



Clutching Cthulhu's Pearls (Time for Monsters)

Author: Marilyn Barr

Category: Fantasy

Description: Harriett

1922, Cypress Kentucky, USA

Does Leopold suspect me? My aging husband's beady eyes are glued to his experiments and notes, but I twitch as if I'm the specimen he examines. His work created our menagerie of selectively bred and surgically enhanced animals—ugly snakes with mouse heads, birds with paws and puppy faces, and worse. They frighten me, but not as much as my future of lonely nights in an empty marriage bed. If we still lived in Boston, among the speakeasies and dancehalls, I'd get the attention I crave from men. With our long, platonic, unconsummated marriage, can Leopold blame me for skinny dipping in the swamp after his lantern goes out? But isolated on his estate, I refuse to give up my visits to the plant frons that give me more pleasure than a man ever could...

Phineas

She comes to my lagoon when the moon rises. With her silky skin, shimmering hair, and sweet voice, she's irresistible. Her moans and gasps of pleasure haunt me between her visits. Who is she? Where did Papa get her? After years of his silence, is she the next female he selected to carry my eggs? I can't risk her fleeing in terror at my monstrous appearance, but it isn't fair for her to believe my tentacles' touches are innocent plants...

How will Harriett react when Phin reveals his Cthulhu nature? What happens when Leopold catches them in the act—will he separate the lovers or incorporate them into his experiments?

Monsters have always existed. They walk amongst us or live in the shadows. Hungering. Craving. Looking for love. Are you ready to meet these swoon-worthy specters and creatures of the night? Its time for monsters

Clutching Cthulhu's Pearls is a horror romance with oviposition spicy scenes, exhibitionism, and violence, written for mature audiences.

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1922, Cypress, Kentucky, USA

“Did you hear a word I said?” I know better than to raise my voice at my husband, but I’m tired of repeating myself. Tucked into his lab like a hibernating bear, Leopold forgot to eat lunch again. I refuse to suffer his wrath when he passes out from hunger. He hasn’t touched the tray I brought him as requested. It took twice as long to cut the sandwiches into bite-sized pieces, but he won’t eat them if he can’t write or study his notes at the same time. I’ve learned that much in our ten-year marriage.

Ten long, lonely years of marriage.

“You said the garden is full of flowers,” Leopold replies without looking up from his stacks of paper. He writes as he speaks. The urge to rip the paper from under his penny pencil, tear it into tiny pieces, and sprinkle them over his head burns within me.

“Not even close,” I say through clenched jaws. I slam the tray on his papers so hard that sandwich bites jump off it and scurry for cover between the pages. “I said your lunch sat here for five hours, and you haven’t touched it. The apple slices are brown when you promised you would eat them first. If you don’t ingest some fruit, you will contract scurvy and lose your teeth.”

“Don’t be melodramatic, Harriett. You know I haven’t time for your theatrics. Next year, the World’s Fair will be in Los Angeles—”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I interrupt with a wave of my hand and an eye roll. “You have one more year to prepare your presentation. You are changing the world as we know

it—bringing back extinct species...blah, blah, blah.”

Before the frenzy to prepare for the World’s Fair, we traveled to Boston and spent time with our friends. Those visits were my socialization for the year. We stayed with my cousins, Elenor and her husband, Murdock, in the heart of the American social scene. Dancing all night in speakeasies, callers in the morning, luncheons in the afternoon with sidecar cocktails, and giggling with Elenor between them kept me alive the rest of the year. The memories of our shenanigans fuel my life force as I clean, cook, and coax my husband to do the minimum to stay upright. The hardest part of my job as Leopold’s wife is ensuring he eats, sleeps, and bathes. Heaven forbid I ask him to ingest fresh air and sunshine or engage in human contact.

I even feed his caged “patients.” Animals, surgically enhanced and cross-bred, snap at me as I clean their enclosures. I wish I could blame them for my childless marriage or console myself by calling them our children. But Leopold doesn’t show them affection after he makes his measurements and takes his photographs for the journals. No wonder I have a kinship with the little beasts. They live a lonely life, full of pain until death. Dying things get my husband’s attention. His eyes light up with the chance to autopsy the poor wretch to find out where he went wrong. As if he were more than a man...

“Harriett,” he shouts. He slams his pencil on the desk, creating a shower of crumbs. “I wish you were supportive of my life’s work.”

If I were more supportive, I’d be the brassiere holding it up.

Leopold didn't notice when I ditched my corset. Or if he did, he didn't say a word. It is the fashion to wear a long, slimming corselette or trade in one’s corset altogether for a bandeau. Since we live in the middle of nowhere, I don’t wear either one. Under my dress is a simple chemise. While I love the freedom of no one noticing my body, it's been many years, and depression has set in. I'm at the point where I would suffer

the harshest whalebone corset just for a spin on the dance floor with a well-spoken stranger. An actual conversation about what's going on outside of this swamp would be a dream come true.

“Right, because I've never put my wants and needs on hold for your life's work,” I snap. I want to say that I ended my life for his life's work, but that would just make him angry. Well, angrier. Even my hair, which used to brush my cheekbones in the latest style, is a cloud of frizz at chin length. What I wouldn't give for a short jaunt to a salon!

“Harriett, Harriett, not again,” he wails. “You knew your place when we married. I have been nothing but open and honest about your role in this household and the type of marriage we have. I never promised love and romance or parties with friends. My home was enough in the beginning. What changed?”

“Nothing changed,” I say with a defeated sigh. He's right. He never promised friends, but I thought the implied promise in marriage was that he would be my friend or—gasp—my lover. When I confessed how dismal our marriage was to Eleanor, she said my feelings were normal. She said the longing I felt and the lack of love I perceived were simply Mother Nature's way of telling me it was time to have a baby.

Boy, did Leopold laugh when I asked for a baby!

I was humiliated and never brought it up again. Is it truly the lack of motherhood that drills a hole in my heart? I never played with baby dolls, so why would I want one now? Why am I expecting more—a pregnancy, no less—from a man who couldn't perform on our wedding night? No, I was a fool to think I would get more than unrequited love when the sight of me sprawled out on our marriage bed for the first time wasn't enough to stir his passions.

When my complaints trail off, Leopold returns to his scribbling. There's a small

victory when he shoves a sandwich piece between his lips. I leave the plate but take the tray of cold tea and brown apples back to the kitchen. I should serve them again tomorrow. It's not like he'll notice. But punishing him won't make me feel better, so I slip the apple slices between the bars of the nearest cage. The mouse-headed snake chirps with glee and swallows one whole.

I need some air.

My apron strings snap on the rusty hook next to the back door of the kitchen. I must contact the gamekeeper to replace the hook. Mr. Breyers is the one staff member we have on our estate. His services aren't for us—not all of the creatures my husband creates are vegetarian. However, Mr. Breyers is kind enough to do odd jobs and repairs around the house in addition to minding our stock animals.

He works for us in exchange for the tiny cottage on the edge of our property. What does he do in there? Never married and never visiting town, except for church on Sundays, Mr. Breyers is a solitary twin of my misanthropic husband. Any attempt I made to befriend him fell apart before it started.

The sun beats down on my face and bare shoulders as I walk past my garden in my housedress, uncovered. Scandalous, but who's watching? It will be time to harvest the tomatoes and peppers soon. Then, I must quickly turn the soil to plant squash. They need time to plump for a fall harvest. All of my husband's creatures with rodent features love squash. While marriage was supposed to make me wise, I'm sorry I had to learn that happy creatures bite less often.

To the west of the house, far enough that I doubt anyone could see me there from inside, is the swamp. I don't know if Leopold inherited the land or bought it himself, but it must have been cheap because the soil makes a horrid farm. Slightly elevated to the east and without the stability to run a plow, no crops will grow on over half our acreage. Water runs under the ground to the Ohio River for ten months of the year.

Sometimes, I wonder what would happen if I stole one of Mr. Breyers's rafts and sailed down the river...would I meet danger or a rugged st ranger to be my companion?

With one last glance over my shoulder, I indulge in the wilderness. The cold mud between my toes as I remove my shoes is a delicious contrast to the sun heating my bare arms. If I had a lady's maid, my tanlines would frighten her to tears. Reeds of the swamp come up to my waist, obscuring our closest neighbor's view of me—not that Lovecraft ever comes to call upon us.

Wading in the brackish water, I feel like a siren. If only I could lure a handsome sailor to my side. I wouldn't drown him like a true siren except maybe in conversation, affection, and the obsessive adoration that only an ignored wife can give. As if listening to my thoughts, the plants beneath the surface coil around my ankles. They stroke lovingly over my feet and between my toes. I splash my way to the northernmost tip of the lake, where the submerged rocks allow me to step into deeper water. I lift my dress higher and higher to avoid staining the fabric. If the cost of soap weren't outrageous, I'd float the cotton on the surface as I twirl around.

The plants follow me, twining up my skinny calves. Are they an aquatic fern or cattail? I'm too protective of my elicit swimming to ask Leopold to borrow my father's botany books to research what type of plants live in this swampy lake. I've never seen these long reeds covered with spore pods before. They must be spore pods because the suction of the round cups on my skin reminds me of tiny kisses. No fern has such strong fronds, though. Another one of Leopold's hybrids? No, he doesn't know botany...not like my father did. Growing up as a scientist's only child, I thought I could handle being Leopold's wife. All it taught me is why my mother left.

My loveless marriage turned my hatred of her into compassion.

How funny, these plants sense my shift in mood! In soothing circles, they climb over

my knees to caress my slender thighs, stroking my flesh like a lover. My mind is calmed, but my nerves ignite. I step on a rock deeper than I've ever gone to give the plant more access to my body. Against my hammering heart, I clutch my dress and chemise. I'm afraid of falling into the black water and drowning. That's all. There's no way a plant pleasures me. Ridiculous to receive more affection than I have in a ten-year marriage from a plant.

My face tilts to the sky. A moan escapes my lips, but my moment is interrupted when the plant tendrils reach my bloomers. The suckers investigate the ruffled edges first with tiny nips to the lace. Let them snag the stitches; their dance on the water's surface is worth the hours I will mend them. I love the rounded tips smoothing over the tangle of appendages that dip in and out of the cuffs. Bright green with mint undersides, dotted with peach cups, I'm fascinated by them. They look like plant material but move like snakes. But what snakes investigate with their tail instead of their face?

Tentacles?

Yes, they resemble the octopus tentacles I've eaten in Boston. Rubbery, chewy nonsense that slipped within my cheeks and bumped my teeth most vulgarly. I loved the sensation of a fishy finger's caress within my mouth at the dinner table. Slurping each phallus along my tongue kept me entertained while I pretended to listen to Leopold blabber on about heredity. What would one of these tentacles feel like in my mouth? Are they edible? Would they grow back if I ate one? What would happen if I didn't truly eat it, but sucked on one while the other rubbed...

An insistent tug on my bloomers interrupts my smutty thoughts. The elastic glides over my narrow hips, and I bend to yank them back to my waist. Bundles of fabric slip from my arms as I tumble over. I flail indecently. The water is deeper than I am tall and tastes horrible. My housedress is ruined. My hair flattens to my head. I kick until the plant tentacles wrap around my knees. They push me upward, and I swear

they are helped by a pair of large hands spanning my hips.

I'm thrust onto the muddy grass. As I huff and puff, I can't help but admit...

...I can't wait until my next visit...

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If Leopold found me out here, he'd spank the daylights out of me. Stumbling around in the dark is asking for a sprained ankle, but I can't resist the lure of the swamp. My afternoon chores, cooking dinner, eating alone, and evening duties are a blur. I can't push past the exhilaration from the tentacles exploring my flesh. No pesky bloomers lie beneath my nightgown. The flimsy frock may give away my whereabouts in the morning with a map of grass stains, but I have time to concoct a story. Would he believe I made a nighttime visit to the chicken coop? Perhaps I heard a noise...or saw a rabbit in the garden out my window... I'll come up with something convincing...

The clench and squelch of the mud under my feet sounds delicious. My fingers made those noises when I tried to ease the ache inside me while under my duvet. My fantasies lit a fire. I can't extinguish the flames in my low belly. I must know if someone's hands pushed me out of the swamp to save me from drowning or if I was evicted from someone's personal space. Of course, this all revolves around the assumption that a sentient being is under the water...a sentient plant tentacle monster—

I've spent too much time alone in Leopold's house of horrors, and I'm going nutty. He's never bred anything larger than a parrot...with lizard legs and rabbit ears. My nighttime excursion will prove my folly, and I will sleep soundly. Wait until I tell Leopold I suspected the pond's plants gave me more affection than him. My grass-stained gown and tale of sentient plants could be enough for him to send me to Boston for the holidays. It will be more fun if he stays home, too. What a wicked thought!

But not as wicked as having a story too salacious to share...

My brain takes a smutty spiral as I imagine a man in a metal breathing suit under the water. The tentacles are leaves he uses as puppets to arouse me. A fantasy man on my property is too much to hope for. But dark eyes and curly black hair above a square jaw take shape in my imagination. When he steps from the black pool, rivulets of water slide down his muscles. He removes his dive helmet and kisses me with all the passion I long to experience !

Or will he—after I stomp my way to the stupid swamp.

By the time I reach the water's edge, my nightgown weighs at least ten pounds thanks to the mud clinging to the hem. Rinsing my achy feet in the frigid water shouldn't feel so tantalizing, but the high humidity mixed with the desire coursing through my veins makes me feverish. Curls stick to my cheeks and tickle my ears. Damp air sits on my chest, suffocating me like a wool sweater. I'll blame my appearance on exertion if I'm caught by Mr. Breyers or Leopold. The singular benefit to being the weaker sex in their eyes is I can feign exertion to end any conversation and headaches to get out of any compromising position.

My toes swirl the water on the surface, trying in vain to wake the plant tentacles from their slumber. I tentatively tiptoe onto the deeper stones. Who cares if my ruined nightgown is soaked? Nobody sees the fabric turn translucent except the fish, the plants, and possibly the mysterious diver from my imagination. I must admit, my husband misses a show. My slim silhouette is elongated in the moonlight's shadow, so I look like a willowy model. My nipples poke the fabric, forming darkened circles above the shadowed triangle between my legs. I'm an illuminated tease with no audience. There's no point delaying the step downward that will raise the water level to my collarbone.

At least there will be less exposed flesh for the mosquitos to feast upon!

Were those rocks always positioned in that manner? Was I two steps from a

submerged chair when I toppled in this morning? A white, flat limestone lays almost two feet below the water surface. On each end, white limestone blocks act like armrests at surface level. Had I kept my wits when the plant tentacles—nope. If I've learned anything today, it is that I'm starved for touch to the point that the brushing of plants above my knees sends me into a dither. My tumble is all Leopold's fault, really.

If our roles were reversed, I could have a mistress. Well, this chair is my mistress tonight.

Of course, the first thing I do is flash my ass at her as I bend over to grip a rocky armrest. Giggle. My saturated nightgown is bundled in one hand while the other clings to the stone as I climb over it. I'm not falling in and cutting this trip short...again. When my knees hit the smooth seat, I let my dress go. The white ruffles glow in the moonlight as it ripples from my body. My bare legs swish forward as I settle on my butt. The seat is narrow...more like a perch... I lean back for balance to discover more rocks on the bank. Nestled in soft grass are two more pieces of white limestone, perfectly positioned for my elbows to rest. No way polished planks of limestone magically came to rest on the bank of a muddy, swampy lake.

The conceited part of me likes the idea of some mystery man hauling stones to entice me to sit so he can tease me with plant fronds at his leisure. My fantasy expands from a man in a diver's mask who happened upon me to a man setting up the scenario because he's obsessed with me. Wouldn't it be divine to have a man so overcome with passion that he not only fantasizes about me but creates an atmosphere for our moonlight rendezvous?

Elbows on the polished stone, I fold my arms behind my head and lay back. My body floats. I swish my legs beneath the glowing fabric of my nightgown. The stars glitter overhead. Slight splashes against the pond's edges mix with the cricket chirps to create a delightful lullaby. The peaceful, meditative spot is a gem, even if nothing

else comes of my adventure. My eyes drift closed as I lose myself in the gentle sway of the water.

Omf!

Bright green tentacles wind around my ankles, thighs, and waist simultaneously. I drop into the seat with a thud that clacks my teeth. My chin bobs. My arms fly upward to flop onto the armrests. They are pinned by vines before my movement settles. A sense of calm washes over me as my body floats just below the surface. If my captor were a malicious octopus bent on revenge for my eating their cousins, I'd sink to the bottom. I surrender to the tentacles' grasp so I can study their musculature.

They aren't plants.

The grip on my waist pulls my midsection lower than my spread arms and legs, bending me into a V-shape. Two more tentacles draw lazy circles on my inner thighs with their tips as their bulk pushes my nightgown to my throat. My pale skin glows against the brackish water. Such a wanton display outdoors pushes my desire to the forefront.

"Please," I whimper, but what I beg for, I don't know. The teasing circles go higher and higher, coiling the dark emotion in my lower belly tight. How far will they go? Are they randomly exploring a foreign entity or controlled by someone sentient? Does the owner hypnotize aquatic animals to pleasure me, or is he manipulating a contraption he built? Does a hidden man watch me writhe in their grasp, desperate for attention?

I don't care as long as they touch me. My knees bend to suggest the path they should go up my legs. When one tentacle disappears beneath me, I release a feminine growl into the night. I buck my hips, which only tightens the bonds on my wrists and ankles...

...but loosens the two about my waist. These tentacles are thicker than the rest. They slither up my ribs and cross between my breasts. A large, red sucker adorns the tip of each tentacle. It tickles my skin as it walks along my flesh. The appendages' paths divide around each breast, squeezing them. My erect nipples point upward in an obscene display of my arousal until they are covered with green coils. It's like a living, rubbing brassiere dotted with peach suckers which kiss my skin. The two largest cups on the ends of the tentacles alternate sucking and releasing my nipples until I ride the edge between pleasure and pain.

Water splashes violently on the banks of the pond with the bucking of my hips.

A shriek catches in the back of my throat as two sets of webbed fingers clench my knees. I freeze. The water is too dark to see anything other than the tentacles and the webbed hands. Ten fingers, tipped with broken, ragged nails, dig into my doughy flesh. Their scales flash in the moonlight with each clench and release of the webbed digits. The rhythm matches the tentacles sucking my nipples. My heartbeat slows. My breathing evens out to match the creature's cadence. It restores my calm and the fire burning between my legs.

I whimper but hold the pose for fear of scaring off this being who holds my arousal in their grasp.

Hesitantly, the two tentacles on my thighs resume their journey to my cunt. I strain the bonds to open my legs as far as I'm allowed. One dips inside my labia to explore while the other's tip plants little kisses on my heated lips. I thought the sucking at my nipples was intense, but my eyes cross with each movement of the tentacles between my thighs. When one breaches my vagina, I cry out in ecstasy. The sucking and releasing continues as the tendril works its way past my virginal barrier.

I'm quickly silenced by one of the tentacles that held my wrists. The coil jams itself between my lips, and I suck it with gusto. The need to pleasure the being who gives

so willingly overwhelms me. I flick my tongue on the suckers and hollow my cheeks with suction. His salty taste reminds me of the gourmet fish I indulge in when traveling. My lips stretch to accommodate the increasing girth. Instead of hitting the back of my throat, the appendage bends into a shape that fills my mouth. I breathe through my nose to maintain our rhythm and not panic.

Despite not seeing a face, I'm confident he won't allow me to suffocate.

He had a thousand opportunities to drown me already.

Somehow, the danger makes me hotter. The webbed hands scrape over the tops of my thighs so the thumbs can hold open my labia for more tentacles. My eyes roll back when, one by one, three more tentacles invade me. The four lengths rub along my vaginal walls in a delicious stretch. I'm touched where no man has ventured and my fingers can't reach. My limbs tense with my impending release. Long inhales shorten to desperate panting. I can't calm my thundering pulse. My fingers shake. I claw my nails to bits on the limestone armrests. I alternate hard swallows with brutal suction to reward the tentacle crammed in my mouth.

I'm on the edge when tapping at the crease of my ass runs ice through my veins. Certainly, they don't hope to breach that hole? The tentacles in my vagina stop their wiggling but don't leave my body. A fierce blush creeps down my cheeks and over my breasts as the suckers investigate my backside. Why do their kisses feel so good? Should I feel shame or pain? When the tip dips inside, it squirts something that tingles. The pleasing warmth flows upward in the strangest sensation, followed by a fullness that makes me squirm.

I need movement, NOW.

My hips swivel and buck. The webbed hands let go of my legs, so I pump with all my might. A squeeze to my ribs draws my attention to my sides, where green, scaled

knees hold me. The brush of webbed feet or fins on my lower back coaxes a moan from my lips. I'm a boneless mess for an aquatic creature. His cock—a tentacle can't have that girth—rubs the base of my spine and between my buttocks. A webbed hand emerges from the black water to work my clit.

It's too much.

My orgasm pulses and pumps as I milk each penetrating appendage. I oscillate between intense pleasure and blinding pain that threatens to rip me in half. After each clench, a tentacle withdraws until I'm sobbing with the loss. He lets go of my ankles. They sink. One webbed finger dips inside my vagina to collect my release while the rest makes lazy circles over my clit. I attempt to suck his hand into my body with each pass. A tremor starts at the base of my spine and rips through my body as I come down from the high.

What?! He vanished?! I never saw his face!

What am I willing to risk to see the face behind this experience? To kiss his lips or find another way to thank him for showing me affection? I can't find it in me to be ashamed of my behavior. No one knows except me and the tentacles... Could the man manipulating them know me? I swim into the center of the pond, arms waving, hoping to catch a glimpse of my lover. I crisscross the space but don't call out. I can't risk someone finding me now—not with my flesh loosened and flushed. I have no choice but to return in daylight.

I shake and sob as I stumble back to my cold, lonely bed. Which is worse—returning to my loveless marriage after what I just experienced or my growing addiction to a monster's touch?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

“Damn woman! Where are you? Harriett!” Leopold’s voice thunders through our home. Good thing we aren’t in a semi-detached house in Boston. I’d hate to leave the confines of my covers to placate disgruntled neighbors. Light rain patters on the roof as if singing me back to sleep. Good, rain will break the humidity. The grey daylight streaming through my curtains tells me I overslept, but by how much? What time is it?

“You’re in bed,” Leopold announces as he bursts through my door. The few wisps of hair left on his head stand on end. His face wears pink blotches as if he ran around the house to find me. The lines on his face are more pronounced today. They broadcast our thirty-year age difference like a news bulletin on the radio. From his loose tie to his wrinkled trousers, I suspect he slept in his clothes again—probably at his desk. Long, yellow toenails peek out from the hem of his pants. My stomach churns with nausea, so I burrow my face into my pillow.

“Why are you in bed at this hour? Are you ill?” Leopold’s questions may be phrased as if he’s checking on my welfare, but his tone is accusatory and menacing. The unspoken ‘how dare you’ hangs between his words.

Am I ill?

“I suppose so,” slips through my lips into the cotton pillow. Am I ill for staying in this marriage after it couldn’t be consummated? Am I ill for seeking pleasure and romantic thrills in our backyard under the moonlight?

Before my father died, he begged me to marry Leopold. He claimed Leopold would provide the type of lifestyle I was accustomed to. Granted, the arrangement I have

now is similar to living in the same house as my father's greenhouse laboratory. But shouldn't living with a husband be different from living with your father?

"How ill?" Leopold pulls me from my thoughts with his childish snipe. Does it matter? We don't eat together in the dining room or spend our morning together, so why should I rush to dress? Usually, I throw on my gardening dress and tend the gardens after a light breakfast alone .

"Do you have hysteria or something real?"

How dare he! I bolt out of bed to invade his space. Just because there is a uterus in my abdomen, my ailments are called hysteria. But that's not how Leopold means it. I hate how the definition has changed in our social circles to a slur. My fists clench in rage. My physical aches or illnesses don't diminish my intelligence. I'm insulted such a link would be suggested—for women—never for a whining man. Pounding around my eyes beats a furious tempo as my blood pressure skyrockets.

"I'll have you know that I didn't sleep a wink until well past midnight. Once I found comfort, I hesitated to relinquish it. Why spend a morning alone in the garden half-asleep when I can catch up on my rest while alone in my bed?" He can assume the comfort I found is related to thread count, not massaging tentacles.

"Well, you are up now, so you can join me. I have the most wonderful thing to show you. Come to the lab," he says, rushing out of the room.

I fold my arms over my chest with a huff.

What, I'm stark naked! No wonder he wore a look of horror and sprinted from the room.

My laughter can chase him down the hall for all I care. I should be grateful he didn't

press me to tell him what kept me awake or how eventually I could sleep. A true scientist would question the holes in my story or the pink circles covering my body like gigantic pox sores. He would want a definitive cause and cure for my insomnia. Moreover, a true medical researcher, as is Leopold's title, should have insisted on an examination. My husband didn't even touch my forehead for evidence of fever...

