

Sacrifice Your Tears

by

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*Say that upon the altar of her beauty
You sacrifice your tears, your sighs, your heart:
Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears
Moist it again, and frame some feeling line
That may discover such integrity.*

--William Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

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It had been a long time since I had been forced to stand in front of this many people, nor endure so many eyes upon me. Worst of them all were the eyes of Amy, who I had once loved so completely, who I had tricked myself into believing was capable of loving me in the same manner. She was no longer looking in my direction, having pulled her gaze away when she was convinced to leave the throne room by voices even more powerful than her own, but I could still feel her eyes upon me, their scornful weight and withering disdain. I had only ever been a pet to her. I could see that now. She had chosen me not because she loved me, but because she had looked upon the litter formed by myself and my siblings and found me the most pleasing of the lot, for whatever reason.

I would feel the weight of her eyes on me forever, but I would no longer wear her leash. That time was behind me now.

Pressed against my side, August shivered like a wild thing that had been trapped and pulled out of the deep woods where it made its home. It felt as if every inch of her was trembling, and as I stroked her hair with one hand, she burrowed closer still, seeking comfort, seeking safety. I had never expected her to choose me. I had thought, when I came here to rewrite my future, that I was going to lose my child in the process. I had even managed, in a slow, painful way, to convince myself that it would be for the best. Amy could teach her how to control her powers in a way I never could. We were similar in our strengths, my sweetest girl and I, but we were not and could never be the same.

The sweet campfire smoke smell of her magic radiated from her skin as she huddled against me, and I stroked her hair again. We were more similar than I sometimes wanted to accept, I thought; perhaps that was why she'd chosen me. Perhaps she'd realized, as clearly as I finally had, that Amy's garden would never be a place where she could flourish and bloom. I might not be her final choice. I shouldn't be, in the long stretch of things--children are meant to outgrow the safe haven of their parents--but I would care for her until the day she left me behind.

The ruckus caused by Amy's announcement of her Firstborn status and subsequent departure was finally clearing. Someone clapped their hands, the sound louder and more carrying than it could have been without magical amplification. I caught no ripple or scent of magic in the air, and blinked, glancing up to find the Luidaeg standing in the square center of the room.

Perhaps she had known that Amy was intending to reveal herself after all these centuries of secrecy; perhaps she had seen it in the dancing of the waves. The Luidaeg was always Firstborn, whether she chose to remind the world or not, and usually, she elected for "not," dressing modestly and unobtrusively, wearing a face and mien that would have been more than suited to a purely mortal teenager.

Not so now. Her face, while it was still recognizably the one she wore most often, glowed from within with a terrible beauty, like someone had tried to put a face to the deepest, most treacherous reaches of the sea, and she was gowned in what appeared to be a slice of that same ancient water. It moved around her, flowing ever downward without moving an inch, and broke into white and shattered foam around her feet. Her hair, longer than it was in her daily life, streamed loose and black along her back and shoulders, blending with the--could it even be called "fabric" when it was so clearly captive and enchanted water?

Her smile was very full of teeth.

"As for the rest of you, please remain where you are," she said, not a trace of mockery in her tone. "I am Antigone of Albany, better known as the sea witch, or the Luidaeg, and it is my honor to stand before you now and conduct a wedding that has been a very long time in the coming."

She paused, directing a glance in my direction. My throat clenched, and I answered it with the very smallest of nods. Yes. Yes, this was what I wanted; yes, this was the time for it. If we waited, I would never find the nerve again.

The Luidaeg smiled--for me--and that was almost as unbelievable as August's impossible, improbable choice. Voice somewhat gentler, she asked, "Will Patrick Twycross-Lorden, late of Tremont, currently of Saltmist, please step forward?"

Patrick stepped out of the crowd surrounding the queen, his tunic and trousers melting into a well-fitted suit that I recognized all too well as one that I had designed for him, back when we both attended upon the Court of King Gilad. Whether it was the same suit or an illusion mattered not at all. Either way, he had remembered it, and saw fit to wear it now.

