched on the ground, wheezing slightly, sand making a mess of her mane of hair. There was a dark smudge at the corner of her lips. Panting, she delicately touched a fingertip to her mouth.

Dark, dark blue. Almost black.

My blood.

She looked up and we stared at each other. I spoke after a long silence, my voice tinged with awed disbelief.

"You little cheat."

She kept scratching. At first it had been amusing, then an annoyance and finally a concern. Her body had collected numerous scars across the course of the year, each earned and with a story to tell. There was the one on her left side the length of her palm across her ribs, the one she had first acquired before stepping foot into the pool. There were more. A long, thin one across her left thigh – courtesy of myself, in a game of hunting – another on her right shoulder and behind her right knee from a fall down a ravine. And still more, so that her strong form was a map of them.

Tamasa was proud of them, in her way. As was I, though I never said so.

The scratching had started a several weeks after her victory through combat. She had been all-too pleased with herself for days. I on the other-hand, had been far more withdrawn. I was not angry with her; on the contrary, I was impressed, *pleased*. I did not know what to do with that.

There was a threshold that had been passed between us. What had once been a stagnant existence had shifted into something other.

But the scratching-

"You're going to rip yourself raw." I warned her, watching as she struggled to refrain from scratching at her side. There were dark smudges beneath her eyes from lack of sleep. The constant movement interrupted her rest and mine. For I had begun to *sleep*, a fact that I was still coming to terms with. I had not hinted that I did not sleep – only feigned so in her presence. But the bits and pieces that I did were as fitful as Tamasa's.

It was still dark when she'd woken me, her voice high and pained.

“Please.” She begged through her teeth. “I don’t know how to make it stop.”

There were welts all over her, some beading with blood. The scars looked red and angry for she scratched those most of all as they seemed to pain her the worst.

I had her submerge herself in the pool for hours, cover herself in wet clay from the banks of the river; to no avail. I was beginning to grow concerned that she would begin to gnaw at her own flesh if it did not stop.

But it couldn’t be ignored that this had started after my blood had wet her lips. A bare amount, a mere smudge. But my blood was not like that of a mortal’s nor like that of a common animal.

Tamasa’s skin was coated in a fine sheen of sweat, her hair sticking to her skull. Tiny tremors would assail her body, as if she were chilled to the marrow.

She was sick.

And I could not help.

“Lie down.” I rumbled calmly. She shook all over. Her voice was small.

“I can’t.”

“You can and you will. Lay down.”

She did so jerkily, first lying flat on her back, her body almost seeming to vibrate. She made a small, high-pitched sound and rolled onto her side in a fetal position, clasping her hands together so hard I could almost hear the thin bones in her fingers creak. Without a word I stood, turned and curled myself tightly around her.

For a moment she stiffened, my abrupt closeness a shock. Her eyes flew up to mine but I looked away as I bent my head and licked at the scar on her shoulder. She was tense, unsure and unused to such an act.

As was I.

Still, she shook with the repressed restraint not to scratch.

I paused and still not looking at her asked,

“Shall I tell you a story?”

I heard the sound of her hair rubbing softly against the smooth stone in affirmation.

“Do you promise not to interrupt?”

Again, the sound of her hair against the stone.

I bent my head to her shoulder once more and began:

“My heart does not beat. If you were to press your ear to my chest, you would not hear my blood flowing through my body. That is because this form is my cage; I did not always appear as I do now. For my kind, we can hold many shapes, take many forms. We may choose to settle on a singular skin but it is always our choice. This was not my choice. I did not come from these lands that have birthed you. I was born long ago, far away. I do not know if its name is still the same, or if it even still exists as it once did. But I was a wanderer, as were most of us. We roamed the world in our skins, to learn and grow. Always changing, never settling. There were many of us then. And we were strong

and powerful. My kind are born in our true shapes, shapes that are extraordinary; but we age slowly and live long, long lives so we forget what our true forms look like after a while. We live long lives, though we are not all powerful. We can die.”

Nimble fingers pressed against the white fur of my chest. I glanced at the head of unruly curls but Tamasa did not move again besides the frequent tremors. Her eyes were shut.

“I was always seeking knowledge. Everywhere I went I studied the lands and their peoples. In my youth, everything fascinated me. And through my wandering and my lust for knowledge I came here. And I met her.”

Those nimble fingers twitched.