Goodness, how awkward would an examination be? Mud caked between my toes, pond scum up my calves, dried slick on my thighs, and the stripes of mysterious green goop marring my back would puzzle him. Would he need to ask if I had skinny-dipped in the pond last night, or would he figure it out on his own? Would he examine my cunt to find it stretched, swollen, and bruised from my activities? I bet if he did, he wouldn't have the nerve to confront me about my injuries.

What if he suspected Mr. Breyers? A mortification I must avoid at all costs.

I throw on a housecoat and slippers. There's no sense in drawing a full bath before I start the laundry. My bed must be stripped, laundered, and remade before I can sleep tonight. Looking at the smears of mud and pond sludge I left under my duvet gives me pause. Should I check on Leopold and have a cup of coffee with him or start the Washeteria machine steaming first? My bedding must be washed in batches due to the small size of the machine, but at least I won't be hunched over a washboard all day. My nightclothes will be a fifth load if I can convince Leopold to hand over his shirt to join them.

"Harriett!" Leopold's bellows declare he's not only over the sight of my nude form but also as impatient as a child on Christmas morning.

"Coming, coming," I answer as I strip the bed, sort the sheets, and carry them to the wash area on the opposite end of the house from his laboratory. The cool water as I wash up reminds me of last night, so I pause to caress the sink bowl. Yeah, I'll listen to Leopold's dribble when I'm ready to face him. My humming joins my slippered

feet in a clumsy waltz into the kitchen. I set bread to toast in the oven and the butter on the counter for light refreshment.

“Harriett, what’s taking you so long?” I wait for the petulant foot stomp and smile to myself when his toes slap the floor. He thunders into the kitchen like a stormcloud, fists clenched at his waist. I must admit it’s fun to wind him up when he has nothing to lord over me.

“I thought we would talk over coffee,” I say with the urn in hand. “Did you have your coffee today?”

“No, I suppose I didn’t,” he says with a furrowed brow. The poor man looks as puzzled as if he’s just arrived from a distant planet. I busy myself with preparing a platter of cold cutlets, cheese, jam jars, and cherries from my garden.

“Did you eat? Let’s share a light luncheon in the dining room, and you can tell me about your news,” I say pleasantly. Despite my best intentions, the mention of the dining room snaps him out of his trance. He narrows his eyes as he rubs his jaw.

“You hide something from me,” he says absently. He takes in my disheveled hair, laying in snarls on the back of my head. His eyes scan the soiled skin at the collar of my robe as I turn. I stink of mildew. He must smell me, even from across the kitchen.

The blood drains from my face and pools at my feet. Will he guess? As I squeeze my toes in anticipation, my pulse resonates in them. Holding the empty coffee mugs in the air, I’m frozen. We stare at one another as the wheels in his brilliant mind turn. Do I confess?

“Wh-what do you mean? What secrets could I have when I spend my days alone?”

“Whose lab do you work for?” His cold tone runs a chill up my spine. The knife I

balanced on the butter tin is in his hand. He waves the blade at the end of my nose. “Which one of your father’s friends paid you to spy on me?”

My mouth opens and closes with shock. How was I to have kept in touch with my father’s friends? Not one of them gave a woman the time of day unless they wanted to bed her. As my father’s daughter, I was off limits, or at least that’s what I tell myself. More likely, my pointed nose, frizzy hair, and minimal bustline frightened them away. Maniacal laughter slips from my mouth for the second time this morning. The knife tip scrapes my cheek as I throw my head back.

“Right,” he replies to my theatrics, rubbing the half-dozen hairs on his head. “You aren’t a woman to be bought. Courting you taught me that. No gift I bought you was impressive. Are you seeing one of their sons behind my back?”

Too sleep-deprived to focus and too shocked to process his words, I’m dumbfounded. I stand with a face-pulling smile because I can’t formulate a better response. He’s threatening to end my life because of his delusions. Could I be a spy under his nose? How? I have limited contact with the outside world. Those who would answer my calls for help don’t want his research secrets—they think he’s gone against nature’s laws. I don’t think anyone copies his research because they have an abundance of ethics, not a lack of intelligence.

But the shine of the knife in the morning sunlight keeps my mouth from spewing my opinions.

“How would I travel to the nearest city and back without you noticing? We are hours away from anywhere, and I don’t drive—” The kettle’s whistle interrupts me before my words find a way to enrage him further.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” he says with a head shake. “You are my eyes and ears in this house and never report visitors. I’m so close to the discovery of our generation

that I see similar experiments in every lab across the country. The papers are full of lectures by Charles Darwin. How does he know my conclusions before my data is collected?”

“I never met Darwin, but I’ve read the same papers as you. He observed natural selection,” I reply with a small smile. There’s a major problem with my husband’s accusations.

“You don’t think he’s engineering his animals, like me?”

“No! He’s dead—for over ten years, if not longer. Even if he still lived, you’re the only one known to surgically enhance animals before breeding them.” The knife clatters on the counter as his anger loses steam. I take advantage of his pause to remove our dark toast from the oven.

I hand him a mug of black coffee. He prefers coffee that has sat on his desk for hours, lukewarm with dust floating on the surface film. He ponders over the mug’s rim as he sips. I doctor mine with three lumps of sugar. Milk would require Mr. Breyers to milk one of the goats when they haven’t birthed kids in years. It’s easier to adjust my palate to acidic coffee than to organize milk production. Besides, Leopold would find a way to sabotage the breeding by incorporating the goats into one of his experiments. After we eat this flock, we may convert to vegetarianism.

“Millicent laid eggs,” he says with the pride of a new father. I’m surprised he remembers her name. I name all the animal hybrids because I care for them like pets. While all the bird/reptile/primate hybrids hate me, Millicent is the least likely to peck my hands as I clean her cage.

However, the fingernails on her tiny hands dig into my nailbeds with amazing accuracy. I remember Leopold’s pride when I complained about her behavior. He was overjoyed she’d developed the forethought to attack my weak spot and the dexterity

to strike at such a small area of my hand. I was less than thrilled.

I sigh into my coffee. No more threats today, with or without knives. My husband's temper cools with the healing balm of science. A dead scientist can't use me to spy on his research, so I am absolved of conspiracy...for now.

"Let's check on our new mother before we sit to eat," he announces. My mug better remain hot while he shows me his darling. I doubt I will find the pile of eggs amusing, but acting impressed with his abominations is how I pay for my lodgings. My slippers clack on the tiles as I cross the hallway to the stairs. I thump up them with tired feet. Laundry can wait; my achy body needs a salt bath.

"Oh, that's unfortunate," he whispers as we enter the dusty lab. His shoulders slump as he peers into the bird cage. I busy myself with collecting soiled dishes to return to the kitchen. "Harriett, the first hatchling is a chick."

"I'm sorry, dear," I mumble. What did he expect? Millicent started as a bright yellow parakeet and paired with a myna bird. Fuzz the Myna Bird had his wings removed to attach hands. Millicent has an extra set of arms protruding from her chest. Snake tail stumps replaced both birds' feet. Leopold hoped they would regenerate tails if he cut them off. Nothing grew...except my concern for the welfare of the animals in his care.

"Don't fret, Harriett. There's still hope that the other hatchlings will have tails, hands, or even unattached variants," he says with an awkward pat on my back.

My body turns wooden at his touch. While my mystery lover might not be my future, Leopold lost ownership of my body last night. The door between our bedrooms wasn't open before, but my side is now locked. I'll die with only the memories of last night before I pursue Leopold again. I've changed. Leopold senses it too. I'm fortunate he's too wrapped in his research to realize what's different about me.

Do I risk his temper and see my lover again? Leopold pulled a knife on me because he suspects I keep secrets. Was it because I threatened his work or his pride? Would his masculinity drive him to violence if I did take a lover regularly? Ha! His masculinity withered away before our wedding night—like his shriveled cocklet. Is the man in the swamp a threat to Leopold's discoveries? Surely, the mystery man would have spoken to me if he wanted to pump me for information. Giggle. He pumped me senseless instead.

“Are you sure you don't have hysteria?” Leopold asks when my giggle triggers a chorus of bird calls from the test subjects.

“I think I might,” I say with the most genuine smile I've worn since my last trip to Boston. “I'm going to take my lunch in my room after all. Enjoy your morning, husband.”

“Harriett,” he calls when I reach the door. “Hysterical, sane, or lonely, you are my wife. Your loyalty is to me first. If I find you have spread my progress to anyone outside of this house, I won't hesitate to dispose of you. Understood?”

“Dispose of me? Really, Leopold. I ask again. Who could I tell your secrets when I don't leave the grounds? Except for our trips to Boston—”

“We won't be visiting Boston until after the World's Fair, if ever again.”

Disappointment squeezes my heart like a caved-in ribcage. “But—”

“That's final,” he yells and slams his fist on the desk. “The future of mankind can't be jeopardized for your silly nonsense. You don't leave this house! You don't talk about the experiments! Do you understand?”

“Crystal clear,” I whisper and close the door before my tears can fall. I'm as trapped

and broken as the mutant creatures in his cage.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

My sheets itch. The Washteria, like all the latest gadgets, has its faults. I didn't scrub the skin off my hands or pull my shoulders into a strange shape while laboring over a washboard, but this fabric didn't rinse free of caustic soap either. My body is on fire. Images of slithering tentacles brush the corners of my mind.

Maybe it's not the sheets...

With Leopold suspicious and on the brink of madness, I should stay in bed. The probability of him following me to the pond is high. His laboratory window faces the backyard, and if he happened to look out, he would see me crossing the muddy mess to the swamp. He would assume I'm meeting a contact to spill his research secrets. Would he investigate himself or wait to punish me upon my return? Would he hide in a dark corner of this room with a knife, crouched behind my vanity chair, or wrapped in my bedside curtains?

That assumes he looks up from his research notes or isn't asleep on his desk.

He doesn't notice my presence when I collect dishes from the surfaces of his lab, so why would he glance out a window? If he followed me, what was the worst he would see? My skinny dipping would frighten him if this morning's retreat from my bedroom was an accurate assessment of his feelings. He didn't have the capacity for sexual desire on our wedding night. Ten years later, we've aged to the edge of child-bearing years—despite men's seasons lasting decades longer. The memory of the flaccid worm he carries in his trousers makes me gag. I have no need of his tiny cocklet when the mystery man outside can pleasure me senseless with pond creatures...like a sensual, freshwater Poseidon.

I can't believe I'm considering returning to the pond, but the ache within me will keep me awake all night if I don't do something. My fingers skim over my nipples. They are as hard as diamonds. Down my clenched belly, I reach for the hem of my nightgown. My feet dangle over the sides of the bed as I work my cunt. The coiling inside me intensifies, but I can't topple over the edge to oblivion. I don't have enough fingers to stuff myself like the mysterious pond man.

No sleep tonight without going outside. All the pleasures of life are denied to me for the sake of Leopold's research—including his newest mandate, canceling our trips to Boston. My physical needs must be met, and sexuality is one of them. Leopold can track through the mud and discover this with his own eyes. If I don't hide my egress from the house, his unstable temper won't allow him to wait inside to kill me. I can't believe my best outcome is to be caught in the throes of passion by my husband while a stranger pleasures me. But then again, look inside the household I run...laughable...as if I'm in charge of anything.

Nothing but my body...

And my body needs more than my feminine fingers.

My feet slap the frigid bedroom floor seconds before my nightdress joins them. The arousal simmering within me will keep me warm and reduce the amount of laundry I must do tomorrow. No sneaking tonight. I brazenly step into the night as naked as the day I was born. I throw a rude gesture at Leopold's window before running to the pond. My faster, lighter steps don't sink into the mucky earth. I skip over puddles like a forest nymph. It's like I have wings! My path morphs into loops and twirls as I enjoy the rush of freedom.

At the pond, I plop onto the stony seat with a loud splash. If I knew his name, I'd call my lover. Would he rise from the murky depths in a bronze suit or emerge from the brush to swim to me? Will he wear his metal dive suit or use a snorkel mask? I'm lost

in my fantasies when a tentacle brushes the inside of my right knee.

Oh no, he's not touching me without showing me his face first!

I want it all—his name, his face, and his cock. If I'm risking my life for a lover, I want a proper one—not just what I formulate inside my mind. I rub the tentacle with my toes. It recoils. My feet clamp together to hold it to the surface. Do I dare pull it from the water?

Hesitantly, I fold at the waist. My arms dip into the brackish water. A moan escapes my lips when more tentacles weave through my fingers. The smooth glide of their tops contrasting with the sucker cups on the bottom was the source of my pleasure last night. A deluge of memories of them wedged inside me opens my legs. The trapped tentacle slivers from my grasp.

I wasn't raised to be meek, and my acquired shyness has led to my captivity. If I want to change my life, I must be bold. Take what I want. I clench my fists on the nearest tentacles and rock backward. A growl drowns out the cricket chirps. The tentacles go taut and slap against my chest. My back arches with the sting on my breasts.

My groans turn to silent screams as my eyes follow the tentacles to their origin. They are two to four feet in length and number over a dozen. They attach to the lower half of my lover's face like a beard. Flat nostrils open and shut as he breathes without a nose...and the pair of appendages stabbing at my thigh confirm my lover is male. His teardrop-shaped eyes dominate his face and glow lime green. Otherwise, his massive shoulders block all light from reaching me. Webbed fingers sink into the mud by my ears. His arms shimmer with reptilian skin. With each movement, it changes between green, blue, and black.

A fin starts between his eyes, and when he drops his head, I catch a glimpse of it between his shoulder blades. He sniffs at my breasts, and my eyes roll in bliss at the

contact. Deep inside my heart, a little voice tells me not to judge him for not being human. The differences between our bodies make him interesting, not frightening. He's powerful enough to rip me to pieces but hasn't attacked me once...unlike impotent Leopold, who held me at knifepoint this morning.

"Harriett, I'm Harriett," I whisper, reaching for his face. He leans into my palm as I near his cheek. The rough texture is familiar, and goose pimples break out on my thighs in memory.

"Hairy, Hairy," he grumbles. His gravel voice struggles to make the sounds, as does his mouth on the phonetic shapes. I watch in fascination as he chews on my name. Will his frustration become anger?

"Hairy, hairy tea, hairy ate," he says, stroking the curls over my mound.

"Hairy," I repeat with a giggle. How deliciously impertinent to accept a nickname in reference to my cunt! Civilized society would combust if they knew. "I'll be 'Hairy' for you. What's your name?"

"You will be Thin's Hairy," he says with a growl. His rubbing fingers clamp over my mound with possession, and I reward him with a palmful of my arousal.

"Thin, your name is Thin. Where do you live, Thin?" With one hand on his cheek, my other hand roams the landscape of his body. He's lean but not skinny, with leathery scales covering every inch. As I near his Orian's Belt, his cock—wait—two cocks jump to greet me.

"I live here. Hairy in my home. Be my—" His words end in a groan as my curious fingers learn his shape.

A thin cock, shaped like a human man's, oozes slime from the tip. My fingers buzz

and tingle where they touch the goop. I squeeze my thighs together, so I avoid experiencing the buzz in a more delicate place. Below it, his second cock is a ringed tube. My fingers don't touch when I measure its girth. I shimmy with anticipation of trying to take the pole into my body. Will it fit? Will I bruise or tear my opening? Do I care after the rapture I experienced impaled on his tentacles? The way the rings pulse may scramble my brain. His mouth drops open as his eyes flutter shut with inhumanly long lashes. His brain may be scrambled already.

"Is my touch okay?" I fish for compliments, but I feel desirable for the first time in my life.

"Learn me," he whispers with a sigh. "Learn your male."

"Do you want to learn my body too?" I ask too quickly. I don't know if he's a virgin or if he has a fishy wife in the pond. What if I'm strangled by a she-creature instead of sliced by Leopold?

"I know Hairy. I know Hairy is my place," he says, rolling to my side. He stretches his webbed fingers on my abdomen, below my navel. "I choose Hairy."

I may be wanton, but my legs fly open at that. A male is choosing me? Wallflower Harriett, with the strange father and dubious dowry, thrust into a loveless marriage because she never attracted suitors when in her prime...is a lifetime away from where I offer myself to Thin. I'm delighted when he wastes no time claiming the nectar dripping from my cunt with his tentacles.

"Oh, your tentacles!" I cry with my hips thrusting upward.

"Barbels know your flavor," he says, lifting a two-foot appendage and rubbing it along my lips. He can't pronounce the 'F' in flavor, so maybe his name is Fin, not Thin. "Not barbel but learn your shape like an en-cul...entacool—" The four-foot

tentacle he holds aloft wiggles as he stumbles on its name.

“I understand,” I say, wrapping my fingers around the tentacle. His short facial appendages are barbels, while the longer ones are tentacles. Oh dear, I have one hand wrapped around his larger cock and the other around a tentacle...without invitation.

I must have made a face. When I open my mouth to ask for consent, Fin pushes the example barbel between my lips. It plays with my tongue and explores my gums.

“Round teeth and defenseless hands. Hairy has a weak mouth. She will need Fin’s strength and claws.” He bares his yellow fangs at me, so ‘strength’ sounds more like ‘senff.’ Instead of fearing their sharp points, I focus on his assessment of my weakness based on my tooth shape. I suck his barbel with hollowed cheeks until he stops smiling. He grabs my breasts to cling to reality.

“Soft,” I say, releasing his appendages to tease myself. His barbel retracts so I can explain. My fingers squeeze his scaled hands to knead my breast tissue. “Hard points are what you want,” I instruct as if my nipples aren’t hard already. My thumb brushes his with increasingly insistent strokes, so the webbing catches and releases my areola to spread my pleasure.

“Will buds spray?”

“Oh no,” I reply while trying not to giggle. “I um... spray below. Spraying is good too...very good.”

“Hairy spray when Fin is good,” he says as he hides his face in the crook of my neck. His breath fans over the sensitive space beneath my ear. A pair of barbels enter my mouth, so I guess my lessons are over. The tentacles become more brazen in their exploration. Instead of tracing circles on my inner thighs, they open my labia and trace the delicate tissues within. I squeak around his appendages as a sucker attaches

to my clit. The rhythmic suck and release may be the death of me.

One...two...three...tentacles glide in and out of me while Fin breathes in my scent. He shifts to lay between my legs without his tentacles losing their pattern. I wish I could see his face. In this new position, I can't reach his cocks. All I can do is surrender to the pleasure washing over me.

My orgasm hits me like a runaway train. Fin rears back to check that I'm screaming in pleasure and not pain. The worry melts from his face, and he adds two more barbels to my mouth to muffle my screams. The stretching of my lips and constant rubbing sends me into overdrive. Who knew my bottom lip was a hot button too? He pumps them once and waits for my consent, but I'm too gone to care. With half a nod, his barbels mimic the tentacles below with shallow thrusts.

He eases me down from my peak with a gentleness unexpected from a creature. I'm treasured like a precious piece of glass or a priceless work of art. Drenched tentacles replace his webbed hands. They smear the evidence of my orgasm over my breasts in an erotic painting that shines in the moonlight. I'm marked as wanton, and I revel in it. I can't deny I've fallen into indecency when I'm naked except for the mud coating my back. I jump when my mound is splashed and massaged. Fin's hand pumps green goop from his smaller cock until it drips over me. My nerves jump to attention as the tingling chemical soaks into my skin. He massages it between my labia and into my body until I light up like a Christmas tree.

"Opens you," Fin growls. "Opens Hairy for me, not you, Papa."

"Yes, good. Follow your instincts, Phineas. Don't stop on my account."

My heart stutters. My blood runs cold. My thighs snap shut around Fin.

"Leopold," I whisper in horror. I knew he would catch me...but he knows Fin. Of

course, he knows Fin...err...Phineas. How else would a sea monster get into our pond? Use your head, Harriett! How long has Leopold been watching? What will he do now? How much of our passion was Phineas and I? How much was engineered by Leopold?

“Don’t act so fearful, dear wife. My plan was always for you to join my experiments, but I assumed I would have to force you. We could have been breeding you with many different monsters by now if you had told me about your deviance.”

“My deviance?” Tears drip down my cheeks. Phineas gathers me against his chest and shields my nudity from the deranged light in Leopold’s eyes.

“Phineas—you have my permission. You can give this one your eggs.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Harriett is different from the women Papa brings me. The beautiful Harriett came to the swamp, seeking my touch. She talked to me instead of screaming awful things about me. I understand Harriett, but I haven't had time to tell her. She's trying to understand my words. I hate that I don't have lips—not plump like Harriett's or thin like Papa's lips—just scales around my mouth. Before Mother disappeared, she taught me to say as many words as my flat mouth allowed. I know my letters, numbers, and colors. Mother started to teach me the magic of reading when Papa took her away. I have thoughts and feelings...

...for Harriett...

Papa can't take her away—not when she looked at me with love in her eyes.

I scowl at Papa as he leads us to the lab. I hate the lab. Women scream and claw at me while Papa yells at me to implant my eggs into them. As their bellies balloon with eggs, the women cry and screech at me to stop. They die. They always die hating me. They fight my eggs and bleed to death, or they kill themselves. I bury them in my swamp with lilies because Mother said lilies are flowers that say, I'm sorry.

If I hesitate to give the women my eggs, Mr. Breyers hits me. His belt hurts. Will Harriett hate me? Will she cry out in fear or with joy like she did in the swamp? If she doesn't want my eggs, I will stop. Mr. Breyers can hit me all he wants, but I won't kill her. Will Papa take Harriett like he disappeared Mother when I refused to deposit my eggs into her?

“I won't put too many eggs, Hairy. I will protect you no matter how hard he hits me,” I whisper against her hair. My sack bulges with six eggs, enough to ensure a living

hatchling but not enough to kill Harriett. This is why I pushed my mating liquid inside her before we moved. It opens her body for eggs, making her crave my oviscape.

She cries harder but buries her head against my shoulder. Her arms around my neck tug me closer. I press her front against me to keep Papa from looking at her pretty curves. She rubs her thighs together as my ejaculate starts warming her body. The rubbing of her folds will feed the need, not reduce it. If it takes all my strength, I will ensure Harriett feels pleasure, not pain. I can't help but hope she knows we'll fight together against Papa.

"We can run," she whispers so softly, I wasn't sure she said the words. She hasn't noticed my egg sack hangs too low for me to run. My thigh muscles strain to lift my legs high enough to protect my egg sack from bouncing on the stairs. "You must be a strong swimmer. From the swamp, we can swim to the river, build a raft, and float to freedom."

How does she know my deepest desires if she isn't my soulmate? She's never heard me tell stories of my future on a raft to my siblings. Could she be the mystery lady I call my starlight? Is that why she visited me under the full moon? I loved her before I met her. The life she offers has lived in my mind since I was a child. I will do anything to live that dream.

"I dream of a raft life with Hairy," I whisper too softly for Papa to hear. My hearing is better than a normal human's ears, but Papa's worsens as his hair falls out.

"If you help me escape, I'll give you a raft life," she whimpers.

"What's your conversation about Harriett? Are you getting better acquainted with the father of your children? Well, don't bother! Those hatchlings will be the centerpiece of my exhibit at the World's Fair," Papa shouts as he storms into the house.

Harriett cries harder.

I see red.

“You don’t need to yell at her, Papa,” I snap.

He repeats me, mocking the way my words come out.

I want Hairy to smile and love me when she receives my eggs—not howl and claw at her handcuffs! Despite her anger at Papa, her body weeps for my cock. I love her because she looks at me as a person with thoughts and feelings—not a beast. I’m more than my fins and fangs. I want to learn, build, and create. My world is small but beautiful under the swamp. No humans go deep into the grasses. It’s a special place I can show Harriett. She will love sharing the wilderness with me. Someday she will love me.

Or I’ll die proving how much I love her.

My mind grabs Harriett’s raft life and refuses to let go. I can see myself building a floating house for her and our hatchlings. Our home will have a cooking area, so I don’t have to eat raw fish. We will have a reading area where Harriett will teach our hatchlings—the way Mother taught me. No lab. I will give Harriett dozens of eggs and beautiful hatchlings without strapping her down. We won’t need a lab. We will transfer eggs with pleasure and love...always.

“Your lab? There’s no room in your lab! Why don’t we retire to my rooms?” Harriett says in a stronger voice.

She glares at Papa, but he smiles at her. It’s not a loving smile, but rather one a devil would wear. We cross his small animal room to the secret door behind the bookshelf. Harriett struggles for the first time. She kicks her feet to swim away without water.

Her eyes widen with terror. The 'O' shape in her mouth displays her blunt, defenseless teeth. She's clawing...but not to escape me...she's climbing me like a tree.

Blunt teeth, flat claws, mind clouded, my mate needs me to rescue her.

If only I could communicate my plan.