The only change he had seen fit to make was the addition of the arms of Saltmist above his heart, bright against the burgundy and brown fabric, and I wholeheartedly approved.

The Luidaeg nodded her own approval. "Will Dianda Lorden, Duchess of Saltmist, please step forward?"

Dianda moved forward to take Patrick's hand, and while her clothing didn't change to match his, it didn't need to. Her gown wouldn't have been out of place in the days when she and Patrick started courting, being cut to a late Victorian ideal, with a tight bodice descending to a straight-lined skirt. The whole thing made of watered satin in an ombre of blue, purple, and green, echoing the colors of her scales, and the skirt extended in a brief train as she walked--the only real nod to a modern wedding gown. She smiled at Patrick, and he

smiled back, and neither of them looked anxious, or unsure in the least.

I was anxious enough for all three of us. If this had all been some terrible, cruel trick--something my traitorous heart still insisted to be true in the small hours of the afternoon, when the knowe was asleep and the light through the water slanted into my room, pouring through the window like gilded honey--then this was their last opportunity to pull the floor from underneath my feet.

Then Patrick turned that smile toward me, the edges of it growing shy, and my anxiety slipped away. He wouldn't do that to me. Not my Pat. Not here, in front of all these people.

But if he didn't, I might have to admit he really loved me. I might have to admit someone *could* really love me, and I wasn't sure who I'd be on the other side of that admission.

I hoped a better man.

Eyes on the pair, the Luidaeg said, "Will Simon Torquill, once of Londinium, once of Shadowed Hills, please step forward?"

"Papa?" whispered August.

I kissed her forehead before peeling her carefully away from me, holding her hands until she stopped fighting me. Gently, I pushed her back enough to let me step away, and left her watching as I walked toward Patrick and Dianda, head held high, knees knocking, tension dancing over every inch of my skin.

My clothing changed as I walked, shifting to something near-identical to Patrick's, if somewhat more precisely cut. This suit, I could say for sure, was an illusion, based off an outfit that had been destroyed a century and more previous. The materials I was basing the illusion upon were dear ones; a lock of his hair, a handful of Dianda's scales, a woven braid of seagrass and yarrow. It would do.

When I reached Patrick's free side, I stopped, taking his hand. He squeezed my fingers to still their trembling, and I swallowed, trying to force down the lump in my throat, which was so hard it hurt.

"Land and sea are not often joined," said the Luidaeg, looking sternly at the three of us. "Shipwrecks are more common than survivors. Why should Faerie honor your request to expand your bridal bed?"

"Simon Torquill is the only person in this world I've loved longer than I've loved my wife. She has never had the whole of my heart, nor has she pursued it," said Patrick. "We would have included him when we were first wed, had he not been married to a woman who didn't share."

"I knew when I allowed Patrick to court me that he came as a package deal with the man he called 'brother' only because Amandine forbade him to use the word 'lover,'" said Dianda. "I've survived a century in the Undersea with a Daoine Sidhe by my side. I can handle a few centuries more with two of them."

We had discussed what we were going to say before we came here, but now, with the Luidaeg's eyes on me, all those pretty words fled, leaving me alone. I swallowed, glancing down at my feet, and said, "I don't have a good argument for you. I can only tell you that I've loved Patrick Lorden longer than I've loved anyone else, except for Amy, and I can't be with Amy anymore. I need a place to rest. I need peace. Dianda and I may not love each other yet, but I have faith that we will. Just give us the time we need."

"Are your sons in attendance today?" asked the Luidaeg.

Dianda nodded. "They are."

Dean, who was standing with his paramour in the crowd behind us, called, "I'm here."

Off to the side, the higher, surlier voice of Peter called, "I'm here as well."

The Luidaeg looked from one of them to the other, eyebrows raised, and asked, in an honestly curious tone, "Do you think I should allow your parents to wed another?"

"I do," said Dean. "As the one with a right to claim offense against the man, I think the punishment he deserves is my mother."