“She was not such as I was, nor what you are. Mortals might liken her to a goddess and indeed, she was something of the like. She had exceptional power and long life. She was far older than I and gathered knowledge and secrets like a magpie gathers bright baubles. And when she found me – for I now know she had taken notice of me long before I’d been aware of her – she offered to become my teacher in all things. And in turn I would teach her about my kind. I should have heeded the warnings but I was willfully blind, so enamored as I was. We travelled and debated and I was her constant companion, one such as I’d never had before. I’d become something of a pet” – I spat this word – “and I did not mind. It was shameful. Whatever she asked of me, I gave. No matter what. It was my goal to please her, so blind I’d become. I hunted down my own kind for her, so she might *study* them. And I did more things, terrible things. All for her. All for the knowledge and companionship she promised. Until I too would have gladly sacrificed myself for her whims. She wanted to possess my kind, gather our secrets and tear them apart as she tore apart my kin. And I let her. I helped her. Until one day, she learned how compel our shapes at her will. She...forced me to change. She did not ask, she simply commanded. And I was a slave.”

Tamasa’s hand was curled tightly in my fur, right over where my un-beating heart lay.

“I was fully aware of what she was doing but with her newfound power I was unable to stop it. I was trapped in my own mind as she conducted my body to do whatever she pleased. And my love turned rotten. Turned to hate; at her and myself. For a long time I felt I deserved it so I let her continue. I’d helped her hunt down my kin, watched her eviscerate them, torture them. Until there were none left. All this, I did.” I swallowed. “It is this form that she preferred above all others. I do not know why. In truth, it probably matters little. But she had made a mistake.” I bent my head to swipe my tongue at Tamasa’s side so she would not see the horrible grimace of my smile. “In her surety of her power over me, she grew arrogant and lazy. Within my trapped awareness, I watched and bided my time even while I remained her puppet. Decades I waited. Until opportunity presented itself.”

I lifted my head to gaze down at Tamasa. She stared up at me, her body still for this brief moment.

“Do you know what I did then?” I asked her, so softly. Her eyes were strangely blank as she answered me.

“You killed her.”

I smiled.

“Yes. I slashed her open and ate her heart. And then I crushed her skull to devour her brain.”

Tamasa was silent.

“I did not do it for revenge for my kin. I did it because I’d allowed her to trick me, to use me. And I could not take it anymore.” I gently placed one massive paw atop Tamasa’s head. “But as I said, she was powerful and she had secrets of her own. One being that she was not the only one of her kind. And she had kept me ignorant of their presence. So though I’d succeeded in slaughtering her, my punishment was not yet done. Her own kin had no real love for her, had avoided her as one would a diseased house. But had their own laws and customs and they were prideful. A lesser being could not kill one of their own; only they themselves had the right to kill each other if they so chose to do so. So they bound me in this form, to this land so that I may be trapped always and serve as my own reminder of all that I had done. For what I had done to my kin, to her and my slight against the creatures who saw themselves as gods. And so, here I am. Stuck in this form, unable to change at will. I do not breathe, my heart does not beat. I cannot die and I can never forget.”

A lock of hair had fallen over Tamasa’s brow but her eyes bore up into my own. Her body had stopped its tremors.

We were silent for a long time, my paw resting atop her head and her hand pressed to my chest. It was a parody of intimacy. Finally, Tamasa tilted her head, my paw sliding down to rest on the space between her breasts. I could feel the rhythmic beating of her heart behind her ribs. The hand on my own chest carded upward through my fur until it settled against my jaw. Her fingers were very close to my mouth.

“You said you could not remember your true form.” She stated at last, brushing my hair as she spoke. Her voice was contemplative, assessing. I made a noncommittal sound of assent. She blinked and adjusted herself until she sat up on her knees before me, her other hand coming up to rest on my side of my jaw; barely cupping my large head between her small fingers.

“Yes.” I replied, voice empty. She stared at me and leant forward so her eyes filled my vision. My fur prickled.

“Would you like to know a secret?” She asked me. I did not reply, only continued to hold her gaze. I could tell that her lips had pulled up in a soft smile with the way the outer corners of her eyes crinkled just the smallest bit. She pressed her forehead to mine and I either had to pull back or close my eyes.

I closed my eyes.

“Tell me your secret.” I said.

She sighed, “It is not my secret.”

I almost drew back then. As if she sensed my intention, her hands held fast, fingering curling beneath my fur. Her nails felt sharp. A growl began in the back of my throat but her next words cut me off, made my eyes fly open.

“I know your name.”

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