Harriett

"No, no, no," I yell as I squirm.

Phineas holds me steady. He whispers stunted affirmations of love and protection with his speech impediment. Instead of calming me, they wind the horror tighter within my body. Whose side is he on? Do I dare trust him to let me go? He's following Leopold into a room so camouflaged, I never noticed it before. I hold onto the doorframe as long as I can before my arms no longer reach. With the finality of the last nail in my coffin, Leopold slams the door behind us.

He lights a gas lantern to reveal his torture chamber. Straps and tubes hang on the walls. My flailing legs kick over a table covered with sample jars and hastily labeled bottles next to the door. I'm smug for two seconds before I'm spanked by Leopold. The sting on my wet skin makes my body gush a torrent of embarrassing liquid. Phineas's webbed fingers hold most of it, but nobody can miss the splatters on the floor.

I lost control of myself after Phineas pressed his ejaculate into me.

Phineas growls and swings me to face the wall. He may be my ally after all.

"No hitting! No, not like Mr. Breyers! No hitting Hairy," Phineas roars.

Leopold opens his mouth to assert dominance...and then closes it. I hope the booboisie sees how small and feeble he is compared to Phineas. If I can convince Phineas that he's in charge, Leopold will have no choice but to let us go. I lock eyes with my husband as understanding blooms in them.

Phineas must be a willing sperm donor...which means Leopold can't abuse me. I wish I could say forcing sex between Phineas and me counts as abuse, but the burn between my legs has blazed from uncomfortable to maddening. Whatever hormones live in his ejaculate, he should bottle and sell. At this point, I'd allow any blunt instrument into my cunt if they promised it would ease my pelvic ache and elongated, over-sensitized clit. My mind doesn't want sex, but my body is primed and insistent.

"No hitting? Mr. Breyers usually holds them down so I can strap the ladies onto the table. Do I need Mr. Breyers, or will you help me?" Leopold asks his questions in a syrupy sweet voice.

"I will help for leaving out Mr. Breyers—and don't strap Hairy in too tightly. Don't hurt her," Phineas says with a flash of his pointy teeth.

My panic multiplies one hundred times. How dare Phineas bargain with Leopold when he has all the power?! While I don't want Mr. Breyers anywhere near my naked body, I don't want to be strapped to the waist-height table either. The leather restraints for ankles and wrists are at least two inches wide. The middle belt, dangling onto the floor, is wider. Once I'm in place, I will be helpless. I doubt Phineas is strong enough to bust through the restraints either. It will take a moment of privacy for him to undo the buckles, and Lord knows Leopold won't take his eyes off me once I'm an experiment.

Dammit, why did I have to get the attention I've always wanted now?!

"Settle, Hairy," Phineas whispers against my neck. Leopold grumbles something and

crawls under the table. As he fumbles with the latches on the table legs to reach it, Phineas inches us backward. “My plan will get us and our hatchlings a raft life.”

Plan? Phineas has a plan! I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. He winks at me in the cutest gesture I’ve ever seen. A barbel caresses my cheek. I cup his jaw in my palm to show my support. Tentacles wrap around my arm and neck. My desire to open my thighs for him intensifies. I can’t stand the empty rubbing of my vaginal walls on each other. For a second, I believe we are on the banks of the swamp in a moment of passion—not ensnared in Leopold’s research. Phineas exudes strength, cunning, and virility. He’s not a giant dumb monster...

...And Leopold underestimates his intelligence.

“Yes, settled. Let’s get her settled,” Leopold says from under the table, grasping onto the half he heard. His ego prevents him from noticing Phineas’s rebellion or asking Phineas to repeat our exchanges. He treats us like furniture. That will work in our favor when escaping under his nose.

“Lay down and let me love you,” Phineas says loud enough for Leopold to hear.

My husband’s evil smile beams in the dusty room.

Too bad I’m so desperate for Phineas’s cock, the table looks inviting. I won’t give my husband the satisfaction of whimpering and begging to be released. No, I want Phineas. My body hungers for him. With my ankles secured on the ends of metal table extensions and my feet cupped in the metal fasteners, I’ll have leverage for thrusting.

If Leopold wants a narrative of his unethical experiments to publish in a dodgy scientific journal, I’ll give him a show he’ll never forget! Let’s see who the man is when I scream his monster’s name and ride his monster’s cock. I’ll beg Phineas to

keep going after I'm full of eggs!

Let's see if that gets rise out of my impotent husband!

"I'm sorry, Hairy," Phineas says with tears in his voice as he lays me on the table. "I will love you gently."

"I know you will," I reply before kissing him fiercely. I hold the back of his head when he tries to break our kiss. My tongue thrusts inside his mouth, mimicking how I want to be impaled upon him. I tuck the end of a tentacle between my thighs and wiggle until it's coated with juices. The tip glides an inch inside me to tease the spongy section of my front wall. Yes, he will do his best to pleasure me. He will find a way to set us free.

"I believe in you."

My words are coated with meaning as I whisper them into his ear.

I shock Leopold to his toes when I raise my arms over my head to be shackled. He glares at my smirk. Phin's lids lower with arousal. One hand massages my hip while the other pumps more green ejaculate from his smaller cock. It oozes over his hand. He glides the back of his knuckles between my labia to transfer the fluid to my arousal-engorged flesh. My hips undulate for more when he massages my inner labia. I throw my head back and moan wantonly when he thrusts two webbed fingers coated in green goop into me.

The burn reaches inferno levels. The tingling in my abdomen morphs into pressure on my pelvic bones. Am I being split in half?

"It burns," I whine when I wish I could keep silent. All my modesty washed away with the green fluid. He adds a dollop to each nipple, so they harden like diamonds.

His fingers plunge between my lips when I gasp. My tongue dances with his flavor and tiny stings. Even my gums threaten to let go of my teeth and prance around my mouth after he rubs them. My eyes roll back into my head with need.

“I will put your fires out,” Phineas declares with the robustness of a man in charge. I strain to push my legs open as far as I can while he looms over me. His tentacles rub along my legs and belly in loving sweeps.

“I want you,” I whisper in response. My tongue is too large for my mouth, so my words come out sloppy. Drool drips from the corners and down my chin.

“She’s ready for your hectocotylus, Phineas,” Leopold says as he emerges from under the table. Not only am I strung out between my wrist and ankle restraints, but a thick strap holds my ribs down.

“Yes, Phin, I’m ready for you,” I say between pants.

“Let’s gag her,” Leopold says with a rough edge. He enters my field of view with a ball hanging from a leather strap.

“Don’t you dare,” Phin whispers with a menacing hiss. “Her sounds belong to me.”

Phineas

He puts the ball gag away. I said no, and he turned to comply. What is going on? Hairy lies in the straps with love and trust in her eyes. She will be a loving mother to our hatchlings if I can get her out of here. I’ve done a thorough job of preparing her to receive eggs. With my fluids changing her body, I won’t rip the muscle at the top of her opening that Papa calls a cervix. Ripping a cervix could fill her with blood...that’s how the fighting, blond-haired lady died. No, I won’t injure Harriett. I must believe she’s my mate and built to bear my hatchlings.

To sneak out of here, she must be pregnant.

She is in no state to transport her. In opening her body, I've unleashed a fireball of desire. She strains to impale her cunt on me. Her body will hunger for cock until she's full of eggs. While I want to give them to her in private, we will travel easier if they live within her. I can carry her as I run to the swamp. She will float on a log of driftwood until we find better transport. Her body won't burn while carrying eggs. She may even sleep.

I thrust my smaller cock into her to test the cervix. The last of my goop sputters into the deepest recesses of her body. Harriett's moans don't change when I bump the end. If her cervix was thick and closed, that bump would hurt. I push deeply to transfer as much fluid as possible. Her moans are throaty with lust, not screechy with pain.

I guess she's ready. Oh, but the pretty way her mouth hangs open, corners curved upward and lips bouncing as I thrust into her. My hips quicken to jostle her breasts too. She sighs with pleasure. Her beauty as she lets me love her brings tears to my eyes. I'm pleasing her! I knew she would love joining with me. It's more than putting out the fire I built in her; she's loving Phineas...like a man and woman. We will make a loving home for the hatchlings...starting with how much we will love each other.

"Enough! Just give her eggs!" Papa stomps his foot and points at Harriett.

"Phin, yes, Phin! I love your cock! Give me your eggs!" Harriett yells. While I glow with her praise, I fear she might want to rub our love into Papa's face. Why don't they love each other? He could have claimed Hairy, bringing a new mother to all his creatures who live in the swamp. She's too young, pretty, and full of life to be meant for him. How did he trap her in marriage? For a husband, Papa doesn't mind my claiming her. He wants my eggs in her for his experiments more than he wants to love her himself.

He's a fool.

"Yes, Papa," I say, giving a wide smile to Harriett. "My Hairy will protect our eggs."

Harriett nods in jerks, out of sync with the bouncing of her body. She hears my unspoken instructions. After I implant the eggs, Papa will be beside himself with joy. He will forget we're in the room and lose himself in his work. This will give us a chance to escape.

I switch cocks and slowly work the larger phallus into her tight body. Her inner muscles squeeze and fight each inch. Tears run down her face. I collect them with my tentacles. She plants tiny kisses on them. Her eyes fly wide when I force the first ring past her opening but settle as it works its way up her channel.

"Yeah, I hope she chokes on your oviscape! Take that, Harriett! How do you like your lover now?" Papa yells his ugly words over Harriett's face. The blood pulses in his neck and floods his face with red blotches.

Harriett

"He's wonderfully enormous," I whisper with a blissful sigh as Phin trades the small cock for the ringed oviscape to deliver his eggs. The friction and stretch against my hungry cunt are just what my body craves. Every ridge must be forced past my straining inner labia before gliding over the pleasure nerves within me. I could get addicted to Phin's oviscape, or hectocotylus, as Leopold calls it. I'll call it a divining rod because it finds all my golden spots.

Tentacles skip over my flesh as he wraps my breasts like he did in the swamp. The red suckers tug my nipples until they lose their grip due to the tingling goop. Oh, how deliciously scandalous to be splayed out in such a wanton fashion while his inhuman appendages play in the ejaculate I'm wearing. I'm stained, ruined, deviant, an

abomination, and every other horrid name Leopold could call me...and I love it.

Being immune to his degradation is my new power.

“I love you, Phin.”

“I love you, Hairy,” Phin replies between thrusts. He works his giant shaft into me, inch by glorious inch. I’m stuffed. His thinner cock rubs against my clit while his barbels flick over my tortured flesh. My mound is a dome where he’s stretched me to fullness.

I may die from sensation overload...but what a fantastic way to go!

“Oh! Oh!” Phin yells incoherent phrases. His facial features droop. His tentacles and barbels straighten as if struck by a bolt of lightning. Eyes closed but mouth hanging open, he releases a moan so deep it shakes the table loose from its fastenings to the floor .

He’s incredible when he climaxes.

Squeak! Did I make that shriek? The egg leaves his body and enters mine. My pelvis sits under an invisible weight. Are the edges of my womb ripping apart? Between my coil-covered breasts, my heart pounds. The area under my navel grows a lump the size of a chicken egg. The closing of my body around the egg is a blast of pleasure so bright I sing like an operatic soprano. My orgasm welcomes the egg into me with loving pulses as if my involuntary muscles hug my new offspring.

“Hairy happy?” Phin’s quiet question and gentle caress bring me back to Earth.

“I’m so happy, I could fly,” I reply as soon as I catch my breath.

His sigh of relief melts my heart. Has no one accepted an egg from him? Did he fear I would be hurt? Were there risks no one told me about? I'm grateful Phin kept those answers to himself so I could enjoy our mating. He has proven he can protect me in all ways. Had he told me some horror story of a failed egg acceptance or birth, I would have blacked out with terror. I didn't know to ask these questions—I still don't want the answers.

“Are you ready for more?” He asks, even though I can feel his struggle to contain his second egg. My sweet, caring man holds back until I'm comfortable. I'm sure if I said I was done, he'd let the eggs drop to the floor. Despite them being the ultimate gift of love and commitment, he only wants to give me as much as I can take.

How can we be so in tune with one another when we're different species?

“I want them all, Phin. Give me our family to carry, nourish, and mother. Let me grow to love them the way I will grow to love you.” My declaration of love isn't to annoy Leopold.

This time, I mean it.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

My love's eyes shine with joyous tears. The small bulge in her belly changes something in me. Seeing my eggs inside a female always pulls my heartstrings, but this time is different. Fatherly love, responsibility, and male pride share space with a fierce rage and surge of protectiveness. Papa won't get these hatchlings. Harriett won't let him take them from her body...and he won't have access to her...because I'm stealing her away.

We will give the hatchling in that little egg a raft life, even if it costs me my life.

"I can't hold them back," I whisper through clenched jaws. My clumsy fingers work the button at the top of her opening, which makes her moan with pleasure. I must bring her to the brink of orgasm, so her squeezing will help usher the egg inside. If her body fights the egg, my shaft may tear her insides. We are joined tightly, or I would pleasure her entrance. If I withdraw, I doubt I will fit inside her again with the eggs lodged between us.

"Just get the eggs inside her," Papa yells. Beads of sweat jump from his bald head and onto Hairy. The sight adds kindling to the fire burning within me. I don't want any piece of him touching my precious Harriett. Never again. "Stop stalling and do it! Do it!"

"She must be ready, or her body won't stretch!" Today I've yelled at Papa more than all my days combined. Is it my age or Harriett that inspires me to rebel against the only family I've ever known? My new family, strapped to a table and helpless, needs me more than the one buried in my memories. Mother is gone. Father was never one of us, was he? He's our creator, a watchful figure in the shadows, but not a father.

“She stretched for one. Once a woman’s body is open, it doesn’t snap back into place. She’s ruined for men, but she’s perfect for experiments with eggs.”

Calling Harriett ruined pulls a growl from my belly.

“Move within me, Phin,” Harriett whispers, trembling from head to toe. “I’ll peak on your command and take your next egg. Please thrust into me.”

Oh, sweet heavens! My hips swing in tiny movements to give her what she wants without hurting her. Her body strangles my empty cock. Lust boils hot in my body, opening my egg sack to my enlarging shaft. The egg presses against Harriett’s opening, and I’m fascinated by the bulge between our bodies. Our hatchling stretches her opening with each of my pushes. As her body engulfs the egg, coated with my green fluid to ease the slide, she moans my name.

Papa leans over my shoulder. His smile is too large for his face. I press our bodies together to block his view.

“Phin! Yes, Phin! Push hard! Slam that big cock into me!” She screams, but for who’s ears—mine or Papa’s? She gets a rise out of both of us, but my heart sinks lower in my chest. Will she still love me when he’s not there to be jealous? Unable to deny her anything, I rock into her with enough force to bruise my legs on the table’s edge. The satisfying sway of her chin and quiver of her breasts is worth the ache on my thighs.

Anything for Hairy.

“Two eggs,” Papa murmurs as twin bulges push out of Harriett’s stomach.

“Three,” I whimper as the third bulge shifts from behind the second two. “I’m sorry, Hairy, I didn’t close the sack in time. I am a weak male.”

“I have three of your eggs, Phin? Why would you apologize for such a gift? You’ve given me pleasure beyond what I’ve experienced in life. I’m honored to be your chosen female, the mother to your hatchlings,” she says as sweat drips from her hair. The tone behind her voice is real, or at least I will pretend it is to fulfill my hunger for love.

Muddy water drips onto the table, and I’m suddenly offended. This whole room is wrong. Harriett’s tied wrists are wrong. Papa’s laughing eyes, bouncing pen, and written letters are wrong. We should be alone, on soft grass, under the stars. The crickets should sing for us as the waves applaud each egg’s arrival in their mother’s womb.

I hate Papa for taking this moment from us.

He will pay. We won’t just leave. We will take something of his first.

“Phin, where did you go? Please stay with me. I’m all alone if you don’t stay with me,” Harriett calls from a place beyond my anger.

“I’m here, beautiful. As long as I’m alive, I’ll be with my family,” I mumble, hating my lack of lips and the way my words come out.

Papa turns away from us to do something on his workbench. Can I hope he’s dropping off his notes to leave the room?

I release the table and slow my thrusts to reach for her. My dark green fingers rub the sensitive insides of her thighs. I cup her mound and then each egg on my ascent up her body. My long tentacles rearrange and recoil around her breasts and tease her nipples with flicks and light rubbing. Their abused purple points can’t take the power of my red suckers. I would fold inside like a wilted plant if I damaged her perfect body.

My bent waist strains our connection, collapsing my cock like a pinched reed, but I reach for my prize. Replacing my tentacles with my softer barbels, I tease her lips open and stroke her tongue with my tentacles. Her moans and groans grow in volume as I stuff four of them inside, withdrawing one to allow another to barge inside.

Harriett

My eyes roll back with bliss. Phin tastes of salt, grass, and desire. I duel with his tentacles invading my mouth. My tongue tickles the space between the suckers and the muscle of his appendages. He growls with pleasure. Despite just meeting him tonight, my body knows his body like a lifelong friend. I hollow my cheeks and suck on his writhing tentacles with all my might.

He lifts my thighs as far as my restraints allow, changing the angle of his impalement. He rams his cock into my sore body. The table rocks, screeching in agony, as he tests the limit of the furniture. The legs he's knocked loose from their moorings on the floor stomp along as if keeping a beat for our song.

"Careful!" Leopold yells as his hanging torture instruments clang against the wall. The clatter of them hitting the floor fills me with pride. We will survive because Phin will reduce this house of horrors to rubble and free his family. "Don't break the glass!"

Phin ignores Leopold.

The fourth egg glides into me like a boat approaching the dock on flat, calm seas. Perhaps Leopold was right. When my governesses warned me that I'd be ruined if I let a boy take my purity, I thought it would be in reputation only. How silly! They couldn't have imagined that I'd be ruined because my cervix stretched beyond repair accepting eggs from a swamp man! After a marriage of denial and starvation, Phin feeds me a feast. I wish I could bring myself to care that my body is reconfigured to

desire eggs instead of a man's fluids.

"Only one," Leopold sneers. He holds a tape measure over my belly to compare the curvature to his initial marks. "You said there were six. She had three. Why did you only release one? Is something wrong with the others? Get on with it! I have notes to write. I don't have all day."

"Slow for Hairy. Hairy must survive," Phin snaps, batting Leopold's hands off my body. He rips the tape measure from Leopold's grip and throws it on the floor. I whimper with each yank and twist of his oviscape with his movements. The barbels slip from my mouth, and I mourn the loss. It's like Phin's rage at Leopold limits our contact.

"She looks to be taking them just fine. She's your slut. Now release the eggs! All of them!"

"You don't get to touch Har—"

"She's my wife! She's my property, which is why you're wedged inside her. One more word, and I'll end her after she delivers your eggs. You will be exterminated as an abomination while she's executed for being the whore she is!" Leopold glares at me as he uses words too sophisticated for Phin. I'm sure Phin gets the gist of what he's saying, but the meaning was meant for me. He wants an ally—albeit a coerced one—because he can no longer count on Phin's obedience.

"Phin, darling, I'm ready for another egg. I must have all the eggs before your arousal fluid wears off," I say sweetly, rolling my hips. How I wish I could caress his face the way a tentacle swept down my cheek?! "My love, I want all our hatchlings in my belly."

Both males furrow their brows at my compliance to the other.

I quickly flick my eyes to the door and back to Phin, risking Leopold's suspicions. As usual, my husband misses my cues because his focus is on his work—in this case, my belly.

"I will give you more," Phin says, jerking his smaller cock until it spills over my stretched cunt.

Direct hit on my extended clit. I writhe as the fire ignites in the tiny bundle of nerves and radiates outward. As the fluid drips through my folds, my hips dance to obtain friction. I need. My breasts bounce wildly, filling the room with an obscene slapping. Phin's eyes are wide with fear, his mouth set in a firm line, but his cock continues to gush. I don't dare look at Leopold. His expression would probably disgust me to dryness.

"More! More! More!" I yell and bare my teeth like an animal.

"Unbelievable," murmurs Leopold, earning a glare from Phin. "Extraordinary."

"Give Hairy eggs! Give Harry eggs," Phin chants as he breaks a sweat. It rains onto my heated belly, and I wish I could rub it in like a brand.

His movements are arrhythmic pulses of varying force, which drive my body into a frenzy. I'm impaling myself on him as much as he's pushing. My eyes bug out with the tidal wave of orgasmic bliss that floods my brain. The fifth egg climbs my vagina, rolling at my hyperextended cervix. Phin jabs it into place with a sting of pain.

He stops when my face crumples with the sting.

"We're done," he announces.

Leopold brings his tape measure and lays it over my lumpy belly. He holds Phin's

wrist in one hand as the other manipulates the tape over his marks. “That’s five eggs, not six. You aren’t done.”

“Hairy hurts. I won’t give her pain—even if it means dropping an egg,” Phin says, yanking his wrist out of Leopold’s grip.

“This is my experiment, and you aren’t done until I say you’re done!” Leopold’s hands shake with fury as he screams at us. He has the maniacal gleam in his eyes he gets when he thinks someone is spying on him. “Implant it in her, or I’ll kill you, remove the egg, and shove it inside her myself!”

“He’s telling the truth,” I wail. Tears mingle with sweat as I calculate the amount of pain I’m about to feel. I’d rather have more of Phin’s hormone goop and loving sex than Leopold’s surgery. Who knows what else he will do to my body while I’m at his mercy? And Phin, I can’t lose Phin when we just found one another. “Please, Phin—”

“I won’t hurt you,” he says, shaking his head. “You can’t die like the others.”

“I need you to hurt me. He will hurt me more—”

“I won’t kill you like the others!” Phin roars.

My heart stutters. Others died on this table? Phin’s announcement vacuums the room’s sound, so we sit motionless in a void.

“Did you stand up to Papa for those women—the ones who died trying to take your eggs?” My muted tone resembles a shout in the silent room.

Leopold snatches a scalpel from his instrument table, forces Phin’s head to the side, and holds it to Phin’s neck. His open shirt waves and his nostrils flare with each forced exhale. He didn’t sleep before following me into the swamp, for his outfit is

the same as at breakfast this morning. His disheveled state confirms he would kill women with Phin's eggs. If he slips or if Phin jerks, he may amputate one of Phin's sensitive tentacles.

No need to ask anything except for the level of Phin's involvement. Phin has a bead of blood as Leopold's knife indents his flesh, but was every prior fertilization reduced to violence?

"I never argued before," Phin whispers. His mouth curves downward in a severe frown that can't catch the drool at the corners without lips. A barbel wipes his face before he continues. "Papa brought them. They screamed. They hated Phin. I thought making Papa happy was my best chance at love, but when Hairy lives, I'll have family."

"Give me family, Phin," I whisper with love and courage coursing through my veins. Phin isn't a rapist or killer. He's Leopold's pawn. Whether he's a simpleton who the scientist took advantage of or just someone starved for human contact who was manipulated doesn't matter.

"I can't," he replies through a torrent of tears. "I'm scared."

"So am I, but we do hard things. We survive. We parent. We love."

"We survive. We parent. We love," Phin repeats. We say the words together in unison. The three sentences become our battle cry as the table marches with Phin's thrusts. His ass bumps into Leopold, who topples out of my view. I'm happy he's ousted from our private moment.

No hormone-induced fever. No excitement over novelty or the forbidden. I lock eyes with my chosen male and relax my sore, battered lower half to receive the last egg. I gather determination from his stare as he harvests strength from mine. My hips raise

to meet his as our frenzied sex morphs into making love. Our offspring travels from father to mother in a cocoon of love. I hope they feel as cherished later as they are now.

Phin and I release tears of joy as his tentacles caress the hatchlings within my belly. He lowers my thighs with infinite care and caresses my feet on the metal stirrups. I can't believe we lived. I open my mouth to spill loving nonsense to Phin when Leopold appears behind him with a long syringe. The needle pierces Phin beneath the ear as my screams fill the room. He falls to the floor with a chorus of thuds. Leopold's looming figure over me is the last thing I remember before a prick at my neck makes everything go black.

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My head pounds. I keep my eyes closed to gather sensory information and to shut out the blooming migraine. What's that taste in my mouth? It's like I've eaten a bucket of sand. Memories flood back of Phin, his eggs, hormonal goop, and Leopold—becoming one of diabolical Leopold's experiments. Why does it stink in here? The chemicals burn my nose and intensify the burn in my throat.

"I know you're awake, so you can stop playing possum, Harriett."

Would it have been asking too much to wake to Phin's voice and not Leopold's? I'd rather be thrown in a pit with Phineas than in the lap of luxury next to Leopold. Light sings my brain when I open my eyes. He's got a million oil lanterns in this tiny space, all pointed at me! I groan in annoyance and throw my arms over my face.

"What stinks?"