I managed, somehow, not to wince.

"If they want to, I don't see why it's up to me," said Peter.

The Luidaeg nodded. "Very well." She finally, terribly, turned her attention fully to me. "Your daughters are here. Do you think they'll agree to your remarriage when your divorce still hangs in the air?"

"I already agreed," called October, sounding surprisingly chipper about the idea.

"I...I can't," said August. "But I can't say no, either. I just want my father to be happy."

"This will be a harder one to end," said the Luidaeg, a warning note in her voice, eyes locked firmly on mine. "Divorce is complicated when there are three lines to choose between. The children you each already have will be bound only to the parents they've known; the children yet to come will have hard decisions to make."

"This marriage isn't ending," said Dianda. "Now will you marry us or not?"

Patrick squeezed my hand harder, and I was sure he was doing the same with her, keeping her from leaping into battle--something she was charmingly prone to attempt, especially when the honor of one of her chosen family was in question. That she was now willing to defend me as one of her own was alluring beyond all measure.

"I will," said the Luidaeg, smile blooming like a rose on the vine. "The three of you have presented a compelling case for why this should

be permitted, and love is rare enough in Faerie that I trust you to nurture and care for it. Dianda, if you'd lied and claimed to already love him, I would have denied you, but you want to tend a garden as yet fallow, and I respect your ambition. Patrick, you have been faithful to two people for over a hundred years. Simon, beloved failure..." She hesitated then, eyes once more seeking mine. In them I saw pity, and pain, and most of all, absolution. She had finally, after all these years, forgiven me. That was almost more miracle than my impending marriage. "You deserve the chance to rest. By the power once granted to me by my father and never yet rescinded, I now declare you husbands and wife."

Patrick yelped with delight, a small, wordless sound that filled the room with light. He turned to Dianda, hand still clasping mine, and kissed her, long and lingering. Then he turned and did the same to me, his lips pressed softly to my own. I had known a kiss would be involved in the ceremony; now that Faerie had moved beyond demanding blood magic as a part of nuptial vows, it was the easiest and least invasive form of binding.

I still stiffened at the press of his lips. He had been so respectful of my boundaries since I had finally managed to give voice to them, giving me all the space I needed to continue the slow, difficult work of putting myself back together after the damage done to me by Eira, Oleander, and even Amy. Firstborn and their weapons. Cruel women with cruel hands.

They had taken so much from me, some of which I would never have back again. They would not taint my second wedding day. I relaxed and kissed him back in earnest, allowing myself a moment's peace. I kissed him like I had never been damaged, like I was still a man with no scars, either visible or hidden, and after a moment's surprise, Patrick kissed me back with equal fervor.

"May I?" murmured Dianda, who was suddenly somehow beside me. I nodded, still kissing her--still kissing *our*--husband, and she settled one hand on each of our shoulders, uniting us in a circle. Patrick finally broke away from me, and we were both laughing as we rested

our foreheads together, and Dianda was laughing with us, and we were connected, we were a *family* as I had never thought to belong to again.

They were going to keep me.

They were going to take me home.

#

I don't know how long we stood there, our laughter the only way the mixture of joy and relief could escape our bodies--a heady blend, to be true, but not, I thought, one that was meant to be contained for longer than it already had been. Of the three of us, Dianda was the best positioned to see the rest of the room. She stood abruptly straighter, although she didn't pull her hands away.

"I think the respite's over," she said. "Simon, someone wants to speak with you."

There were many people she could easily have been referring to, and almost none of them would be pleasant encounters. Laughter smothered by returning wariness, I turned, and met pale golden eyes, the color of water white honey. I knew those eyes better than I knew my own, although they hadn't been so shadowed the last time I had seen them clearly.

Finally, I pulled away from Patrick, and to his credit, he let me go, although Dianda's hand remained resting lightly on my shoulder, gripping just tightly enough to remind me that I was not alone. That I would never be alone again.