"Carbolic acid spray," Leopold murmurs as he pulls a long thread from within my vagina. Is he sewing? "Lister, an innovative man, says that spraying the birthing area, instruments, and patients with this stuff lessens occurrences of sepsis. We can't risk losing you, right?"

I roll my eyes. If he didn't kill every egg he tried to incubate without a mother, he'd be performing my autopsy. Good, that's good. Focusing on what I learned while cleaning his lab will help me plot my escape. I'd give anything to know where he hid Phin, but if I ask Leopold, it may detonate his temper. However, he can't hurt me without risking the eggs.

No matter how much we disagree, neither of us wants to risk the hatchlings'

wellbeing.

“I’ve unbuckled your arms so your shoulders don’t lock. But I won’t hesitate to restrain you again if you struggle,” Leopold says from between my knees. “Of course, you probably don’t want to bump me while I’m stitching the tears inside you. He did a number on your cervix. We can’t have you dropping those eggs, can we? Unless you care to fry them for me.”

His chuckle grates on my nerves. My ankles are still tied, or I’d kick him in his smug face...stitches or no stitches.

“Oh, lighten up, Harriett,” he says, returning to his work inside me. “I remember our friends saying you were the fun one.”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I return to collecting data like he would if our roles were switched. Every twitch of my waist reminds me of the double-bent spoon Leopold holds inside my stretched-open birth canal. Someone, hopefully Phin and not Mr. Breyers, bathed me. Leopold wouldn’t lift a finger to clean his other pets, so I doubt I would be treated differently. He did draw guidelines and measurement markings all over my body with charcoal. If the eggs grow or shift, he’ll want to know. It’s sad that if I manage to escape, he will miss the scientific opportunity more than me.

“He roughed you up,” Leopold says after the silence makes the air between us too thick to breathe. “But, my observations, you’ll heal in no time.”

“I’m proud to wear his marks,” I mumble as I trace the sucker prints on my upper arm. My thighs have red polka dots and pink slashes from Phin’s amorous tentacles. Two large handprints bruise my hips from Phin lifting me against the straps. The abrasions around my wrists are probably nothing compared to what lies beneath my ankle restraints. “It’s as if he wrote his name on my skin to claim me as his own.”

“Phineas doesn’t have the brain capacity for such foolishness—”

“Oh, he does, I can assure you. He thinks with his heart, which has more capacity for love than a man, so if you doubt his brain power, don’t underestimate his heart,” I say wistfully. I cross my arms over my breasts to hug myself. Please let Phin be okay...

“We can’t be talking about the same Phineas. I’ve tested his IQ over the years. He’s dumber than a box of rocks, but then again, so are you. Why am I surprised you found one another?”

“You didn’t always find me stupid, you chose to marry me—”

“As a favor to your father,” he sneers as he cuts his sewing line with massive scissors. He drops the instruments on the metal table he’s wheeled to my bedside...err...table side. “You should look upset if you’re pretending you didn’t know, or at least suspect, that we had a deal.”

“Why? I’m stupid, remember? Just like your other wives,” I huff. I play at jealousy to get him to spill Phin’s backstory. Phin calls him Papa, but is he really Phin’s father or just the scientist who created him? His life had to come from some womb, one large enough to incubate a human...or was he an egg? I run my hand over my lumpy belly. It’s warm to the touch despite the chill in the room.

“Maybe I underestimated you,” Leopold’s gasp of surprise gives me more satisfaction than it should. “You are my fourth wife and, by far, the ugliest of the bunch. Ever wonder how I could live without marital relations?”

“I thought it was a case of impotence, like limp dick or something.”

“Such a vulgar mouth to match your hideous features,” he says between tsks. He wipes his hands on a bloodstained towel. Ha! Who will wash that while I’m strapped

to the table? “Have you seen yourself lately?”

He retrieves a blood-splattered mirror from the table on wheels. He flashes me in the eyes before correcting the angle so I can see myself. My left eye is red around my brown iris, where I popped a blood vessel seeking orgasms. My lips are bruised with chapped edges, the corners cracked. I knew I was dehydrated. The pointy features staring back at me are the same I see every day. I stick out my tongue and smile at the indentations left by Phin’s suckers.

“Beastly woman,” he mutters as he takes the mirror back.

“Made for a beastly male.” I purposely say male instead of man to punctuate my preference for Phin over Leopold. Human or not.

“Phin’s mother, Maria, was a beauty who never failed to stir my passions. She birthed all sorts of magnificent specimens. How many have you fucked, dear? Don’t blush when you spoke plainly first.”

“Specimens?” I squeak with horror.

“Phin’s brothers and sisters fill the swamp. Didn’t you know? You decided to skinny dip with your stepchildren. Did they pleasure you as well as Phin?”

“What Phin and I have is special—”

“After how many days? My poor Harriett! The poor, ugly wife, so desperate for a man’s attention that she projected her feelings onto a monster. Look where that got you. Legs held open for anyone who may enter the room, but don’t shiver, dearest, no man will touch a slut full of eggs.”

“Don’t make what we have into something as foul and corrupt as you,” I say in a

shaky voice. “You pinned me down. You won’t let me retire to my chambers. You are the monster who tortures these poor creatures in the name of science! Do you want to know what I think?”

“Not really, but I can’t stop you from telling me without strangling you...” He wheels his table of instruments to the sink by the door with clangs and tinkles. The water blasts at full strength, drowning out any words I’d say.

“I think you use science as a cover for your real perversions—”

“I am a brilliant scientist! Take that back!” He shuts off the water and turns to shake his fist at me.

Finally, I’ve burrowed under his thick skin. Rational talking isn’t revealing where he’s stashed Phin, so maybe knocking him off balance will trick him. “You’re a pervert and a deviant. Nothing more!”

“I’m the most brilliant mind of our time! I’ve created life! Life! Life the world has never seen before!”

“Then you’re a woman,” I say with a hysterical laugh. “Women bring lives into the world every day. We have since the first creatures inhaled the first breath of life. How do you think we got here?”

“I don’t duplicate creatures like a vapid woman. I create new! I am a god!”

“A god still isn’t a scientist,” I say in a frosty voice. “You’ve forgotten what good, ethical science is. Isolated out here, there’s no one to question the limits of your depravity. You are in your natural state...like Satan himself.”

He picks up the tray of instruments from the table on wheels. Is he about to chuck it

at me? A crash at the sink makes me jump as he slams the tray down. The instruments clatter at the bottom of the sink as they settle.

“No control,” I murmur with no inflection. “No ethics. No checks and balances. That’s not science. What you say is law only because nobody’s in your lab with you.”

“Control? Control? How can you prattle on about control when you’re tied to a table with your legs in the air? You gave away agency to your body because you were delirious with lust. Your hunger for cock clouded your judgment, or did it uncover who you are inside?”

The wisps of hair he has left stand on end like stalks of wheat in a barren field. His red-ringed eyes carry black bags of exhaustion. While I slept, he didn’t. He’s used to marathon sessions in his lab, but probably not the physical exertion of stalking us in the swamp, returning to the lab, the perversion of watching us breed, the cleanup, and whatever transpired to remove Phin from this room. His weariness is his weakness.

He must sleep sometime.

“I’d say you’re in a better position to see what I’ve got inside than me. This is the most interest you’ve shown in my cunt in our marriage. Is it because you want what Phin had? Is it because you secretly wish you carried eggs? If you aren’t curious about how I stack up compared to Maria, then why are my legs still splayed apart for you?” I goad him in the hopes he slackens some more straps. My toes wiggle, shooting electric pain down my legs as the blood resumes circulation.

“You don’t hold a candle to Maria,” he mutters. His wild visage scares me to my core. He stalks to my side and rips the leather from the buckles on my ankles. With a fiendish grin, he drops my foot so it swings to the floor instead of resting on the stirrup.

The pain fills my head with stars. A coyote howl echoes in the small room. It must be mine. Tears flood my ears and neck as he frees the opposite ankle with the same violence. I sob openly at the agony. I've never wanted my heart to stop pumping so badly. Each drop of blood brings a thousand needles to my poor, abused feet. I curl my legs to my chest to ease the onslaught. My body trembles as Leopold approaches the side of the table.

He kisses my tear-soaked cheek as he releases the middle strap under the table.

I'm disgusted but free.

Without a second look, he returns to the sink to clean his instruments. Pity if they rusted. The care he administers to each piece of metal renews the tears falling down my cheeks. What if he could value those around him as much as those tools?

Showing little care—even his animals wouldn't be so spiteful. I'm forgotten, like his other caged hybrids...and the ones in the swamp. How many other sentient creatures live on the grounds? Are they happy? Resentful? How do they eat, survive the Kentucky winters, or evade discovery by our recluse neighbor, Lovecraft? Surely he's seen creatures prowling on his property... It's not like there's a wall.

"What happened to Maria?" I ask once I find my bearings. Might as well go for broke, seeing as I'm a heartbeat from him beating me.

"Died delivering eggs," he says sadly. Compassion bubbles into my bosom. "She never delivered more than one or two at a time, but I got greedy and wanted three. Even after multiple litters, her body couldn't handle three. How many did you beg Phin to give you yesterday?"

"Six," I mumble with a gulp of fear.

“Ah well, let’s hope you know your body best.”

He rinses the straps and lays them to dry with his instruments. The mundane chores at a leisurely pace do more to unnerve me than his warning. Someone kept this room neat as a pin while I struggled to maintain order in his other messy lab. How can he torture multiple people without his rotten conscience eating his insides? He’s reduced me to an incubator without an ounce of remorse...like his previous wife, who he seemed to like more than me. Is this the man I must rely on to keep me alive as I deliver these eggs?

“Will I have a midwife—to help at the delivery?”

He shoots me a frown that says it all.

We can’t risk anyone else knowing about his research . As if any decent soul would attempt this abomination! On second thought, I don’t want to bring another female into this madhouse. She could be forced into my position after I expire. No, I must focus on escaping... Eggs are easier to carry than six squirming hatchlings...

My eyes wander around the room as I roll my ankles and wrists to equilibrate my blood flow. There’s a stand of rubber tubes I could use to climb out if there was a window in this dungeon. Am I upstairs, downstairs, or in a basement? I thought I knew every inch of this house. The cabinet of instruments could arm me, but do I have it in me to kill whoever walks through the door? What if it’s Phin, and I attack him? Nausea rolls through my belly... I can’t hurt a person...even an evil bastard like Leopold.

Escape, escape, escape. I must sneak around until I find where he’s hidden Phin.

There are two doors out of here...or is one a closet?

“Try not to trash the lab. I know animal impulses and all that, but at one point, Boston’s high society considered you a lady. Act accordingly, and I’ll allow Breyers to return you to your room, maybe even dress you. Lord knows we don’t want to look at your grotesque, misshapen body any more than experimentally necessary.” He shivers with revulsion .

I’m delighted. The fewer hands and eyes on me, the better.

“I’ll be good,” I say sweetly because my mouth doesn’t know when to quit.

He starts to say something but thinks better of it. The fervor in his eyes has dulled to his usual calculating glare. He dries his hands on the same bloody rag but takes it when he leaves. I guess I no longer have the status to deserve a goodbye. My cage is bigger, but I’m an animal in his thoughts.

Well, he will be my past soon enough.

I can’t put weight on my feet without crying. My back aches from lying on the metal table for hours. I roll from the table to the floor, biting my fingers to keep from crying out. My forehead rests on the cool floor as I regulate my breathing to normal. My wrists burn, so I use my elbows to propel me across the room with the help of irregular pushes from my knees. I was a more coordinated toddler at crawling...

Gross, I left a streak of clear fluid in my wake. Let’s hope it’s water from my bath...the one I wasn’t awake for...shiver.

Blasted, the door Leopold exited is locked. Wait! The other door’s handle turns easily. I hold the knob with two hands—please don’t creak open—and gently pull it towards my swaying body. Plush yellow rugs capture my attention first. The breeze swirls dust in plumes and propels the rocking horse. A chair glides on its rockers further in. Books of all shapes and sizes litter the floor. Some are open as if waiting

for a child to finish their stories. Dolls and stuffed animals stare at me as if I've intruded on their private meeting.

This was Phin's childhood cage...I just know it.

I vomit bile until my tender heart forces me to black out.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Is it morning or night? How long have I suffered under Mr. Breyer's whip? Blood runs down my face, so I can't see the tiny window at the top of my cell. This isn't my usual cell. I suspect the one beyond the nursery where I grew up is too close to Hairy, and they don't wish for her to hear us. Her surprise at the impregnation lab tells me she had no idea about my siblings and me in the swamp. She also didn't know about the other women...the women I killed with my eggs.

What's more important than my misplaced guilt is whether or not Hairy knows the true nature of Mr. Breyers. Does she see past the kind mask he wears around humans? Does she know that he yells Bible verses at us and curses our births despite how he helped Leopold create us? His hatred burns more than the welts on my back. I'd strangle him with my bare hands if they weren't tied within a foot of the ceiling.

"What are you?" He screams as the leather cracks. I'm sure it landed somewhere on my battered body, but I don't feel the sting anymore. The welts on the bottom of my feet and tentacles will hurt the most as they heal, but it's too soon for that. The cycle goes: beating on the ground, whipping while hanging, cutting in the chair, and back to the floor. His behavior is always the same...whether my infraction was small or great...or if I'm a hatchling or fully grown.

"A disgrace," I mumble. My jaw hurts from the fistfight on the way to the cell. There's a gurgling in my left ear, like when I forget to close the canals underwater, and a grinding when I talk.

"You aren't one of God's creatures, and you deserve to rot in hell!"

I must have misunderstood the Bible tales my mother read to me, because I thought

you had to sin to rot in hell. In the nursery, she made sure we memorized the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and all the ways to be good. Nowhere did she mention what made a creature God's or not God's except that he created everything. Mr. Breyer speaks in riddles, but I find if I repeat him, he stops hitting sooner.

"I'll punish you on Earth for what you are, what Dr. Guett made you, and what you do to God-fearing women! Tell me you are guilty so you can be redeemed!" His brown eyes flash. His grey hair waves like a white flag, begging me to stop him.

I stay silent, gnashing my teeth together. Once I plead guilty, he will move to the next phase. I must keep him with me as long as possible. Even if I die in this room, Mr. Breyers must sate his lust for violence and anger at me here. He can't be released until his temper is finished. If he got his hands on Hairy in her condition, he'd kill her and our young.

She's too fragile for this. I will endure it for her.

"Don't you seek redemption? Don't you want to go to heaven anymore? Has the Devil taken you?" He punches me between each question.

I sway in my bonds. My eyes roll around, making the room spin. The effort to focus them is too much, despite the acid swishing in my guts.

"Don't you dare release hell's venom on me! You keep that poison inside your hideous self!"

I gulp, but my dry throat offers nothing to coat my insides.

"Why don't you ask the Lord to save you?"

I glare at him through streams of red and spit at his feet.

“Because if you’re punishing me, it means my family is safe. I’d suffer your wrath for the rest of my days to keep you locked in hell with me.”

Harriett

“You find trouble wherever I put you,” Leopold scolds me as he kicks me awake.

My hair sticks to the floor, where I lie in a puddle of vomit. I stink of acidic filth. My naked body curls inward to hide from his too-observant eyes. He’s seen every inch of my flesh and witnessed my most private moments with Phin, but I’ve been domesticated to hide my nudity from men. Old habits get humans through the worst of trauma, so my feminine manners rush to the forefront of my brain. Plots of escape are shoved out of the way by shame at the state of me.

“You found your new home,” he sneers. “You will live in here once you earn it. For now, get up. I’ve telegraphed the World’s Fair commission to change my exhibit details. I expect their reply in the next few hours—probably with a request to see the state of my work in the flesh—your flesh in particular. This means you must look the part.”

He yanks me to a seated position by my elbow. My head lulls around on my shoulders. He must have drugged me again because I can’t seem to keep myself together. Clouds float into my thoughts when I try to focus. He’s talking, but I can’t make out the words. Do I want to know?

“Drag—Heavy—Dumb—Mess—” Leopold’s anger accelerates his words, which makes them harder to understand. What’s wrong with me?

“Did you drug me before you moved me? That was a dumb move,” I say, but my words come out in a groan. My lips struggle to make the shapes of the letters.

Oh no, this can't be good. Leopold removed his shirt. Why did I ever yearn for his saggy, wrinkly body? Was it because he was the only man to give me attention? Was it my wanton desire, marital obligation, or selfish pride hiding the shame of him as my husband in name only? My mind is as foreign as someone else's, so I have no answers.

He loops his arm under my knees with the other around my shoulders. I roll against him due to gravity, not any effort on my part. My cheek thumps against his chest. There's a mole the size of a silver dollar inches from my nose, but I can't turn my face away. He grunts and strains to lift me to no avail. Ironical, seeing as how he blamed my lack of curves for our chaste marriage. After three attempts, he drops me.

"Don't make yourself heavy!" He grabs my hands and drags me. A screeching sound follows us as my sticky thighs catch on the smooth floor.

"Why am I like this?" My words are still a chorus of moans. Have I lost my ability to speak?

"Your dose is too high. Let me write that down," he says, releasing my arms to notate my distress in his notebook. My body flops to the floor with a crack. "Dammit, you Dumb Dora, now you're bleeding! Can't you do anything right? Just lie there and don't do anything stupid. Is that so hard?"

I can't help it. I laugh. My torso shakes with the effort, but the humor blows the fog from my head. He drops me, but it's my fault I'm bleeding...after he overdosed me on God knows what. My fragile psyche can't handle the injustice, the absurdity, and the desperation of my situation. What can I do to help myself? Why did I wake on the floor in the first place?

Phin's nursery. My future home if I don't find Phin and escape.

Where will we go?

“Let’s try this,” Leopold says, shoving smelling salts under my nose. I try to pull away, but he locks me in a headlock until he’s satisfied. “Pupils finally constricted. You are a simple creature, aren’t you— barely conscious when fully alert. What a wonderful world you must live in with such a vapid mind.”

I let him jab at me because they are just words. The more compliant I am, the less likely he is to restrain or drug me. I know I’m bright, so I don’t need his affirmation. I’m not the one who craves outside validation. More suitors rejected me for the knowledge my father passed down to me than any of my other faults. Nobody wanted a female botanist...except Leopold. He told my father I’d work in the lab with him. I thought he lied, but I guess not. I started as his maid, and now, I’ve worked my way to his subject of study.

This time he lifts me from under my arms, and I can step my feet beneath me. I sway as I stand before him, but it’s better than plastered against his rubbery chest. Why was he ever the star of my fantasies? If I knew what lay beneath his clothes, I wouldn’t have bothered...or did I have a choice? I guess I did, because I chose Phin.

Phin, with his sweet, lipless smile and strong arms. He carried me like a blushing bride from the swamp to this dungeon. Trudging through the murky grounds, he didn’t wear shoes but never stumbled. His breath never labored on the journey. I know because I listened to the steady beating of his heart to calm my nerves. His bright green eyes and the love shining within them grounded me. Now I must endure whatever Leopold plans to save Phin .

One thing is certain, I’m proud of my choice of father for my children.

My shoulders thump against Leopold’s chest, popping my daydream of Phin like a soap bubble. As he walks forward, I must walk forward in lockstep or else get

trampled. My arms swing in lazy arcs over his elbows as if I'm strolling through the gardens. Our heads bounce with the large steps, clanking at the temples. Our shadow is one of a two-headed monster, which I hope doesn't inspire Leopold's next round of experiments. I can't let him splice my children and stitch them back together—no matter what births from me.

Leopold reaches for the door and throws it back with a ghastly grunt. The breeze throws my hair, which resettles in sickly clumps on our faces. Leopold spits when a clump lands in his mouth. I hope he tastes how vile I found his little dungeon/nursery setup. My skin prickles as I traverse his regular laboratory without clothes. A macabre kinship shines in the eyes of the hybrids in their cages as if they knew this would be my fate. Or perhaps they revel in my downfall to become what I've despised for years.

I gasp when he opens the door to the hallway. The audacity to walk naked through one's house! Basking in the moonlight while using the shadows and tall reeds to preserve modesty is one thing. Trapsing around in broad daylight is quite another. How indecent!

How wonderful.

I'm free from the shackles of society. Why should I obey the insufferable housewife rules and roles if I can't have the glitz and glamor of sidecar cocktails and speakeasy dancehalls? I'd strut to my private rooms if I didn't want to keep Leopold unaware of my growing strength. My back arches to lean heavier onto him.

"Sleep it off," he yells as he pushes me across the threshold of my bedroom. I fall to my hands and knees to play the part of the overdosed, delirious patient. "Tomorrow, you must look your best. I mean it, Harriett. Local scientists are visiting to inspect my findings on behalf of the World's Fair Commission. You must be the shining assistant you were for your father...except without speaking. Yes, your role is the demure

mother...like the silent vessel of feminine grace and charm. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I croak, rubbing my belly to soothe my hatchlings. They've had a traumatic time in my care, but not for long. We must escape tonight before more people are involved in Leopold's madness. If Leopold manages to ship off Phin and me to a city lab, I'll never see my lover again. I may as well kiss our hatchlings goodbye, too. Once I birth them, I'll be disposable.

How could I return to polite society knowing my family would be prodded and poked by civilized men for the rest of their lives? Or worse, what if they try to take the project from Leopold, and he kills us to prevent the transfer of proof? While the arrival of World's Fair officials and God knows which scientists excite Leopold, I'm brimming with dread. I must get out of here, but where is Phin? Do I dare ask?

The lock clicks, barring my chance to ask. I crawl to my bed and pull my nightgown to the floor. With my weight on one end and my fingers gripping the other, I tear it into bandages. The locked door blocks my way to the bathroom for a proper bath, so the wash basin will have to do. My knees scream in agony as I balance on them. My dressing table never seemed so tall.

Water sloshes over the sides of the washbasin as I lower it to the floor. First things first, I rinse a bandage to lay against the wound on my head. Next, I'll— Nope. Rational preparations are for tea parties and summer soirees. I dunk my head into the bowl and scrub my hair vigorously with my nails. The water is pink when I raise my dripping head.

At least I smell better.

I secure the wet tie beneath a few dry ones before securing the rest of my hair. Hopefully, Phin will think I've fashioned a turban instead of bandaged a wound. I can't have him fighting with Leopold as I attempt to escape the house with him. My

elbow has a gaping wound where a scab must have rubbed off when Leopold dragged me across the floor. I waste precious moments wrapping it so blood doesn't accidentally seep through my blouse.

At my closet, I'm frozen with indecision. What does one wear when trying to flee for their lives? Do I wear durable leather? Lightweight linen? Maybe my most expensive dress in case I must sell it. Maybe my gardening trousers, to blend in with the people who live on river barges. My flapper dresses would attract too much attention, so I whisper my fingertips over them in farewell.

Clad in a billowing nightshirt and heavy gardening pants, I strip the bed. The duvet is too thick to be tied into my rope but will be the perfect landing pad, should I need one. With tentative touches, I ease the window open and chuck the fluffy quilt onto the ground. The hardest part is sliding the bed to the window without making enough noise to wake the dead. Every few inches, I pause and listen for approaching footsteps. If someone catches me, I'll be strapped to that table for the next ten months.

I will incubate the eggs like a full-term human pregnancy, right?

Hurrah! My bedsheet rope ladder reaches the ground. The tip lightly grazes the top of the overgrown grasses. I don't hesitate to swing one leg outside. Wrapping my rope around it, I'm ready to descend. Easy as pie.

By the time someone checks on me, I'll be long gone...but what about Phin?

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The ground smacks me like an errant child. My final knot wasn't tight enough, so the lowest bedsheet let go before my toes could make purchase in the grass. I tumbled six feet. It could have been worse. My knee twisted at a strange angle as I fell, and now makes a crackling noise when I move too quickly. As long as I can put weight on it, I've got to walk. Running on uneven, flooded ground risks a second injury...twisted knee or not.

But time is of the essence. I must make it to Lovecraft's neighboring estate before Leopold brings more scientists and discovers I'm gone. With grunts and curses, I wobble to standing and take my first steps across the estate. Leopold's laboratory is on the opposite side of the house, so even if he takes his one look out the window a month, my escape will be out of his view.

Would Leopold keep Phin alive in hopes that we could produce multiple clutches of eggs, or did Phin sabotage that plan when he fought Leopold when we made love?

I don't care if Leopold's clinical gaze was over Phin's shoulder. We made love—not that I have any experience to compare. Phin made sure I wasn't in pain every inch of his oviposition. He loved me with everything he had, despite my being tied to a hard metal table. The way he caressed my face gave me more warmth than snuggling in front of my bedroom fireplace. His tentacles rubbed each egg as it nestled in my womb like any loving, human father's hands do.

My boots sink in mud rising to the knees, which slows my hasty escape to a slog. Drizzle mats my hair to my head and suctions my clothes to my body like a linen suit of armor and helmet. Open your mouth! I choke on spittle as the muggy air fills my nose. My greedy lungs gulp oxygen from the supersaturated fog. I pinwheel my arms

as if I can swim through the soupy backyard. When I reach my garden, I slide between rows of strawberries. I cry out when my knees hit the straw fortifying their bed.

“Who goes there? Show yourself! Have the courage to face the groundkeeper instead of sneaking through the fog like the devil’s servant!”

The voice carries from the opposite side of the garden by Mr. Breyers’s cottage! That’s it! I’ll go to Mr. Breyers’s cottage. He can go to Lovecraft’s place on horseback while I nurse my knees at his fire. Being a God-fearing man, he can’t approve of Leopold’s experiments. I’ve never seen him feed a created hybrid or help inside the lab. Does he even know what’s going on inside the house?

He does. Phin yelled at Leopold not to bring in Mr. Breyers. Maybe Phin doesn’t understand Mr. Breyers because he doesn’t know religion, or maybe Mr. Breyers takes his disapproval out on Phin...Either way, Mr. Breyers should still help me, he doesn’t know I willingly allowed Phin to implant his eggs. If I can convince Mr. Breyers to take me to Lovecraft—

The sloshing to my left must be him. He’s not graceful. He’s a man of the soil, much like Phin. Why didn’t I settle down with a simple man in the first place? If I hadn’t been dazzled by my father’s erudite friends, I wouldn’t have agreed to the match with Leopold. Would my father have allowed me to marry a farmer who shared our love of plants instead of a scientist who shared our love of the lab? Ironical that such a man will save me today, and another will raise my children.

“It’s Harriett! Mr. Breyers, it’s Harriett Guett,” I yell into the misty void. His hunched shadow is outlined by the fog to my left, and my heart soars. I’m not alone! There’s a man to help me stop Leopold. My account could be dismissed as a hysterical woman’s pleas to leave her husband, but with Mr. Breyers corroborating my story, Lovecraft or the police will have no choice but to investigate.

“Over here! Mr. Breyers, is that you? It’s me, Harriett! I’m on the other side of the garden and seem to have fallen—”

“Oh, you Jezebel, I know just how low you’ve fallen. I heard your every sinful moan, wail, and plea for more. Every ear in your house listened as that thing defiled you, and we heard your screams. Not once did you ask Dr. Guett for mercy or to honor your marriage vows, did you?”

The shadow that promised hope of rescue now looms over me like the broad head of a hammer to crush them. He’s covered in blood from his stained shirt to the hair tinted pink as the rain rinses it down his face. Is all that from Phin or Leopold? His jaw is set to a sneer, offset by some swelling to the right side. His opponent fought back. Leopold can’t fight, so he must wear Phin’s blood. Tears drip from my chin as despair settles into my bones.

“You were there?” Feeding him lies would be best for my survival, but the words won’t pass my lips. I can’t betray Phin—not with his love in my heart and his eggs in my womb. Every word and moan was to encourage him. Whether Leopold sucked sour grapes or not, I didn’t care. That moment in the lab was a beautiful transfer of love and intimacy between man and woman.

“I didn’t need to watch your humiliation to know you fell into disrepute. It was a matter of time. How could you be a woman of God when I never see you with a Bible or at church on Sunday? Your soul was low-hanging fruit for the devil’s minions—”

“If you hate Leopold’s experiments, why do you work for him?”

I hold out my hand for a lift to my feet. His cold, beady eyes stare at it as if I’m offering him a one-way train ticket to hell. After a few awkward moments, I yank my right boot from the mud with both hands and stand on my own. Once the pull of gravity has a straight target, my feet begin their descent of an inch a minute. Maybe I

am sinking into hell...

“I keep my family’s land in tip-top shape until I can buy it back from him. My grandfather settled his homestead here first! Damn taxes drove him to sell, and Dr. Guett snapped up the feast like a vulture. Why does he need farmland when he’s not a farmer? I asked my Pa and Grandpappy. They didn’t know but worked honestly to protect their land from his neglect.”

“Then you will help me!” I tug his elbow towards our home. “If we bring down Leopold’s laboratory, I’ll disappear, and you can have the estate.”

“Uh huh, I find witches who disappear tend to reappear when they run out of money—” Instead of ripping his arm from my grasp, he pivots to stand behind me. He grabs my other arm, lifting me from the mud.

“I didn’t mean disappear as in poof, I’m smoke. I meant I’ll leave Kentucky and never come back. You have no right to call me a witch.” Instead of setting me onto my feet, he marches with my legs dangling between us. He doesn’t head toward the house or his cottage. He isn’t going to carry me all the way to Lovecraft’s estate, is he? I know I’m slow and ill-coordinated, but I’m also quite heavy for an aged man.

“Why else would you take a demon into your body?” His voice strains to release the words as he trudges through the deepening muck.

“Demon? Leopold is the demon, and our marriage was never consummated.” I squirm to see if he will let me down without my asking, to no avail.

“Always like a woman,” he sneers through grunts. “You open your legs in exchange for security, and once your husband bores you, you claim the marriage wasn’t consummated. I know all the tricks of a woman.”

“Let me down! It’s not a trick,” I say as I twist harder in hopes of elbowing him in the face. He’s much stronger than he looks. Fueled by his fury, his spindly arms overpower me easily. “Have you seen Leopold? He’s too old for martial relations. He’s incapable of love outside of his work—”

“So, you decided to become his work? Manipulate him into loving you when your black magic failed? Did you pray before you sacrificed your body and soul to the devil’s work? Well, you will pray now—all the witches pray when they see death’s approach. Who will you pray to?”

“No! No! No!” He’s a madman. Why didn’t I see his madness before? Is this why I instinctively kept him at arm’s length despite my hunger for companionship? While he’s too homely for romantic stirrings, I never put much effort into growing a friendship, either. Did my intuition keep me safe? I kick my legs, but they glide between his knobby knees. If only one kick would connect! “What will you do to me?”

What will he do to my eggs?

“Nothing more than you deserve,” he says as he throws me into the shallow end of the swamp.

Freezing water attacks like needles while stones batter my muscles. First my rump, then my head bounces off the bottom. Pain from the back of my skull pierces between my eyes. It’s like my brain seeks a place to hide from injury. I scrape my nails on anything that passes my hands to anchor myself, but the slippery frons glide through my fingers. My boots press into the mud but sink into the bottomless murk. I thrash with the desperate need to raise my face above the water’s surface.

“Scream, yes, scream, Little Jezebel,” he yells in my face as his left hand bats my arms away from him. His right-hand fingers wrap around my throat. They burn

against the frigid water. I claw him as he presses his thumb gently against my windpipe. “Your open-mouthed screams swallow water. You will die faster than I can strangle you. Drown, and you can escape the pain of my righteous justice. You’ll receive your final judgment at St. Peter’s lectern and your punishment in hell!”

Despite his religious tirade, he strangles my ability to scream with his diabolical thumbs. My legs kick as high as I can lift them, knees bending to pummel his back. I fight the lack of air, the dizziness from my head injury, and the sweet surrender to the abyss. I can’t stop clawing my way to fresh air. My babies need a mother. What will happen to them if I die?

Cold water rushes into my mouth and up my nose, hosting a deluge of confusion.

I’m just so sleepy. Is this death or another dose of Leopold’s drugs? Where am I?

I snort to blow the water from my nose, but more rushes in...

Why am I so cold? Did my fire go out? Where is my duvet?

My arms stop spinning. I stop kicking my feet to conserve energy. My limbs drop like leaden, limp noodles. I can’t sleep for some reason, but my fuzzy thoughts can’t remember why. What is that insistent pushing on my throat? A man’s silhouette blocks the beautiful hues of the rising sun. Who is he? Why does he frown at me? I can’t lift my hand to slap him away...

But another blur takes him from my sight.

A large orange blob appears on the water’s surface. Are they underwater, or am I? Why would they wear such a loud color while outdoors? Scaly claws grab my arms and haul me from the water with a roar in my ears. I’m lifted nose-to-nose by a lizard-like creature with Leopold’s brown eyes but with long feminine eyelashes. No,

she doesn't have a nose—just two nostrils that close between exhales.

“Breathe,” she growls. She speaks through jagged fangs and puffy lizard lips. “Collect air before you try words. Mr. Breyers held you under longer than he holds us. He wanted you gone, but you aren't his. You are Phin's starlight.”

“Phin,” I moan as the memories threaten to drown me again. Phin. Phin's eggs. Escape. Drowning. “I must save Phin. I went to Mr. Breyers to save Phin.”

“Mistake,” replies the lizard lady. She holds me with four arms—two lizard claws and two human ones with brown fingers. With infinite tenderness, she lays me on the bank. Her snake body slithers from the water. I'm rolled to the side for her to prod my head. “Cut, not flattened.”

There's one miracle.

I risk fainting to climb onto my elbows. Peering around my snake companion, I catch a glimpse of Mr. Breyer's fate. A blue lizard man—twin to the female who tends to me—holds Mr. Breyer's flailing arms. Is that a merman? Yes! A man's torso slaps Mr. Breyers with the large, flat tail of a ten-foot grouper. He must be a merman. Two men's upper halves with yellow birds' wings—wider than our house—use their four thick bear legs to anchor Mr. Breyer's legs.

My lizard caretaker presses my face to her ample bosom as Mr. Breyer's cries fade into the night. Crickets chirp as the creatures remove his body with a chorus of splashing. A whoosh, and the two bird men fly over our heads empty-handed. I guess the blue lizard man and the merman will dispose of his final remains.

“What's your name?”

“Ruth,” my orange lizard companion says shyly. Her lashes lower in the demure

fashion of a lady even though I bet she's never stepped foot into a tea parlor. "Nobody has ever asked my name before."

"I'm Harriett, and nobody asks my name either. Any friend of Phin's is a friend of mine, so would you mind introducing me to his siblings?"

"Siblings? I don't know this word," Ruth replies with a slow shake of her head. The crests on top remind me of a lady's updo with coils instead of curls piled on top of her head—except Ruth's coils move with her expressions.

"It's a name for the ones who share a parent with you. Your eyes are the same shape and shade of brown as Leopold's, so I assumed he was your...Papa. That's what Phin calls him, so another assumption is that you two are siblings. Like Hansel and Gretel...if you read their fairytale."

I bite my lip. It's a gamble to assume Ruth read or listened to the books I found in the nursery.

"Oh yes, we were raised on fairytales...together in a nursery despite our different mothers. Those were the good times—hatchlings of different ages playing, a mother to teach us her human ways, and books to help us escape when the experiments were too hard..."

"I'm so sorry for what Leopold and Mr. Breyers did to you. I can only imagine what it was like growing up inside that room—"

"The nursery was wonderful," she snaps. "I can't compare the nursery to your life in the big world, or I will wither away like autumn leaves. Phin used to say that. The big world that we found in books isn't for us. The swamp is for us. Mr. Breyers made the mistake of trying to drown you in our swamp. His death was always on our minds. He beat us, but never in our swamp."

“I didn’t know, or I would have asked him to stop,” I reply. “Please know I didn’t help Leopold or Mr. Breyers with your mistreatment—”

“Our cage brothers and sisters told us of your kindness and its limits. Whether or not we agree with Phin’s decision to claim you, we agree you aren’t evil like them. You didn’t deserve to die at the hands of Mr. Breyers.”

“Nobody does,” I whisper.

“Well, that can’t happen anymore, can it? We must face the ones who come next. You’re hurt. You can’t stand on that leg.”

“I twisted my knee climbing out of my window at the big house. When I kicked Mr. Breyers, I must have aggravated it—made it worse. Once I rest it, I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll splint it with reeds once I find the right stick. We patch each other’s wounds in the swamp because we are family.”

Her words bring my hand to my belly. She stares with wide eyes of interest, irises eaten by her pupils, at my protruding sack of eggs. I nod to affirm her suspicions. “They’re Phin’s eggs.”

“Phin’s last story, before he disappeared, was of a raft life with his starlight. We thought it was another one of his fairytales, but he must have been planning a future with you.”

“Yes,” I whisper before sobs cut off my words again. Her inquisitive eyes—so strikingly human—watch me recover my wits. “We want to build a raft life for our hatchlings. It is our dream.”

“You don’t believe your dream will come true. Dreams are nonsense, written in

books for those who look like you. We've learned our place isn't one where dreams come true, so why have them? Only Phin dared to write his own story...and look where it got him."

"Maybe he hasn't arrived at his dream yet," I say as my plan pieces itself together like a wooden puzzle. "Maybe there's still time. Will you help me?"

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

John the Blue Lizard Man disappears into the swamp to build an escape raft with some of the silent siblings. With Ruth's help, I met the twins—Raymond and Roy. Their golden wings shed feathers with each flap, so how did I miss them in my wanderings? The siblings must be experts at hiding in the swamp or driven to become experts to avoid Mr. Breyers's whips and paddles. Their stories of abuse break my heart, and tears flow freely down my cheeks when I thought I had none left to shed.

Thomas is the merman whose leg muscles have more girth than my waist thanks to carrying his heavy tail behind him. Ruth's glide and Thomas's tail leave identical tracks through the mud. I had assumed those markings were trenches from the constant ebb and flow of the tributaries adjacent to our land, but it was the siblings' movements all along. How often did they watch me in the garden, traipsing through the swamp, or skinny dipping with Phin?

It's eerie to be surrounded by Leopold's eyes without the piercing, analytical stare. Thomas, the twins, Ruth, and even the siblings who can't speak but hover around me with curiosity all share those almond-shaped brown eyes. How different they look without evil lurking behind them! Did Leopold's face hold the same warmth and simplicity as theirs when he was a child? Or was he always cruel? These hybrids might know, but digging through their memories would harm them more than satisfy my curiosity. They struggle enough with their odd additions and appendages. I don't need to add to their misery.

"We can take you to the stables," Thomas begins but trails off when I turn his way. He acts like many wives whose husbands punish them for talking out of turn. My heart breaks for him. Whatever events silenced him, I hope they ended with the death of Mr. Breyers.

“Leopold will want the horses as soon as the post office opens. He’s waiting for a telegram from more scientists like him. He will bring them here to see me, and I fear they will want to take Phin’s eggs from me.”

“Where is Phin? It isn’t like him to leave you in the hands of Mr. Breyers,” says Raymond. Now that the sun has melted some of the mist, his blond highlights set him apart from Roy. Otherwise, his nervous, lip-chewing habit would be all I had to go on.

“I climbed out my window in the big house alone. I stupidly went to Mr. Breyers for help against Leopold.” Shame drips from my words for not knowing the personality of my own servant. “He never showed his violent tendencies around me, but men like to hide their real nature from ladies.”

I wince once the words leave my lips. Isn’t Ruth a lady? Yet the knowledge of Mr. Breyers’s savage beatings quivers her lips when I say his name. Aren’t Thomas and the twins gentlemen? They came to my rescue. Thank God I didn’t say human men or human women, implying these creatures aren’t more humane than the demons who run the estate, hidden under a veneer of civility.

“Speak frankly with us, please,” Ruth begs. “No need to dilute your words with swamp water. We know what we are and how we were created. It was never a secret that we are less.”

“But you aren’t,” I blurt out, grabbing her human-like hands and squeezing them. “Your beginnings weren’t your choice, nor are they a blemish on who you can become—”

“You sound like our mother. No wonder Phin desired you to carry his eggs,” Thomas whispers. The others nod in agreement.

“My hatchlings need their father, too,” I reply before unfurling my legs to stand. “I don’t want to leave without Phin. We will create our raft life, and you can come with us—”

“Come with you?” Thomas’s eyes round, and his jaw drops in terror. “We can’t leave the swamp! Where will we go? Who will take care of us?”

“Phin always leads us,” Ruth snaps.

She plants her four fists on the ridge of her snake tail at hip height in a surprisingly human pose. While they mention a mother raising them, I’m still amazed by the adaptation of their bodies to human mannerisms and body language. I’m surrounded by evidence of nurture overriding biology in direct contradiction to Leopold’s research. In creating sentient creatures with human mothers, he disproved his hypothesis. A scientist can’t create a new hybrid animal and observe a new set of behaviors. They didn’t evolve in a single generation like he said they would. They are still people...and, therefore, deserve to be treated as such.

“Yes, we need Phin to decide what to do,” Roy agrees.

“With Mr. Breyers’s demise, Leopold is alone in the house. Now is the perfect time to get Phin—” I loop my arm through Ruth’s and start toward the house.

“Hide!” Roy and Raymond take flight while the rest of us bellyflop onto the ground. An inch of frigid water sloshes between us, coating Ruth’s vibrant scales. I roll to my side and curl my body around my eggs to protect them.

Leopold’s top hat stands proud as he storms from the house in his best suit. The coattails flap behind him in a macabre parody of his creature’s tails. What if he secretly wants to be one of his hybrids? It would explain his giddiness at my breeding with Phin. Why else would he be so keen on giving his wife away? I hold this in my

heart because it hurts less than the truth. The booboisie never loved me, and my joining his experiments was always the plan. He said so himself.

But I bet he never planned on me falling in love.

“Do you think he saw us?” Thomas asks from a stand of reeds. His tail swishes, surrounding us in gentle ripples.

“No,” I whisper. “He’s lost in his head, dreaming of impressing the other scientists. We are all in danger of becoming specimens at the World’s Fair. I know you don’t know what that is, but it means people from around the world will gawk, poke, and study our bodies while we rot in cages. Leopold could sell us there like cattle, splitting us into laboratories all over the world. You would never see this swamp or each other again.”

“He won’t sell us! He won’t give us up. I know because he won’t let us die when we’re injured. How would he continue his experiments without us?” Ruth scoots closer to me as she shivers with fear.

“If Leopold can sell you to the scientists, they must credit him in their research. It’s how he will gain fame, popularity, and admiration, which he wants more than anything else.”

“Didn’t you adore him when you married him? In fairytales, the couple is deeply in love during the wedding at the end,” Ruth whispers.

“I did adore him, but he didn’t adore me. He married me as a favor to my father when he couldn’t provide for me due to his failing health.”

“Wasn’t your adoration enough?” Ruth’s questions rip the scab off old wounds that I wish were healed. Despite my love for Phin, the sting of Leopold’s rejection still

hurts. I didn't desire the man, only reciprocated feelings. In our brief time together, Phin showed me more love than anyone ever has. Having someone who puts your needs first is addictive. How could Leopold take my loving him for granted? Will he have remorse when I'm gone?

"Apparently not," I croak before clearing the tears from my throat. No time for old wounds when a new beginning rises like a second sun. If we are to survive together, I must believe in him. "I'm not a scientist. My father thought the degree and title would hurt my marriage prospects. Turns out my plain face, intelligence, and outspoken nature did that for me."

"Phin adores you. You're his starlight," Thomas whispers as Leopold disappears in the stables.

"That's why I need him at my side. Come on."

I crawl in hopes of blending into the swaying grass of our yard. My protruding belly sloshes in the puddles and swishes against the mud. Ruth slithers at my side. Thomas crawls behind with a few siblings who didn't introduce themselves.

We could cut the risk in half by waiting for Leopold to leave the grounds, but what if Phin needs medical care? What if he's bleeding or starving in some hole under the house? We wasted too much time at the swamp bank, waiting for my head to clear and my body to recuperate from Mr. Breyers's attack. Recruiting the hybrids to my side before attempting to save Phin was the right decision...I think.

My heart jumps into my mouth when the hoofbeats of our horses clap on the cement stable threshold. I wave my arm for everyone to flatten themselves to the ground seconds before our carriage emerges from the stables. Leopold's hat bounces as the carriage, designed for city roads of cobblestones or bricks, struggles with our rugged driveway. The large, thin wheels throw mud onto the cab. By the time the carriage

reaches the road, it won't be a handsome black anymore. At least the less durable construction makes the vehicle lighter and easier on our aged horses.

Why would Leopold drive an empty carriage? Why wouldn't he just saddle a horse and ride to town? Either he plans to ride the two-day journey to Louisville and intends to sleep in the cab on the side of the road, or he found scientists closer to us than I imagined.

Who could travel to Kentucky so quickly, and how much time do I have to escape them?

As soon as Leopold turns the carriage to head in the opposite direction of the house, I crawl at double my former speed. One arm cradles my egg-filled belly while the other three limbs hold me half a foot above the ground. The hot summer sun, which I praised for burning off the fog, now attacks the mud. Oh damn! With each step, the ground is harder. My knee screams louder with the constant pressure under my kneecap, but I don't dare slow down. Every second counts with Leopold already on the road and the possibility of visitors. I miss the days when a querent had to send a letter by post, wait for a reply, and then make preparations to visit.

Society moves too fast. Perhaps that's what attracts me to raft life.

I want slow romance and lazy days with Phin.

Roy and Raymond circle the house before landing against the mud room door. I can't believe I snuck out of this same entrance less than a week ago to mingle with plants. I went from feeling trapped and alone to leading an army of hybrids to a haven of our own. How much my life has changed! My cousin Elenor will have to fend off the gossip after my fall from grace, but her opinion is all that I care about. She won't see this as the ending of a long descent into obscurity, but as me finding my freedom. No matter where I land, I must write this tale and send it to her...

I must say my goodbye and explain how I chose Phin.

I'd choose him a thousand times over parties, dancehalls, and glittery dresses. Those things didn't fill me with happiness or love. They were distractions from the horrors occurring under my roof. As we enter the house, the damning evidence is everywhere I look. Why do we own so many cattle prods, floggers, and knives? Why do they hang on the wall for ease of access?

I lived in a nightmare but ignored the warning signs in favor of the leisure culture—even though I only got my dose once a year in Boston. I'm light on my feet as if twirling on the dance floor when I creep through the kitchen and down the hallway to the staircase. My boots squeak, and I wince with every step. Nobody is here, but the hairs on my arm stand in alarm. The brush of tails on the wooden floor—in need of another coat of wax—rings in my ears. Why is everything so loud?

This is ridiculous!

I am the mistress of this household and should walk through it with authority...but it wasn't mine, not really. Leopold said he had another wife, but Phin alluded to many women staying in this house. Were they courted by Leopold? Wives? Mistresses? Maids? Prostitutes? Or worse...women he abducted?

"If I leave, who will be next?"

"That's not your concern," Ruth replies.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize I said that out loud."

"If we manage to escape this house with Phin, promise us you will run," she says, grabbing my arm and piercing my flesh with her claws. "Promise us, Phin and those hatchlings will have the fairytale life we all dream of living—outside of the swamp,

away from the experiments, and out from under Papa's thumb."

"What about you? Won't you come with us?"

"We can't," Raymond snaps. "Too many creatures are too difficult to hide. Phin taught us to split up so someone survives. You don't know how many of us have been lost to human tempers over the years. A group too large will give you away. Then you'll be back, but with Papa mad at you for leaving. Promise us. We can endure anything if we know Phin is on his way to a raft life."

I want to argue, scream at them, and lash out in a great temper tantrum. If only to affirm that I can save them all to alleviate the guilt sitting on my heart, I want to assure them they will be safe. In reality, I can't keep that promise. They know it. It's me who's the silly one, believing in fairytales, narrow escapes, and happily ever afters. The rings of heartbreak and experience surround Ruth's eyes like the interior circles of a tree chopped too soon.

I stop walking to shed my pride. This may be my house, but I obviously don't know half the layout. Secret labs, nurseries, passageways, and extremist attitudes remained hidden for years because I never asked, looked, explored, or investigated. I gobbled up everything Leopold fed me to earn my yearly escape to Boston, costing these children...what? A pound of flesh from the beatings they mentioned, the fear of capture and extermination, a round of Leopold's breeding experiments? While I played Lady of the Household, I had no idea of the terrors running within.

"Where would he keep Phin?" I ask in a voice smaller than what's left of my self-esteem.

"Let's check the second dungeons first," Roy says, squeezing past us to take the lead. "Mr. Breyers likes the bolts in the ceiling to string us up in the lower level."

“ Second dungeon? Bolts on the ceiling? Oh well,” I say, patting my damp hair in a nervous tick. “Lead the way.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Mr. Breyers left when it was dark, and now the early morning sun shines through the tiny windows just below the ceiling. Please allow those happy rays to reach Hairy and my hatchlings wherever Papa hid them. My broken mind drifts to Harriett's beauty to warm the cold corners of my soul. Her hair glows like fire when the sunlight hits the reddish-brown strands. I've watched her from afar. Her skin collects the sun's warmth in little brown spots like the toasted bread I loved in the nursery.

Oh, how I miss bread and stories from books instead of my head.

Harriett can read. I just know it. She lives in the big house without chains like the humans who can read. She will teach our hatchlings. Can I listen to her lesson to improve my stories? Will I create stories without my fellow hybrids who need my words to ease their fears? If only Harriett had time to teach the other hybrids about stories. Even if she survived claiming my eggs, the birth will probably kill her. All human women die. All my hatchlings die. Even most of the eggs die before their precious little ones can hatch.

I roll to press my face onto the floor, releasing the strain on my tentacles and barbels. Sobs shake my shoulders. They yank my facial limbs, which stick to the cement with dried blood. The sting is a constant reminder of how powerless I am in this cell.

Mr. Breyers left hours ago... Please don't let him find Harriett. Do I trust Papa to protect her from Mr. Breyers, even if he has bad reasons? More tears flow. Maybe they will soften the blood, release my barbels, and allow me to lift my head. I must stand on my feet before Papa or Mr. Breyers returns. I'm not ready to die. Ever since I was a hatchling, their taunting has haunted my nightmares...

Footsteps, too real to be in my daydreams.

Panic squeezes my chest. Aaah! I cry out as I rip my limbs from their bonds on the floor, leaving green strips of flesh in the stains. The worst pain is from the sucker torn from my right-most barbel. I suck on that tentacle in a child-like attempt to stop the pain. My shoulders scream as I boost myself to sit on my knees. The soles of my feet no longer have skin .

I test placing the bottom of my right foot on the floor without weight. It's like stepping on a hive of angry bees. Running a tentacle over the chopped meat attached to my foot bones feels like combing through a carcass for offal. I can't stand, let alone fight my way out of here. It'll hurt too much. How will I save my family?

The heavy iron door of the dungeon opens.

Keys rattle from their hook at the doorway.

Fear silences my pain. My knees slide in the puddles of blood as I crawl to the darkest corner. I curse the sun's rays for shrinking the one hiding place in the empty box. My tentacles and barbels curl under my chin. I place my back toward the cell's door, hugging my legs to my chest. My neck presses against the wall to protect my head in the corner. If Mr. Breyers comes in swinging, he will add more lashes to my back...not my softer spots.

"Phin, oh my Phin." Hairy's voice soothes my heart like a healing salve from the nursery. My mind must be defeated because my soul reaches for its mate for comfort on the journey to the afterlife. Will I be judged at heaven's gates and sent to hell for punishment? Will the angels listen to my misspoken words or give me lips to beg for forgiveness? I close my eyes to drift into the void with Hairy's kisses on my brow.

"Phin, Phin, can you hear me?" Her worried voice mends the cracks in my mind.

“His heart beats.” How is Ruth here? Did they throw Ruth down here to break me? Have they run out of flesh on my battered body to cut?

“We must move him.” Thomas? There are only two cells in the second dungeon. Who’s sharing a cell?

“You can’t move him without wrapping him in wet cloth. We can’t risk tearing the exposed muscles,” my darling Hairy’s voice wraps itself between the voices of my swamp friends.

“Why wet?” Listen to her, Ruth!

“Dry cloth will stick to the wounds as the blood dries,” Hairy says as her palms cradle my cheeks. If this is a dream, my mind will burst into pieces, but I must know if I can say goodbye to my unhatched young.

I risk opening my eyes. Ruth’s bright coloring fades as she leaves the room in a hurry. My eyes focus on the most beautiful vision I’ve ever imagined.

So beautiful, she must be real.

“Hi,” my mate whispers.

Her eyes shimmer like the swamp's surface on a hot summer day.

“Hi,” I reply in a croak. I can’t bear more strain on my throat.

“They aren’t clean, but they’re wet,” Ruth says from behind a stack of cloth .

“They will have to do. Thomas, take him to the kitchen and lay him on the table. The sheets are to protect him in transport, but once he’s on the table, gently peel them

away from the wounds. If they stick to him, leave them.”

“Ruth, in the upstairs laboratory, there is a bottle of carbolic acid spray—never mind, I’ll have to get the bottle because only I can read the label.”

“I read,” Ruth snaps. “I read all the storybooks in the nursery. Finding the letters to Car Bowl A Sin Spray won’t be difficult.”

“It’s a brown bottle with a pointed, black lid,” Hairy calls after Ruth as she runs out of view again. The scratchy sheets don’t bother my wounds because her slender hands place them on my body. Oh, I didn’t think I deserved one more touch! What a gift!

Her little mumbles tempt my smile, but it would pull my cracked jaw. “I’ll set a kettle to boil for clean water, grab the whiskey... I’ll need some of Leopold’s surgical instruments. Maybe I should set these sheets to wash before we wrap him again. No, there’s no time. The swamp’s not clean, but we can’t stay here.”

She kisses the space between my eyes before covering my head with an itchy sheet. I’m tossed and bumped. The fabric rubs every wound like I’m consumed by fire. My screams of agony fill my ears. I’m burning from head to toe. It’s too much for my simple mind to bear. My mouth tries to yell for Hairy, but I can’t force her name through the inky dark that consumes me. My mind shuts down with regret flooding my soul as I prepare to die without saying goodbye to my greatest love.

Phin

I don’t know this room. Bright and yellow, like buttercups. It’s comforting and promises happy times. I don’t trust it. There are no happy spaces in this house.

“He’s waking—” Thomas’s anxious face appears inches from mine. “—you must go

faster.”

“Any faster, and the stitches will break open when you carry him,” my love scolds. “He must be stable for travel. Ruth, give him the whiskey.”

Ruth’s frown replaces Thomas’s face. She lifts a bottle to my mouth and tips the liquid into my dry throat. I scream with the burn, but it comes out as a drowning gurgle. My friends roll me to my side to let the fire water drain. Hairy curses. My moving must have interrupted her.

“Phin, my love, you must drink the whiskey, or this will hurt too much. I know it burns a little, but that’s nothing compared to stitches below the—oh hell—under your skin.”

“Dry, forest fire, burn for you,” I mumble as I fight to stay with her. My mind can’t keep up with her words.

“Here,” she says at the end of a string of words I can’t piece together. She tips a glass of clear liquid into my mouth. The cool rush of water! I gulp greedily until it’s nothing more than an echo of my slurping. Hairy smiles as she tips the bottle of firewater into my mouth. Does it burn less because I’ve had water or because she smiles as I drink? I’d drink the whole bottle if I could watch her face as it burns a trail to my stomach.

“That should do it,” Hairy says, dabbing a cloth on my chin. “More water?”

I groan in hopes she agrees to give me more.

“Ruth,” Hairy asks over her shoulder. “Will you refill the water cup and hold it for Phin? I need to finish these stitches.”

I sip from Ruth's clumsy pouring. Why isn't Hairy in my view? Somewhere far away, my bones scream in pain, but I don't seem to care. Dandelion fluff invades my brain. I'm already slow, but now I fight through white puffy clouds to gather my thoughts .

The screams fade into the background. Hairy and Thomas chatter, but I can't understand the words. Her voice pulls my face into a smile, which spills water over my chin. It's pink. Ruth scolds me. She looks funny, yelling with no sound emerging. I can't laugh, or I'll choke on the water.

Why didn't Hairy feed me water? It tasted better then.

Where am I? Why is it so bright? I hate this room.

Harriett

Phin's busted smile warms my heart as he glides in and out of consciousness. His expressive, intelligent eyes take in my small kitchen like an explorer discovering a new world. Then they roll back into his head as his pain consumes him once more. I've closed the wounds over his large femoral artery, carotid artery, and every other major vessel I can remember. He can't bleed out in transport.

Being the daughter of a botanist, I'm a decent surgeon, but I have no idea what I must fix within Phin's body. My hope is that my mediocre skills, Leopold's equipment, and all the prayers of the hybrids are enough to keep Phin in this world.

"His feet," Thomas whispers over my shoulder. "The cuts on his feet will hurt the worst. He'll want them healed first...if there's anything you can do to help."

I nod and pour the carbolic acid over the wounds on the bottoms of Phin's feet. The wounds sizzle. Steam rises from the table, scaring all of us. We check Phin's reaction.

He twitches but otherwise stays blissfully unaware. I don't ask Thomas about his experience with such deep lacerations on the bottom of his feet. If these cuts were placed by a switch or whip, as I suspect, I don't want the details. The worst wounds cover the soles of his feet, so I wrap them in the yellow curtains I ripped from the windows.

"He's back! He's back!" Roy's feet leave the ground as he flies into the kitchen. "Two carriages turned onto the driveway from the road. One of them is the doctor's!"

"Did he see you?"

I pause my stitching, tying off the last stitch in a knot. Pushing sheets into Thomas's arms, I wordlessly command him to moisten them at the manual pump. My arm sweeps Leopold's surgery equipment into a large bowl I had hoped to use to soak bandages. Ruth secures the cap on the disinfectant and places the bottle into the bowl with a clink.

"No," Roy says with a smirk. "We fly too high. Raymond watches him. I came inside to warn you. Shall we distract him?"

"Too much risk," I say, grabbing random items from my kitchen drawers. "Make sure everyone is out of the house. Go out the backdoor and disappear. We will meet you at the swamp."

"Hairy," Phin moans.

"No, no, no," I mumble. "You can't wake now. This is going to hurt, so if you can hear me, go back to your happy place."

"Hairy," he moans again, fighting to awaken. He thrashes his head from side to side, threatening my stitches. Wounds with fragile scabs on his face break open. I grab the

nearest strip of cloth and wind it around his forehead. Ripping the sheets from Thomas's hands, I wrap his body as tight as possible. He resembles a mummy more than a monster. "Hairy reads stories to hatchlings on the raft life."

"What?"

"He wants his storybook for the hatchlings," Ruth translates.

"We've got to go now," Thomas whispers.

"He doesn't want to leave without the book our mothers read," Ruth snaps.

I don't have time for their arguing when I know where the book is. As long as the storybook is the same book as on the nursery floor just inside the terrible room where I received Phin's eggs, I can grab it before the end of their bickering.

"I'll get the book," I blurt out, thrusting my bowl of stolen supplies at Ruth. "Thomas, you and Ruth carry Phin to the swamp. Find the group making our escape raft like the one in Phin's stories. I'll meet you there."

My heart pounds until they nod.

Phin moans my name as Thomas lifts him off the table. Ruth throws open the door to the mud room to escape the way we came. The pool of blood left behind on the kitchen table is unmistakable. I fight the urge to wipe it clean as I tear up the stairs. The sooner I leave this house, the sooner my eggs will be safe. While the puddle will tip off Leopold that something's amiss if he sees it, he may never enter the kitchen.

That's a woman's domain.

With any luck, he will host his visitors in the parlor like a gentleman. He will rush to

my rooms to collect me to serve them...and to parade my egg sack for their examination. However, knowing Leopold, he will want to take them to his lab post-haste to show off his creatures. If that's the case, I'll be trapped in the breeding room—or worse, the nursery—until they move onto another part of the house.

As I pass the hall window upstairs, the carriage approaches the front door...

I'm out of time.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

No time for stealth. My riding boots thunder on the aged hardwood floors. I explode into the breeding room with a crash of the door and the clatter of instruments falling off the walls. They ring as they ping off the floor. I can't believe I didn't know this room existed. While the door is concealed as part of the wall, the noises within aren't dampened. I kick myself for not questioning anything. Why did I waste so much attention on moping?

The door to the nursery is locked on my side. My fingers shake as I turn the locks. What will I find? A small creature, previously kept in a cage? Another sentient hybrid child? Another woman? I squeeze my eyes shut to block out the fear and pull. My nose is met with the musty odor of a sealed room and molding soft furnishings.

I fight against my lady's training to gather the pillows and rugs to air them out. Oh, to run the blankets, towels, and tiny baby things through my modern washing machine! The books could use an afternoon in the summer sunshine as well. My hatchlings would love this room once I spruced it up. I creep inside to get a closer look inside the cradle.

Luckily, it's empty.

My eggs shift, sending a jolt of love and affection to my heart as I rub my belly. If it weren't for the rest of the house—and its diabolical owner—this would be a cozy place to raise a baby. Once they grew into a toddler, they would need fresh air, sunshine, and room to play...did Phin get those things when he was a toddler? Did he get to explore the outdoors with the security of his mother watching over him before he was abandoned outside to live in the swamp? How long was he caged in this room?

I push sentimental musings from my mind to focus on the pile of picture books on the floor. Gathering each one in my arms, I'm tempted to take them all. Will the weight slow me down? Can I open the doors one-handed? What if I drop one?

Harriett, stop being silly and move!

No, wait! The book on the rocking chair seat is thicker than a child's book. On the cover is a picture of a princess, knight, and dragon, but the title has worn off. This is Phin's storybook—I feel it in my bones. I dump the picture books onto the chair to claim the precious book. My hands feverishly grab anything close that may benefit my hatchlings. A few nappies, a receiving blanket, and a stuffed frog join the book in my arms as I flee the room.

Running smack into Leopold's scowling face.

"Nesting, Dear Harriett?"

"Yes," I reply, attempting a steady voice so he doesn't notice I'm gulping for air from sprinting around the house. Intuitively, I lower my bounty to sit between Leopold's body and my eggs. I hold his skeptical gaze as I conceal the blood splatters on my clothes. While Leopold ignores women's fashion, he would take great interest in why I've paired a nightshirt with gardening pants and riding boots. He's clever enough to figure out I'm escaping.

Oh heavens, the blood on my hands from Phin's surgery is damning too.

"Glad you selected a few trifles. Your baser instincts will emerge as your incubation progresses, but you mustn't be embarrassed by them. You must tell me everything, for the good of the experiment and mankind as a whole. The documentation is your duty as much as it is mine," he says, grabbing my arm.

He sees me. He talks to me, but he doesn't recognize me as Harriett. His glazed eyes miss the stains on my nightshirt. His ears are too full of future fanfare and plaudits from his guests to hear the uneven clomp of my boots as he drags me back to my rooms. No matter how I try to balance us, my limp tugs on his arm with each step. When he jerks on my bedroom door handle, why doesn't he question why it's still locked? He doesn't ask me how I got out. The distraction of his impending fame puts him behind the eight-ball. Best of all, he rationalized my stealing Phin's storybook, or he missed it under the baby blanket.

Nesting. What a Patsy.

"Now be a good dear and change into something matronly," he says, patting my head like a child. If I weren't shaking with fear for my eggs, I'd smack his hand away. "I have three guests in the parlor who require coffee and light refreshment—nothing too heavy, as we will tour the labs while you clean up. Then it will be your turn in the spotlight. Isn't it wonderful that you will get the attention you always pestered me to give you?"

"Yes, wonderful," I say, failing to keep the sarcasm from my tone.

"See, I knew you would grow into the wife I needed," he says, planting a slimy kiss on my cheek.

"Yep," I reply with a fake smile that squints my eyes. "You're the bee's knees."

I might have laid it on a little thick, because his brow drops like an iron trellis blocking the drawbridge to freedom. A breeze blows through the gaping open window like a tattletale. He pushes me further into the room, both hands squeezing my shoulders. He must suspect something. I cry out at the bruising pressure on the delicate place where my collarbones meet the joints. His thumb digs into the pressure point. Tears bloom in my eyes. My mouth drops open wide, but his expression

silences my scream.

This is a test. If it were a punishment, he'd be yelling questions. For Leopold hates nothing more than knowing less than someone else—especially a woman.

I can't alert the scientists that I'm less than cooperative if I'm on Leopold's side. He's evil enough to hurt me to press the issue. I'm not surprised in the slightest. However, the fact that Phin hasn't come up in this conversation says he—and the dungeon that held him—isn't part of today's tour. If the hybrids reached the swamp without detection, Phin is safe. I hold an image of them building a raft while Phin supervises in my mind's eye to distract me from the pain.

Three...two...ah, it worked.

Leopold releases me with a shove. I'm careful to sit on the bed without throwing my feet in the air and flashing my muddy boots. His smirk of triumph churns my insides. I'll give him this victory, but he will celebrate it alone.

"Not more than five minutes," he warns as he backs out the door.

I nod like a docile wife until the door's latch quietly clicks shut. No lock engagement. Do I dare run through the house? Do I try the window again? Damn, my rope of sheets isn't attached to my bedpost. It lays uselessly in a heap in the grass below. I don't dare to hope it will cushion my fall. My knee twinges in agreement. Going through the house is my only option, which means fooling anyone who may cross my path.

My gardening dress isn't the finery I usually wear to entertain, but I can't pass up the tool's pockets. He did say to dress matronly. I sigh at my glittery flapper dresses as I bid them farewell once more. Knowing the frigid water of the swamp intimately makes me long for thermal underwear, not beaded fringe.

I add a thermal layer under my riding pants and jam the storybook into my biggest pocket at the hem of my apron. It weighs down the heavy dress, but I can still run. Trinkets with dual purposes, such as hat pins, fasteners, and half-empty gin flasks, fill the smaller pockets. I exchange the laces of my boots with longer ropes. I may need rope, thicker than the suture string I gave Ruth, in my raft life.

I've never lived on a raft, but the opportunity brightens my face to a smile, rivaling the late afternoon sun. An aura of fancy washes over me, and I pin the receiving blanket I stole from the nursery to my shoulders. Not only will it keep my hands free, but it will enhance my demure appearance should I get caught. I tuck my hairbrush in my apron strings after running it through the snarls on top of my head on the way out the door.

With my chin held high and my upper lip stiff as a board, I march down the hallway. Eyes trained on the top of the stairs, I don't turn to my left or right in case I trigger myself with a glance into the wrong room. If I calmly exit the house, I'll make it to Phin. One foot forward turns into one step, which increases to one hallway. I made it to the stairs!

Rhythmic. Serene. Unhurried.

There's the front door. Too close to the front parlor where men's laughter and cigar smoke leak from underneath the door. My heart breaks as I glide past an exit and the den of my enemies. The back door will give me a straight path to the swamp without windows to give my exit away. Plus, there's the added bonus of my footsteps disappearing into the kitchen in case Leopold listens to my movements.

Ten feet. Three steps. No, no, don't speed up. I can't allow Leopold to suspect anything. Even steps, calm breathing, rubbing my belly, I must be the picture of domestic bliss. The kitchen door creaks as I open it—a signal that I'm obedient.

My veneer shatters as soon as I enter the kitchen.

Phin's puddle on the table. Snipped ends of suture thread. Bloody hand prints on the kettle.

"Want to explain, Harriett?" Leopold leans against the countertop, wiping his hands on a fresh dish rag. "I came in here to put the kettle on, to help you serve our guests, and look what I found. Either you hunted a very large animal and butchered it, or you've been playing doctor."

"Did Mr. Breyers hunt this morning? Perhaps he—"

"Do you doubt I know the whereabouts of my staff? I know Mr. Breyer's activities this morning didn't include hunting. He was disciplining a naughty specimen and got quite messy—almost as messy as this room. Do you know which specimen required discipline? Do you know the fate of your precious Phin?" His evil smile brightens to the sinister glow of a full moon.

"Phin? What happened to Phin?" I play dumb so I can inch closer to the back door. Leopold doesn't exercise. I can outrun him. I must distract him long enough for a head start.

"Last I saw Phin, he was no more than a puddle of flesh—shaped like the stain on this table. Tell me, Harriett, did you sneak into the dungeons? Did your sinful ways lure your corrupted soul into the bowels of this house? Were you jealous that I never took you down there?"

"There's no dungeon in my home," I say with more bravado than I feel. Leopold rears back as if I've slapped him. "Everything in this house is half mine, and I'd never allow a dungeon to be built inside it. That is inhumane."

“Your home? Your home! This home is mine. The estate is mine. The labs and observations are mine! Humane? Humane! You want to talk about humane. I am the human in this house now that you are full of eggs. You’re an animal, an incubator, a cunt for me to fill and empty as I see fit. Nothing is yours. You! Are! Mine!”

Silence descends over the house as Leopold remembers we have visitors.

Soft, leather shoes of gentlemen squeak as they leave the parlor. I imagine their wingtips flashing as they race down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“You’ve ruined everything!”

Leopold’s hair waving is the flag to wake me from my musings as he lunges for my throat. I duck at the last moment, falling onto my hands and knees. Ruth explodes from the pantry, yielding the large ceramic bowl as a weapon. Leopold collides with her, but she’s much taller than me. His fingers bury into the muscles around her ribs instead of around my neck. Clang! She wacks the back of his head with the bowl.

“What the devil?” Dr. Alexander Breakfield, the coroner, exclaims from the doorway. Behind him peeks Dr. Herman Moldenman and Dr. Jacob Ledernoskoff from the University of Louisville.

“Run, Harriett, run!” Ruth screams as she throws Leopold’s motionless body to the floor. She bats a path to the door with her bowl using forehand and backhand strokes.

The scientists retreat to the hallway, screaming like children.

My dress glides over the dry patches of blood as I shuffle under the kitchen table and across the room. One last glance over my shoulder... Leopold is out cold, but for how long? Part of me hopes Ruth killed him, but I guess that’s the wicked part he and Mr. Breyers saw in me.

“Come on, Harriett, Phin’s waiting for you,” Ruth says, swinging me into her arms.

She tips the bowl upside down to fit over my belly as we cross the threshold. I shield my eyes from the burning rays of the sun, hoping they burn the sins from me before I reach Phin. Phin, who doesn’t have a mean or callous bone in his body, deserves a better mother for his hatchlings, but I’ll do my damndest to love him the best I can.

Visions of hatchlings, rafts, and Phin swim through my head, along with the black dots of the vapors. As the adrenaline drains from my body, the terror of all I’ve been through this day seeps into my bones. My eyes roll as if the energy to focus them is more than I can handle. I’m in no way out of danger, but the respite of allowing Ruth to care for me is intoxicating. My body has no more resources. I’ve done everything to ensure our survival. My consciousness gives up its grip on my mind as I nod off to the gentle swaying of Ruth’s footsteps.

Harriett

“She’s fine,” Ruth barks as I’m jostled awake.

I clutch her arms in terror.

“Leopold? Ruth? Phin? Don’t let them have me! I won’t let them take my babies!” I yell before scanning my surroundings. The hybrids’ facial expressions range from horror to pity to amusement at my outburst. “Sorry, I was dreaming.”

“We know, dear, we have those nightmares too,” Ruth says as she sets me onto a raft next to Phin’s wrapped body. If it weren’t for his smile peeking through the fresh bandages on his face, I’d think he was dead.

“Not for long,” I reply, recovering my strength. “Come with us. If the aquatic hybrids take turns swimming, we can all...”

“No,” Raymond says, handing me a pole taller than myself. “You must live the raft life.”

“I’ll swim alongside and help you navigate the tributaries to the big river, but then I must turn back. My brothers and sisters of the swamp need me,” Thomas says before he slips into the murky water.

“They can come too. I’ll need help when the Ohio River reaches the Mississippi. Will this raft withstand the current or be blown apart? I’ll have my hatchlings...and Phin may still be injured...we need you as much as you need to come with us,” I plead.

“Do it for us so that we can dream of your happiness,” Roy finishes as he pushes us from the shore and towards the tributaries of the Ohio River.

I sob openly as we drift away from their forlorn faces. All I wanted was companionship, and now I’m more scared and alone than ever...

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

What's in the reeds? Was that him? I've waited for Leopold to jump out from behind a cypress tree for days. Every shadow has the potential to be our doom. Why can't we go faster? My heart raced for the first day, but now, my body tires of constant panic. I've never been so dirty in my entire life...or as free. My time is my own. And what do I do with it? Sit in fear of shadows lurking over my shoulder. I don't have the strength to jump with each noise because I haven't eaten since I left the house.

Thomas suggested gulping the swamp water to ingest the tiny critters for sustenance. No thanks was my knee-jerk reaction, but I'm drowsy from hunger and tempted...

The incessant chirping of the bugs grates on my nerves. I'm wound tighter than a clock spring with too much mental energy and not enough physical. Phin's fever broke the first night, leaving him silent. At least his moans and whimpers reminded me he was by my side, but now... I truly believe that together, we can withstand anything—amended, together and conscious, we can withstand anything. We can raise these hatchlings shifting in my belly. I use the swamp water to mop his brow, hydrate his skin between bandaging, and feed him.

I don't know what else to do.

Thomas, not one for conversation, swishes at the side of my raft. We've been on the water for three days, and he hasn't stopped to rest or sleep. He may be more fish than man, but who cares? He will abandon us as soon as the river widens...and we clear the rapids.

Somehow, I envisioned escaping on a large party barge. Dozens of hybrids would pitch in to travel to our new life, far from Leopold's laboratory of horrors. Ruth

would assist me in birthing the hatchlings, Thomas would help steer the raft as he does now, and the twins would scout out for danger. The silent siblings would open up to me and become my friends who would help with Phin's medical care and hatchling sitting. Once we reached the bayou down south, all of us together would build a homestead on the riverbank to sustain ourselves.

The reality is a river raft the size of my two-person bed in my former rooms. The back half has seven-foot walls to accommodate Phin's height and a thatched roof of reeds and green vegetation. One strong storm, the craft will crumble like a cookie. If I had help, I could fortify the structure with the more substantial trees we pass, but then who would steer? Who would care for Phin?

"Hairy, don't hurt my Hairy! You don't get to touch her—" Phin's nightmares are back. Sweat glistens along his forehead and above his barbels. While his silence worries me, his feverish screams from the terrors in his mind are worse.

"Shush, shush, my darling," I whisper, patting his forehead with a damp rag. "Hairy is alone with you. We are home in our swamp. The danger is gone."

Along with everyone and everything I've ever known. There's not a soul for miles—a comfort and a worry. While I don't want someone associated with Leopold finding us, I'd love a friend. I gaze down at Phin to find his green eyes smiling at me. "Are you awake? I mean, really awake?"

"I'm awake. Are you real?" An exploratory tentacle slithers up my arm, planting little kisses with his peach-colored suckers. With each kiss, they flush darker, from peach to rose to scarlet with delight. Before I can blink, half a dozen tentacles slither over me with loving caresses and tiny nips.

"I'm here, Phin," I say, throwing my arms around him. I kiss every inch of his face not covered in bandages. His barbels dance on my cheeks as if verifying I'm corporal.

“We’re free!”

“Does Leopold chase us?” Leopold—not Papa—Phin’s change of moniker for the monster who was my husband doesn’t escape my notice.

“No, Thomas swims beside us,” I reply, pointing to the lazy waving of Thomas’s tail fin over the raft’s bow.

“The others?”

“They wouldn’t come,” I say in defeat.

“I suspected as much. Many of the others are too scared of the unknown, and we can’t blame them when all they know is fear, pain, and Leopold’s labs. They suspect what’s around the river’s bend is worse than the evil they know. Not all hatchlings learned to read the fairytales and hope for a better life.”

“I feel the worst for Thomas,” I reply, pointing to the gentle undulation of his tail fin. “He will watch us break away but must return to Leopold’s horrible estate because he promised the others. He’s swam for three days without rest...without the benefit of a lifetime of freedom in his future.”

“I must help him—”

“Oh no you don’t,” I scold, pushing him into a reclining position. “You’ve been dead to the world for three days. Take it slow to conserve your strength, for we reach the Ohio River in a few hours. Can you hear the rapids? Will this raft survive those? Once we are through them, Thomas will leave us to return to the siblings. I will depend on you for everything.”

“As you should.” He groans as he rolls onto his side to face me.

One hand cups my belly while the other rubs it in slow sweeps. My toes curl as he nuzzles the eggs in my womb and his tentacles sneak beneath my ragged dress. I tore the hem to knee-length to make bandages and hung my pants in the shelter to conserve them for land-dwelling, leaving my legs bare to his exploration.

“They’re moving,” he whispers in awe. His widened, round eyes dart to mine.

“Is that bad? Are they in trouble? Was the stress of our escape too much on them?”

“It’s good. It’s very good,” he says, sitting up abruptly to press me against his muscular chest. “They hatched!”

“That is good? I mean, my body was made to birth live young, so I guess—”

“The others died delivering eggs. Leopold’s words explaining why never made sense to me,” he replies with a blush that paints the tops of his cheeks a muddy, olive green. “Our hatchlings swim, so you will live! Hairy, we will have a family!”

Just like that, the sun shines on my world again. Phin’s magic isn’t his tentacles; it’s his optimism. Buzzing flies transform into musicians, churning waters rock us like cradle runners, and the movement under my skin is our hatchlings swimming in Phin’s heart...a place I want to call home.

“Thank you,” I say, kissing him with all the love in my heart as tears roll down my cheeks.

“For what? You kept our eggs safe and gave them enough comfort to hatch.”

“For reminding me what life is worth living for...love.”

“I will always love you, Hairy.”

“Phin, thank goodness you are with us,” Thomas says from behind me. He nearly capsizes us by boosting himself onto the raft’s edge without warning.

I glare at him for jostling us until Phin squeezes me against him tighter. Aww, we both grabbed my belly to protect our hatchlings. We share stupid smiles while Thomas natters on about what fish are below us. The flat, calm waters have intensified to brisk waves. The roaring of the white caps in the distance sends a shiver down my spine. Phin’s countenance falls from adoration to concern.

“We should navigate the rapids in the daylight, but the catfish in the mud at the river’s bottom is good eats. If you dock on dry land for the night, I bet Harriett could roast some over a fire and enjoy it too,” Thomas says, oblivious to my growing fear.

My stomach growls, so I mustn’t be too scared, or maybe I’m tired of feeling scared. The two hybrids laugh at my body’s noise. “I haven’t eaten since we left. I was too worried—”

“Our hatchlings depend on you to eat,” Phin answers in a surprisingly dominant voice. My heart beats double time in response. “Thank you, Thomas, for looking after us as well as alerting me to Harriett’s need for food. Before we part ways, you must join us in a catfish feast.”

Thomas nods and slips back into the water as if Phin barked a command. The other siblings mentioned he was their de facto leader, but I have never seen this side of him. I’m proud he’s the father of my hatchlings. My anxiety drops like a stone. As long as I follow him, I will be cherished...and that’s all that matters.

“Hairy, you will hide in the shelter—”

Um, no.

“I’ve steered this raft every second you have been passed out! I won’t sit back and let the big males handle the rapids.”

“You must relax and focus on holding our young—”

“I haven’t relaxed a second since I got them! Why start now? Phin, you can’t push me into a corner to protect me—”

“I hate this, but I love you too much to argue. If I can swim in the rapids with my injuries, I guess you can steer from up here with our eggs.” He throws his hands in the air.

“Thank you,” I reply, grabbing his cheeks and kissing him thoroughly. I let go when I’m nudged backward by a tentacle holding a bundle of bandages. “You took them off—”

“I need my skin to breathe underwater and my limbs free to fight the current. You can dress me again when we’re safe.” He gives me a mischievous smirk as if the bandages do nothing but satisfy my need to take care of him. I narrow my eyes at him to let him know I’m onto his assessment of my care but suppress the arguments boiling in my belly. He knows his body better than anyone...as a different species from me...

“Be careful, please. We need you,” I whisper. My gut’s tied in knots. The fear of losing him makes me want to shove him into the raft’s shelter, but common sense says we are better off with two aquatic males under the raft than one. I refuse to cry another tear, but my heart weeps. Have we made a mistake in leaving Leopold’s estate? Should we have killed him and taken over?

“Hairy,” Phin whispers, stroking my face with a barbel. His webbed fingers envelop my hands to stop their shaking. “We won’t be separated again. I promise. ”

He's so strong, I believe him.

He slips between the waves, leaving me holding fists of bloody rags. I chuck them into the bowl I anchored to the back of the shelter. Adding the soiled fabric helps the ornate ceramic crock blend into the surrounding shack. I giggle as I retrieve the hickory branch I've used to guide the raft around small obstacles. While the pole is taller than me and quite flexible, it might not be sturdy enough to resist the current of the rapids.

Perhaps I should use a longer bandage to tie myself to the raft? If I'm thrown overboard, I don't wish to be separated from my escorts. The rapids whirl around boulders in thick, foamy waves. What if I'm thrown and then trap myself beneath the raft with the tether? Which is better—lost or hidden?

Ridiculous. The guys are below, so they will rescue me from confinement and drowning. I tie myself to a branch that makes up the wall, leaving a two-foot radius of movement. Water sprays my face as the raft bobs on the larger swells. My pole successfully pushes the raft from a pointy obstacle when I stab it. I can do this. Thomas's tail waves as it skirts the pointy boulder on the far side. I haven't seen Phin since he dipped below the surface. However, if he breathes through his skin like a frog, he doesn't need to surface for air, right? I never saw his face during our first encounters because he could stay underwater for hours.

"He's not drowning, you ninny. You don't want his attention divided between navigating the rapids and watching you," I scold myself aloud.

The river shouts and spits in my face in return.

We reach the first set of rapids faster than I imagined. The raft turns sharply to the left. My pole wasn't in the water! How did I turn? I dig my toes between the planks of the raft as if they can hold me to the surface. Phin's webbed fingers caress them.

The green appendages are startling against the dark brown sticks and my pale, dainty toes. I'm grinning at my feet when we collide with a wall of water. My butt bounces onto the planks as I fall, knocking the air from my lungs. I twirl my pole horizontally, so it catches on the shelter's side walls. My body swings like a pendulum as the tip of the raft tries to throw me into the water.

The boat slams onto the water's surface in a violent splash.

I crawl to where I last saw Phin's fingers. Did the raft crush him against the rocky bottom? He hangs on with white knuckles. His fingers couldn't grip the sticks like that if he was knocked unconscious, right? I don't have time to worry because I'm thrown against the shelter's wall by another boulder. We will hit every rock and bust this rickety structure to bits if I don't get to my feet! Scrambling to the edge of the raft on my hands and knees, I use the tip of my pole to leverage myself to stand.

I jab at rocks and use the crevices between them to create an exterior rudder for my primitive craft. Once I point the raft where I wish it to go, Thomas slaps the side to build momentum. Phin acts as a stabilizing weight and limits the vertical rocking so I can stay upright.

What the hell is that? Oh, Lord help us! The last obstacle is a four-foot waterfall.

Calm water promises a reprieve on the opposite side, but I shrink in fear. My behind hits the shelter's back wall before I realize my feet have backpedaled away from the dropoff in an instinctive motion ingrained through the generations. Thomas's tail disappears as he dives ahead. He wasn't interacting with me, but the loss of my visual cues makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. Like a coward, I plant my feet as wide as possible, drop my pole, press my palms flat against the shelter walls, close my eyes, and pray for the best.

This must be what my clothes experience in my Washteria.

Air blasts from my lungs. My eyes flare open as the raft hits the bottom. The raft slowly drifts to the center of the Ohio River, where Thomas treads water. I trip over the pole I dropped as I sprint to where Phin held onto the raft. My chin hits the planks, but I don't stop frantically searching for his green webs.

"Phin, Phin!" My cries are borderline hysterical.

Thomas points behind me.

Phin swims ten feet behind the raft...holding three wiggling catfish over his head like trophies.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Mississippi River, two weeks later

My sweet Hairy was a ray of sunshine as we floated across what she called the Ohio River. Even during the rough transition to the bigger waterway, which she calls the Mississippi River, she put her faith in me. When she looks to me to care for her, the power in my body is my greatest treasure...but not when the pain of birthing our hatchlings dulls the starlight in her eyes. Birth steals her sweetness and reveals the monster within my lover.

She screams, clutching her folds as if to hold them together. I'm frightened for her and of her. Part of me wishes to hide in the shadows until the hatchlings emerge. Her screams stab my ears and pierce my brain. Who is this wild creature who spits curses in one breath and pleads sweetly at me to help her in the next? I don't trust her rapidly changing emotions. She's not the woman with the gentle spirit and soft voice who hummed to herself as she danced in the moonlight.

"It hurts," she wails.

She's suffering. I'm helpless. Worse than helpless, I'm the cause. I implanted my eggs.

She lays upon the nest of soft grasses I built for her over the last few days, sweat dripping from her brow. Her hair sticks to the underside of her chin as if she emerged from a swim. The flush on her cheeks has spread down to her navel, her clothes tossed into a pile hours ago. Her legs spread wide, and I have an unobstructed view of the paradise I haven't entered since I gave her my eggs. She's as beautiful as she was under the moonlight when we first met.

Her scent fills the small structure on our raft. I'm ashamed of my body's response to her when she suffers. Her body readies itself to birth our hatchlings—not to receive my cocks—but my primal reaction to her has no intelligence. What's in my heart and what my body displays are not in agreement. I hide my lower half in the frigid river in hopes of cooling my desires.

"Take the pain away, Phin. How can I stop the pain?"

"I don't know," I confess. "Leopold never let me attend a birth."

While watching my hatchlings die on their way into the world would have broken my spirit, I wish I had shown more interest in the birthing process. There, thinking of Leopold and my failed attempts at fatherhood chased the desire from my body! He made birth sound like women's work, but he delivered the hatchlings. I should have attended, too. However, my presence terrified the women, so they were probably glad my face wasn't the last vision they saw before my eggs killed them.

"I'm glad this is your first birth, too," Hairy says between pants. She clutches my large hand in her tiny one as if lending me strength as she suffers. "I just hope our hatchlings are healthy. It's too soon. Humans carry their babies for months. They must be tiny to birth after only two weeks of gestation."

What's gestation? Time in their mother? No matter when you aren't talking about humans, right?

"But you carry hybrids who are mostly...inhuman like me. They may have your eyes or hair from forming within their eggs inside you, but I doubt they are as human as you think." My chin drops in shame. Despite accepting my eggs, she thought she carried human babies. I don't dare tell her how much this guts me. Will her lip curl in disgust when our hatchlings crawl out of her like tiny salamanders? Will she refuse to love them if they are mute with little humanity like some of my siblings?

“Oh, Phin—” she cries as the pain pulls her mouth into a silent scream. “—I will love them because they are ours. They symbolize our love for one another. It doesn’t matter—”

She’s twice as scared as me, which pricks my pride. I lift myself onto the raft and slither to her side. She grabs my hand in a white-knuckled grip. My mind fails to find the words to soothe her. I don’t know what to do or what will erase her fear.

“Do I push? Do I push? Do. I. Push?” She screams until her eyes and the vessels under her skin bulge outward at me.

“If you continue screaming, someone will hear you,” I whisper in a voice roughly grated by helplessness and horror. My mind retreats from her anger and erratic behavior. In my youth, humans became erratic moments before they beat me... Hairy isn’t Leopold or Mr. Breyers, but she’s never acted like this before. Did birthing my hatchlings break her?

“Do I push?” She repeats in a terse whisper as she grabs my chin to capture my attention.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know!” My whispers turn into shouts as I cover my ears and shut my eyes to block out this horrible place where we find ourselves. “I’m just an animal who can’t understand his kind or even his own body!”

“Oh, Phin,” she says, calming down from her latest round of pain. Her touch on my cheek brings tears to my eyes. I allow them to flow down my face to relieve the pressure on my heart. She’s so confusing. I can’t handle this! “I know this is scary, but I need you to be strong for us...for our hatchlings. Okay?”

I nod until she presses our foreheads together. Her breath fans over my nose and calms the swirling whirlpool of my thoughts. She’s acting out because she’s as scared

as I am. I must remember that I'm not a pawn to her. She doesn't have the answers like Leopold or Mr. Breyers, who used their intelligence to find reasons to punish me. Hairy seeks my help in surviving and finding someone to love. We are more alike in this than different.

My love needs me.

“Now, sit with your back against the wall. I will sit in your lap, and together, we'll push them out as a unit. I don't know what will happen when they come out, but I need them out. NOW.”

Harriett

Next time, it won't be this way.

Next time—and there will be a next time with how my body craves him even as I writhe in pain—I'll know what to expect. We'll be settled in a homestead. Phin will have seen birth before and will know I get loud when my body hurts. He won't look at me with round, frightened eyes or shrink away from my touch as if he expects me to strike him. For now, I must be strong enough for both of us.

Oh, thank goodness! Once I'm in his arms, our heartbeats synchronize and the tension melts from our bodies. If I don't scare him again, this will be a magical experience. I must keep my cool if I don't want him to run off and hide in the swamp. Our hatchlings deserve better than us, but we're all they have.

“See, this is the world I wish to welcome our hatchlings into,” I say with a sigh. “Next time the pain grips my belly, we will push.”

“How?”

“Roll my shoulders forward by leaning over,” I reply with a quiver, betraying my nervousness. He envelops me in his arms, surrounding me with support. Tentacles caress my arms and kiss along my collarbone. My head falls against his chest as I absorb his affection. He licks up the side of my neck and nibbles my earlobe.

“This is good,” he purrs. “This feels like the world is right.”

Phin and I hold our breath, waiting for the next round of pain. The water sloshes in the ceramic bowl where our hatchlings will spend their first day outside my womb. It dances the same pattern as the river water waltzes to the beat of the waving branches of the trees. Leaves flutter around the shelter’s opening like the warning of autumn’s arrival. The urgency to float south where the water’s warm enough for hatchlings rings alarm bells in the back of my mind. Can they survive winter outdoors? Did Phin winter in our swamps under a blanket of snow?

“Phin, how—”

My question dies on my tongue with the agonizing stab to my womb. Phin’s strong chest pushes against my back as his palms smooth down my arms. We roll my body until I’m curled around my belly. Phin bears down on me. I grunt with exertion as I push. My body says to push, but there’s no pressure at my opening. What am I forcing out? How will I know—

Oh.

“Stop pushing! Stop, Phin, we don’t need to push!”

The pain I’ve been experiencing isn’t a tightening of my belly but the dilating of my womb. Fluid trickles onto the raft. A wiggling starts deep within me. I gasp with the strange sensation of tickling within my vagina. The fluid release intensifies.

I wish to squirm with the uncomfortable itchiness between my legs, but I don't dare disturb whatever is happening to me. The tickles press on my inner labia. Curiosity has me reaching between my legs. Is it an eggshell? Phin said his eggs aren't hard like chicken eggs, so did I just dispel a slimy sliver of a shell?

Shells don't climb onto my fingers.

I raise the tiny peach creature to our faces. From its patch of brown hair—that matches my own—to its webbed toes, our hatchling fits in my hand. He's a boy, with two tiny cocks the same shape as his father's. His arms and legs are half the length of my thumb.

I raise him to the end of my nose to examine his face. His eyes are closed. A faint welp emerges from his tiny, pink mouth as his tongue darts onto my skin. No tentacles or barbels adorn his chin. I giggle at his sounds.

"He's so precious," I coo at the hatchling as the tickling of our next hatchling begins deep inside me. "I just love him, Phin. Isn't he adorable?"

"I'm happy you are pleased, my love. I'm sorry I doubted you," he replies, kissing my temple. "He will be more comfortable in the water. If he's like me, it's easier to breathe through the skin. "

Phin takes our hatchling from my hand. He laughs at my pouting lip, not-so-secretly pleased that I'm attached to our firstborn son. While I'm scared for their survival—my second-born son's body is smaller than the first—I'm grateful not to birth a ten-pound baby like most women. Such a feat could kill me in the wild without so much as a midwife to minimize the bleeding. After the opening of my womb, the pain reduced to manageable waves as each hatchling creeps into my vagina.

In my impatience, I reach inside me and pull out our first daughter. Not only does she have female genitalia, but she has long brown hair that curls at her shoulders. “She’s a tiny princess!”

“Yes, we shall call this one Princess,” Phin whispers before kissing the tiny head of our daughter.

She cries out when he places her in the water bowl with her brothers. The two swim to her side like protectors, which warms my heart. They’re just like their father, who protected his siblings as best he could in Leopold’s house of horrors. And while I’m legally still married to the vile man, Phin is the husband of my heart.

“We will need many boy’s names,” I say as I catch two wiggling, fighting hatchlings. These two will be troublemakers. They grab and smack at each other until I hold them in separate hands. Then, their inch-long tentacles reach for one another as they cry in tiny squeals.

“Now boys,” Phin says in a fatherly voice I’ve never heard him use. “We will have none of your nonsense. You must try to get along and set a good example for your siblings.”

Oh, my ovaries! Phin’s paternal instincts bring out the best in him.

Phin

My heart threatens to burst. Harriett’s gentle handling of our hatchlings is everything I’ve dreamed of, wished for, and wanted rolled into one vision. She coos at them and kisses their tiny heads like a true mother. Nobody taught her what to do. Her fear melted into unconditional love like a fairytale when she looked upon them.

As she inspects each one, I judge her expressions. My tentacles grip her tightly,

constantly tasting her moods. I wish I could trust that her lips curl into a smile instead of a sneer—that her tears are happy, not sad. How much did the lab break me? If I had never met Harriett, would I have noticed how wrongly my insides are arranged?

“I’m sorry,” I whisper against her shoulder. “I shouldn’t have doubted your heart.”

“It’s called trauma, an old Greek word for injury,” she murmurs, playing with our youngest and fifth son. He’s the largest of our brood, with green skin and tentacles strong enough to clasp her fingers. There are no suckers on them yet, so he misses tasting his mother’s joy at greeting him into the world. “Your distrust and confusion are Leopold’s fault. Yes—before you ask—you will heal. I listened to scientists lecture on injuries of the mind—traumas—with my father in Boston. The science is new, but the concept is as old as medicine. With love and time, you will glue your heart back together and learn how to trust.”

“You have lots of faith,” I reply, hypnotized by her play with our most alert hatchling. She holds her index finger above him, and he reaches a tentacle upward to investigate. A second joins the first, pulling his head off her opposite hand.

“He’s trying to stand,” she cheers. “Oh, Phin, can we name him Crusoe? I just loved that book. It was about a brave explorer. Our son is brave too. Please? I know he must return to his siblings in the water, but he’s so fun. I could watch him learn for hours.”

“We have the rest of our lives to chase Crusoe on his adventures,” I murmur as she passes him to me. “I will remember this moment when you scold him for finding trouble and scaring you.”

“I can’t wait,” she whispers before settling into my arms with a deep sigh. “I hope our children have their father’s courage, tempered by his sensitive heart.”

“No, Hairy, I want them to be whole.” I cast a worried glance at our hatchlings,

happily swimming in their bowl—except for Crusoe, who clutches the rim as if his upper strength is all that's keeping him confined.

“Then let's teach them to be that third person who emerges when two soulmates find one another. The synergy between us creates this loving force that highlights all the good in the world while confronting the bad. They will be better beings than us both because we will only give them the best of us.”

Her words are beautiful, even if I don't understand them. The storybook propped against the back of our shelter shows me she will give our hatchlings her beautiful words.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Epilogue—Two Years Later

“And the bear bachelors chased Goldilocks from their home, cursing their broken chair. The frail, old woman hobbled the best she could on her cane, but even in her drowsy state, she escaped unharmed. She learned her lesson. Never enter a strange home without invitation again,” I read before gently shutting the aged storybook.

The pages have warped with the constant assault of humidity that comes with raft life. Phin has asked about replacing it more than once, but my fear of humans keeps me glued to the raft. I’d be worried sick over my family’s secrecy and safety every second I was in town. Despite the money we’ve stolen from people wandering too close to us, I also can’t justify the cost when we need more crucial supplies. Supplies, like rope to mend our fishing nets, I can barter or purchase from other people living their own quiet raft life. It would take me forever to find a bookstore—let alone this book in a bookstore. What if someone followed me back? What if I were harmed and had no rescue?

“I don’t understand why the Bears can chase that mean old Goldilocks out of their home, but we must hide when someone enters ours,” Crusoe pouts with his little arms crossed over his chest. I’ve discovered our hatchlings develop five times faster than a human baby, but can you imagine my surprise when he said his first word while marveling at the flakes falling from the sky that first winter? He’s the most verbose of our children, with a strong streak of fairness and justice.

“Because nobody owns the river,” says Princess, with a flip of her hair over her shoulder. She’s parroting my response to his complaint. We have the same argument every time I read this story, but the children fuss if I skip it. Sometimes, I think they

want the argument more than the story.

“Next time, I won’t hide,” Crusoe states in a bold new objection to our life.

“Yeah, we’ll hunt down those pesky people and eat them!” I don’t know if Frank or Fred made the inappropriate comment, so I wag my finger at both of the giggling troublemakers.

“We don’t eat people. They taste gross,” replies Wilhelm, our smallest son. He wiggles his tentacles at his siblings while pulling a silly face.

All the hatchlings laugh except our eldest, Jacob, who rubs his bald chin with glassy eyes. Now that they’ve learned the difference between males and females, It doesn’t help that Princess lacks tentacles, too. I make a note to chat with Jacob about his human face. He loves our private chats and may open up to me about his body issues. I love all our hatchlings for their unique gifts, and it pains me to see how Jacob’s using them to build walls around his heart and isolate himself. The siblings don’t feel anything less than love for him. It’s all drama in his head.

He's as sensitive as Phin.

“That’s enough with the giggles. It’s time for bed,” I say, tucking them into their nest. They snuggle together in a bed of reeds under their cozy blankets. I kiss each one while collecting hugs from tiny arms, barbels, and tentacles.

Splash!

My head whips to the door. That’s Phin’s signal that someone is approaching our raft. He enters and exits the water soundlessly unless he’s sounding an alarm. The hairs on the back of my neck lift in fear. We’re tied to a fallen tree for the night, which usually isn’t as dangerous as tying our craft to someone’s dock. There wasn’t a house in view

when we selected this place. Whoever they are, we aren't encroaching on their property, so they should have no reason to interact with us.

"Goodnight," I whisper to the children as I close the door to our expanded enclosure. There's no need to alarm them. Although I hope I can count on Crusoe not to overreact and calm the others when I lock them inside. All this talk of vengeance makes me worry that one of the boys will try to play the hero.

"Good evening to you too, darlin'." The man shuffling down the riverbank is three times my size. A black cavern of rotted teeth tops his scraggly brown beard. Thankfully, the beard covers his pale chest, bulbous belly, and pelvis. Worn boots with one pink toe sticking out the top stomp into the shallows to get a closer look at me. Every third step is a stumble, as if he's hit the bottle before strolling into the woods alone.

"Lovely weather we're having," I say pleasantly.

I find the simpler the folk, the more kind and genuine they are, so there's no reason to be rude. I've befriended and bartered with all sorts—from the plain's farmers to the bayou's gator tamers. We wouldn't have half the luxuries we own without them. For every bad apple, we've encountered ten sweeties.

"Not as lovely as a woman traveling alone," he says, giving me every reason to be rude. My smile drips away as if he splashed it from my face. "Where's your menfolk?"

"Swimming," I say with practiced ease. We've encountered this scenario a thousand times since fleeing Leopold. Even the children have practiced the procedure. Phin hides beneath the surface, waiting in the murky water to pull this stranger under by his ankles while I try the more diplomatic approach. "My husband loves an evening swim before retiring."

“He left you all by your lonesome—”

“Oh no, he swims nearby,” I say with a curt head nod. “I bet he’s watching us right now. Please, do you need help? Have we traded with you before?”

It’s one last hope that he’s a trader who is more comfortable bartering with a man. I’ve met a few of those, too. They’re harmless—just as skittish as I am—most either have strict religious rules that keep them from doing business with a woman or an overbearing person in their life who makes them keep their distance from women. We usually part ways when they realize I won’t call my husband to greet them. They curse me as they retreat, but words have no power over me.

“No, darlin’,” he drawls. “We’re strangers in a temporary sense. Do you reckon we could get acquainted before your husband returns? Him being swimming and all.”

Something about the inflection of his voice when he says swimming suggests he believes I’m without a husband. Phin can’t hear the exchange from below and waits for me to jump in the water as his signal to attack. I’m half tempted to jump in just so I don’t have to fight off this guy’s advances. But crude behavior is no reason to add another death to Phin’s list of victims. We don’t need anything on this man’s person—I doubt he has two nickels to rub together. He hasn’t touched me, and I won’t give him the opportunity.

“It doesn’t matter if he’s returned to land or not, he sees us now. My best advice is to stay where you are and state your business. He’s got quite a temper and doesn’t suffer fools.” While I give my final warning, I rush to the raft’s edge to lift the mooring ropes off their tree branch. His bloodshot eyes follow my movement as he chews his thoughts...or food particles found in his beard. We stare at one another like two cats facing off.

“No reason to fly away, little birdy,” he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his

hand.

“Stay where you are,” I scold, grunting as I dislodge the anchor line from the rocky riverbed. After a few tugs, it gives—no doubt helped along by Phin beneath the raft. Why isn’t he closer to the man? He must be between the raft and the man when I jump in, or the hatchlings will be defenseless!

The current swiftly carries the raft to the middle of the river, where an eddy slowly spins us sideways. We move in circles instead of downriver! My attention is divided between the swiftly turning current and the man advancing on the raft. If I had my steering pole, I could push off the bottom and maneuver around the miniature whirlpool. My hair swings as I swivel my head back and forth to keep both dangers in view.

Do I retrieve my pole from the shelter’s roof, stay where I can keep an eye on the stranger, or jump into the water to alert Phin?

“Or what, little birdy,” he says, shuffling faster with more stable footing than I thought his addled brain could muster. The water is up to his knees in a blink of an eye. He stoops and pushes off the bottom to glide toward me. “Why would you run off if your husband is meeting you here? There’s no husband ain’t he. We both know it—”

“There is so, and he doesn’t like you bothering us. Go sleep off your drink and leave us be!” My tone is mousier than I’d like, but my final warning is clear.

He plants his meaty paw on the raft, rocking it severely. He boosts his top half over the side, blasting me with the stink of alcohol and unwashed human. I kick at his shoulder to push him away peacefully, but he grabs my ankle. We fall into the water, but I don’t hit the bottom.

I bounce off Phin's forearms and roll back onto the raft in a singular motion. Spitting water as I catch my breath, I crawl to the far side of the shelter to retrieve my steering pole. Phin will take care of the drunk. I must release our watercraft from the eddy spinning us and leave the scene. Who knows if the man was alone or if a group would search this area for him?

I poke between stacks of rocks at the center of the mini-whirlpool. Please don't let me stab Phin accidentally! I must have faith that he predicts my escape and knows to dodge pole jabs at the southern edge of the raft. Pushing left and then right, I wiggle the raft free of the current. Its agonizingly slow descent toward the Mississippi River delta drains the adrenaline from my veins. I collapse in a heap and thank the newly emerging stars we survived another encounter. While they aren't frequent, I don't think I will ever get used to hiding my family from every human who exists.

"He won't bother us again," Phin whispers as he rolls beside me onto the raft.

"You didn't have to..."

"No," he chuckles, "he's on the banks."

I peek around the shelter to where we previously moored the raft. The drunken man pounds his fist into the mud, spraying muck over the back of him. He lost a boot in the scuffle. The greying sock dangles from his foot as he toes his weight up the banks. He yells obscenities about sabotaging reeds and frigid women.

"I'm grateful he blames the plants for holding him under while you escaped instead of a monster—"

"Well, mistaking your tentacles for reeds is an easy mistake," I say with a coy smile. Something about the way Phin defends us without causing unnecessary harm is very attractive. I run a proprietary finger over his chest muscles, down his abs, and to his

flaccid cocks.

“What is it, Mrs. Phineas Guett? Do you reach for me because you miss the reeds?”

“I reach for my husband’s tentacles so they taste my desire to ride his cocks.” His tentacles and barbels swarm my body and fight the clothes sticking to me. I unclasp my dress before he tears it open again. No way am I cooling my ardor because we must search the riverbed for lost buttons.

“How indecent!”

Phin’s growl cuts off my giggles as he rolls on top of me. He crushes my lips against his mouth as he probes my nether lips with his tentacles. I wrap my legs around his waist to give him access to my sopping entrance. My hips lift and jerk as he works inside my holes.

“Oh, I—” Tingles start on my mound where his smaller cock drips green pre-fluid onto me. My eyes cross with need as I reach between us to pump more of the intensifying liquid where I need him. His larger ovipositor rubs beside my clit to lift my passions higher. It’s assisted by a tentacle that alternates between dipping inside me with two others and sucking random places on my cunt.

He lowers his head to my open blouse to tease my nipples with his barbels. They stiffen to peaks in anticipation of his hot mouth. The pressure of his weight increases as he braces himself on his elbows. With his hands free, he wastes no time cupping and kneading my breasts. I love the confinement of my body between the raft and his heavy body. It reminds me just how big and strong my chosen male is compared to me. I’m not a petite lady and always felt like a giant among humans, but Phin makes me feel like a tiny treasure.

“No eggs yet,” he says between pants. He shuttles himself through my fist, coating

both of us in his fluid. “My body may sense we aren’t settled yet and doesn’t wish to give us more hatchlings until we find a home. This summer, my love—”

I reach between us to smear some of his green ejaculate onto my fingers. We eye it like co-conspirators before I suck my digits clean. His lips curl into a naughty smile that makes my heart stutter.

“It’s not about more hatchlings. I want to love you,” I whisper, gazing deeply into his eyes. “You must know my body is overwrought with desire for you. I’m ablaze with the burning from your lubricant. I need you now.”

“That, my love, I can do,” he says, kissing my eyes, nose, and cheeks before claiming my mouth.

He lifts his head to give me one more wicked grin.

Using two arms and two wide tentacles, he flips me onto my belly. He laughs at the little yip of surprise that escapes me. Another tentacle snakes under me to lift me onto my hands and knees. The rough sticks under my legs contrast with the smoothness of Phin’s tentacles roaming my body. I arch my back to communicate my need and receive two exploratory fingers along my slit. The burn spreads. He’s lubricating me...everywhere.

“Not kidding, Phin,” I pant. “Take me now!”

I’m rewarded with his massive oviscape rammed inside me. He’s seated to the hilt. We share a moan of relief, echoed by the river birds who watch us. Each ring on his giant cock scrapes the sensitive tissues within me, making my eyes cross in pleasure. I’m stuffed full—eggs or no eggs.

Phin presses against my hip bones as he roars a release from his smaller cock that

splashes my lower back. It drips down my crack and over my puckered back hole. There? Do I desire the smaller phallus there? Whether it's the intensifying nature of the green fluid or my further descent into depraved activities, I need to be double penetrated. Now. Even his pinky finger working his ejaculate into my ass isn't giving me relief. I swing on my knees to press us together harder.

"Easy, love, easy," Phin whispers, placing a firm hand on my hip to stop me. "You will tear. We must wait for your exit to open like a womb—"

"This is nothing like my womb," I snarl. "Give me more!"

He switches to his middle finger, judging by the spread of his webbing over my cheeks. The digit doesn't reach deep enough. His webs are in the way! I may combust from the inside out. Whimpers and whines leave my mouth like a feral puppy while I impale myself on his larger cock.

"Stop moving. Breathe out, and bear down," he says in his commanding voice.

I freeze as if he's turned me into stone. He squirts directly into my back hole before pressing his tip forward with agonizing slowness. No more than an inch is inside me before he's pulling out. Tiny wiggles slip it in, further and further, while bumping every happy place inside me with his larger cock. When he's bottomed out, I'm stretched, stuffed, and in a state of bliss.

"Are you okay? Am I too much?"

"Your slow pace and pauses for confirmation are too much," I say with a tilt of my hips against his pelvis. "Give it to me. "

"I don't want to hurt—"

“You were made for me, and I for you. If I’m sore tomorrow, you can baby me and scold me for not being cautious. For now, show me why I chose a beast over a man.”

Phin’s growl sends shivers down my spine, which vibrates our joined bodies. His hands appear at my shoulders, bracing himself over my body. There’s no doubt in my mind that I am his prey. He’s everywhere. Inside, outside, above, and with tentacles writhing below me. His scent is in my nostrils as deep as I’ve taken his cocks. The snaps of his hips knock me forward, so my shoulder hits his chin in successive thumps.

My low belly coils tight. The walls of my channels flutter and squeeze his invaders. Low-careening groans escape my mouth until they’re silenced with a fat tentacle. Stuck on his limbs and pressed between him and the raft, there’s nowhere to escape his pounding. My desire soars higher and higher. I lose the backdrop of our lovemaking. Whether I’m floating on water or a cloud, I couldn’t say.

His oviscape thickens.

I shatter into a million pieces.

I pulse from head to toe—maybe even my hair follicles. Euphoria floods my system. The gentle pumps of my vagina pull Phin’s orgasm from his two cocks. A deluge of spend splashes my insides and runs down my legs.

“No eggs,” Phin puffs as he rests his forehead on the back of my neck.

“Still fun,” I reply with a giggle. His chuckle rumbles along my back. “I’m messy, thanks to you.”

As my contractions quiet, he pulls out, dominating me by holding me in place with his hands. I twist around to gaze at the look of pride in his eyes as he watches his

fluids dip out of me. My male loves me dirty and used as much as I love it.

I can be a respectable mother and a shameless vixen in his care without judgment. His acceptance of me is what I love most about our raft life. He may have to hide from humanity because he looks like a monster, but I hide, too. According to society, I'm a monster on the inside. No tentacles or webbed limbs, but a wanton woman is more feared than any beast. With Phin, there are no secrets...except those we share between ourselves.

“What are you thinking, Hairy?” He says, painting my hips and cheeks with what expels from my body.

“How grateful I am to be with you.”

He lets me go as I roll onto my side. I open my arms wide for him to carry me. As we slip into the water, he cups my mound so I'm not shocked by the temperature change. Tentacles coil over my nipples for the same reason. There's no teasing, only protective pressure. It's those little touches of love that I've always wanted. Someone attentive and kind...but as monstrous as me.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Marilyn Barr takes you back in time from 1918 to 1725 for a Kraken shifter romance.

Sabrina

“Why must you judge me for picking up random men at the tavern? I don’t judge you for eyeing the pastor at the orphanage and don’t roll your eyes as if your attraction isn’t obvious! You would trade your tentacles for him in a heartbeat,” I scold my big sister, Benita. We reach the front of Maude’s dirty tavern not a moment too soon. My prim sister’s diatribe churns my stomach—not with guilt—but with annoyance. I have no reason to be guilty.

What I choose to do with my one night a month as a human is my business.

“You could spend your time doing something good for the species we mimic. The joy I receive from seeing those children’s smiling faces—”

“I get the same amount of smiles I promise,” I say with a wink that twists Benita’s face into a scowl. “I promise by the time I lower my skirts back into place, every man I encounter is smiling.”

“Sabrina, how could you! You’ve ruined yourself for your fated mate,” she snaps.

My eyes roll so far, that I can see the back of my hair. I thrust the bundle of fish I carried for her onto her shoulder. After she drops me off at Maude’s tavern, she will continue to the cathedral in the island’s center. The kids will be thrilled to roast fish over an open fire as she tells them stories of our undersea adventures. I’ve watched her flirt shamelessly with a man of the cloth without guilt. Why should I feel guilty

because my idea of fun is more... raucous...bawdy...lively?

Her face is red with frustration and embarrassment on my behalf. Her wishy-washy pastor brainwashed her. We can't conceive a baby without the soul bond to make us human or our mate into a Kraken. Once the full moon lowers and we change back into Kraken, we shed all human ailments. There is no harm in what I choose to do with my time...or what she chooses except when she tries to choose for me.

"I'm having fun! As for my fated mate... If I find him in Maude's, he's as unscrupulous as me. Otherwise, he will never know what I've been up to. Dancing on tables is fun. Drinking rum and flirting with the men who buy it for me until I'm three sheets to the wind—is fun. And guess what? Sex is fun too."

"Sabrina, you've grown into a horrible wench!"

"Yep, and I'm good at it," I say with a flip of my long, red hair over my shoulder. She presses her lips together until they are white like the lacy collar under her chin. "I'll meet you under the pier in the morning to stash our clothes. Have fun sleeping alone on a straw mattress in the drafty chapel."

Shedding my prissy sister like an itchy coating of sand, I press through the swinging half-doors of Maude's. The smoky interior smells of cigars, spoiled ale, coconut rum, and unwashed sailors. Breathing a healthy dose into my lungs, I make my way to the bar. My hips swing with feminine sensuality as I weave between the long wooden tables and askew benches. I scan each seat for my intended targets. One to buy my drinks, one to pay for my room, and one to tip Maude so she doesn't get on me for taking customers from her working girls. At least three men will treat me tonight...make that five. My sister has soured my mood, so I'll need twice the drinks to loosen up.

"The usual, Sabrina," says Jamal, who tends the portion of the bar closest to the door.

“Not yet,” I say with a laugh. “I haven’t found the man who will tend to me tonight.”

“Put her on my tab,” says a dark-haired man with a scar running from his eyebrow to his chin. He throws back his shot of rum when I give him a demure nod of gratitude, lowering my lashes over my bright, sea-green eyes.

Jamal’s an easy-going landlubber and would probably fit Benita’s definition of someone appropriate for me—even if his reliable job is at Maude’s. He never drinks while behind the bar, stands up for strumpets whose clients can’t understand ‘no’ or ‘not now’, and always wears a smile. His smile is the reason I’ve never taken him to bed...and my strict don’t-bugger-your-friends policy.

I don’t touch rot. Blackened teeth, matted hair, gangrenous limbs, and yellowed fingernails are deal breakers. I won’t allow a man with rot to touch me—not even to help me off the tabletop after I dance over him. With Jamal’s poor dental hygiene, it’s a miracle I accept drinks from him.

Lucky for me, the scarred man who offered to buy my night’s drinks is moderately clean. He drops off his stool to hobble my way with his peg leg clapping the wooden floor louder than Maude’s off-tune piano. Missing a leg doesn’t mean he has rot...quite the opposite in my experience. If he has access to a competent, ship’s doctor to perform such an operation, I find he also has access to soap. This man’s growing in my favor and could be my bedfellow for the night.

“Tonight’s not the night for a delicate flower to swindle drinks from pirates,” he whispers in my ear. His breath is thick with alcohol and coconut milk. It fans over my bare shoulder and exposed cleavage. I feel my nipples harden at the first attention I receive in a lunar cycle.

“What if this flower isn’t so delicate?” I ask with a flutter of my eyelashes. He’s missing a few teeth, replaced with metal crowns. Otherwise, they’re as clean as his slightly yellow fingernails.

Truth be told I could snap this guy in half with one of my tentacles. Who's he calling a flower? I'd drag him to the bottom of the ocean and drown him before he knew what happened.

"My ship's been in this harbor for two weeks and I've dipped my stick in every well under this roof twice...except yours. You aren't one of Maude's regular girls. I doubt you are even a working girl. I bet Daddy is in some hacienda wondering where his little princess ran to," he says before sucking on my earlobe.

I shiver at how much I like a man to play with my ears. Too bad his sexist comments smell of rot and drop him down a notch on my list.

"No hacienda. My daddy isn't on this island, nor is my keeper. You're right. I'm not one of Maude's girls. I'm my own girl," I whisper against the bottom of his chin. Yum, he smells of gunpowder and boat tar. He's a sailor—pirate or merchant. No way would a soldier come to the tavern out of uniform when the uniform earns them free drinks and privileges from Maude.

"Patricia's Wish docked this morning. Her Captains are a she-devil and her consort. The crew is a hoard of demons. Any one of them would ruin you," he says, rubbing a proprietary hand down my back.

"How do you know I'm not one of those demons?" I toss back the end of my drink in one swallow. My sailor's pupils dilate as he watches my throat work the liquid down my gob. I have no time or interest in conversations about good and evil. If I did, I'd be at the orphanage with Benita—all pious and boring.

To come to my rescue, Maude plays a livelier tune and the real tavern girls clamor onto the stage to dance. Their singing resembles the alley cats marooned by the ships docking on this island, but it's catchy enough to tap my sailor's toes. I lead him to the end of a long table and use him as leverage to climb on top of it. With a salute to Maude, I lift my skirts to my knees and dance along. My hem flies over my sailor's

head to give him a glimpse of my thighs. I wink over my shoulder at the other men at the table to prevent him from thinking we're exclusive. He blew it with his warning about demons and she-devils.

There's one she-devil in this bar and she's me.

I twirl as the music comes to a crescendo. Time to find my next mark. Pity because that sailor smelled so good. His rot was on the inside. The men at our table are uninspiring, so I hop onto the one adjacent. Nope, they smell of yeast dough and cheese—the telltale signs of foot and lip fungus.

Next table!

I've leaped and tapped halfway around the room when a crew of pirates burst through the doors. Their leader has shiny, clean brown hair framing cold, grey eyes. His hands are red from scrubbing. Ship's doctor, if I had to guess. Behind him is a short man—no higher than the doctor's ribs—with shocking red hair and a tidy, red beard. His blue eyes twinkle with mischief but the set of his mouth is stern. I'd say he's the enforcer—small but lethal—like a bosun, master of sails, or quartermaster. Wouldn't he be fun for a night?

Other crewmen flood in without a care in the world. They are ratline climbers, deck scrubbers, gunners, or other disposable men, based on their dependence on the short man to scout out the bar for danger. A man with a full set of metal teeth gives me a terrifying smile before heading for Jamal. Not touching that sailor for all the pearls in the sea!

Last through the swinging doors is a man with the whitest smile I've ever seen. Crystalline blue eyes clearer than the Caribbean sea sparkle at me. The crooked hook of his nose mars the perfection of an otherwise statue-worthy face. Tall, strong, and encased in worn leather, he's built like a ratline climber but wealthier. He scans the crowd like a seasoned pirate too.

I'm blinded by lust and momentarily lose my footing. The heel of my tattered boot lodges between two planks on the table. My ankle screams as it twists with my momentum. Arms pinwheeling, my weight swings over the edge of the table. The sticky grog-soaked floor rushes toward my face as I prepare for impact.

I thump into the strong arms of the handsome pirate whose boots are the size of boats. My hair brushes over their metal tips and tangles in the leather laces crisscrossed up his shins. Two long, clean fingers press into the side of my breast, sending lava through my veins. He's missing the middle and ring finger at the base knuckle.

"Caught me a doxie," the handsome man yells to the crowd who laughs and cheers in response. His deep timbre rattles my bones and spreads goose-pimples over my flesh. The cold, bare flesh of my arse exposed to the room! I fight the hem of my skirts that flipped to my shoulders during my fall. His arm supports my weight at the waist while his hand fists my skirts to keep them up. His other hand spans me, hard. The crack rings out over the chorus of laughter. My face heats with embarrassment. I'm not drunk enough to flash the crowd!

"Unhand me, you scoundrel," I yell upside-down, earning myself a second swat. My cocktail threatens to come up again as I spin upright. I wobble as he sets me back on the table where I fell. I should smack him. I channel Benita and scold him.

Why am I aroused by this handsome man who can handle me like a tiny fairy, but chooses to degrade me by spanking me in public? Men like him threaten my independence and right to a night of fun each month. He's the type of pirate everyone is afraid I will meet. Did they know I'd be drawn to him like a moth to a flame?

"There we go," he says with another pat on my behind. Thankfully, this time my skirts block his contact. "Back to work, wench."

It's on the tip of my tongue to save face and tell him I'm not one of Maude's girls. He must be one of the demons from Patricia's Wish . The smartest course would be to

dance away from him and back to the condescending sailor who smelled nice. I'm too bright to be swayed by a pretty smile...a smile without a hint of rot...and perfectly manicured nails...all seven of them as clean as his smile. As my eyes search him for flaws, he runs the four fingers of his left hand through his mane of golden hair. Both his middle fingers are missing. I'm blasted with the scent of soap, gunpowder, boat tar, and an ocean breeze.

My shoulders rise and fall as I breathe him into my lungs.

A flirty remark dies on my tongue as he adjusts himself through the crotch of his leather pants. Nope. Too much. Too uncouth, too vulgar, too smarmy, too much for a part-time human, like me. He's as shameless as me but with twice the firepower. Not gracing him with another second of my attention, I twirl and dance along the table to the opposite end. I'll find a safer man to bed tonight.

I kick and tap to the beat with my skirts swishing above my knees for mediocre sailors, stealing furtive glances at the handsome man and his table of rowdy friends. I don't dare approach them. I do have some sense of self-preservation. The night flies by as shots are taken from my cleavage and poured down my throat by random drunks.

All the while, the handsome pirate watches me from his corner.

The heat in his stare burns away my inhibitions and I find myself performing for him, using the attention from men closer to me as my props. Coins jingle in my pockets and shoes as I earn my night's lodgings under the pirate's lustful gaze. It isn't long before I'm singing louder than the girls on stage.

My peg-legged companion leaves with his head shaking in warning. He can't buss my cheeks. He's not my father. My father's at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. I thumb my nose at the swinging doors as he exits the bar.

Time to secure a room from Jamal. Looks like I'll be sleeping alone tonight, but some nights are slow. I've taken two or three men to my room in succession before selecting the one I will sleep beside. Nights like tonight balance the scales. I hope the working girls are luckier and wake up next to stacks of gold.

"Here's one, two, five gold coins," I count as I drop doubloons onto the bar top. Maude's rate is three coins for rooms not occupied by her girls, so the two extra coins will go to Jamal's savings. I hope he opens the beachside cantina of his dreams someday. "I'd like a room—the one at the far end of the hallway if it's open."

"Are you sure? Miss Opal has the room next to that one. Maybe take the first room," Jamal says, swiping my coins into his hand. He trades them for a large, iron key. Being a 'screamer' is Miss Opal's specialty. I'll wake up with a banging headache if I'm in the room next to hers.

"Thanks for always looking out for me," I reply, swiping the key off the bar top.

"Which room is ours?" I don't need to turn around to know it's the handsome pirate behind me. My body ignites with the command in his question.

"I'm in room one," I say, verifying the key is labeled with the number one. He steps toward me with a palm outstretched for the key. "You are bunking in the bilge of some ship with the rest of the sea sludge."

He takes a predatory step forward. My back hits the bar. I clutch the key to my chest. It vibrates with the pounding of my heart or maybe that's the shaking of my fingers. Blond hair tickles my nose as he leans over me, one arm resting on the bar to either side of my waist. His scent invades my nose. Blue eyes bore into me with an intensity that curls my toes in my boots.

"Tell me you don't want me in your bed to pleasure you from head to toe and make your every fantasy come true, and I'll disappear," he whispers against my ear. The

brush of his lips on my earlobe unravels me.

My soul bond snaps from its cage in my heart and reaches for him.

My fated mate stands before me.

A once-in-a-lifetime connection and the promise of true love war in my head with my common sense. He's not just a pirate, but a notoriously demonic pirate, sailing under a she-devil. For all my blustering, I'm afraid. This man will break my heart when he chooses piracy over life under the sea with me. Why would a man like him commit to a quiet life? I should save myself the agony of tying my soul to a ruffian and losing him to the sweet trade or worse.

The word 'no' will save my heart and soul.

"Stay with me," I whisper as tears gather in my eyes.