"August," I said, smile pulling my lips upward despite my growing anxiety. "My dearest girl, are you come to congratulate us?"

Maybe it was a foolish question. *Absolutely* it was a foolish question. In the moment, with my wife to my back and my husband behind me,

looking at the face of my long-lost little girl, it was the only question I had.

Not such a little girl anymore, either. She had been more than a child when we lost her, when she had faded into the mists and vanished, but Amy had kept her so sheltered and controlled that she had still walked with a child's innocence, a child's graces. The years since that day had clearly been less than perfectly kind. She stood now with the wariness of one who understood to the base of her bones how dangerous the world could be, how cruel, and had yet to make her peace with it.

She looked at me with a stark challenge in her face that was less her mother and more my long-lamented sister, sweet September, may the rose and the thorn cradle her sweetly. "You're not supposed to leave me," she said, each word sharply bitten off.

I blinked. "I assure you, my darling, I have no intention of doing so."

"No? Then your mermaid and your maritime swain are intending to come and live above the waters?" August shook her head, frustration clear in her expression. "They won't. They can't. You're leaving me."

This was something I hadn't considered. "August, poppet, when we were making our plans for this day, we knew there was no possible way you'd choose me above your mother. She's your First. She knows what you're capable of, and has the power to teach you how to control it better. I'm sorry I didn't consult with you about today's design. I had no way of talking to you without her listening in."

"I *had* to choose you, Papa," she said, chin jutting out stubbornly as she glared at me. "She's had me locked in her tower since you gave me your way home. A *year*, Papa. I've been home for a *year*, and this is the most I've seen of the world outside her garden. I have a sister who hates me and barely knows me, I have cousins who might not even realize I'm alive--I've been a prisoner, and when I asked her how long she was going to keep the doors sealed, she said three

days for every day she was without me! I wouldn't have survived three hundred years locked away with no one else for company! I love you. I know you can't teach me as well as she could, but I also know you'd never make a prisoner of me because I disappointed you."

The urge to apologize for Amy rose in my chest, reflexive and powerful. I had been making apologies for her for so very, very long. I didn't have to do that anymore. Dianda's hand still rested on my shoulder; the scent of Patrick's magic still lingered in the air. No matter what else happened today, they weren't going to abandon me. These were the people who had seen me at my worst, and chose to love me anyway, despite the danger it could put them in, despite it risking the wrath of my now ex-wife, Oberon's own daughter. I was safe.

Now I had to find a way to help my daughter be the same.

"I have no authority in Saltmist beyond that extended to me by my lady wife," I said, slowly. "And as we had no expectation that you might choose me, we have yet to discuss this."

"And we don't need to," said Dianda, taking her hand from my shoulder as she stepped forward, stopping when we were even. "Hello, August. It's been a long time."

"Your Grace," said August, with a formal inclination of her head. "It's an honor to be remembered."

"So the manners took with this one, huh?" asked Dianda.

I snorted, earning myself a sidelong glance from August. "Your younger sister received much of the same etiquette training you did, when she was a child," I explained. "It was somewhat less effective in October's case."

"Which is like saying a pleasant breeze is somewhat less destructive than a typhoon," said Dianda. "She's a blunt instrument, your sister."

August bristled. "I apologize for knowing my place."

"Kid, your place is daughter of my husband. That makes you a part of my family. If Simon wants to bring you back to Saltmist with us, you're welcome. We don't have a room for you, since we didn't know you were coming, but we have guest quarters for visiting air-breathers, and it wouldn't be hard to set something up. It's up to you."

I glanced at Dianda, awestruck with hope. This was more than I could have asked her for, even on--or maybe especially on--our wedding day.

August, however, looked skeptical. "What's the catch?"

"Well, for one thing, you say you chose your father--good call, by the way, he's a way better person than your mother is, and while I won't go out of my way to insult her in your presence, I won't lie about my feelings, either--because your mom was keeping you locked in her tower and not letting you see the rest of the world. If you come home with us, you won't be locked in, but you'll have a hard time leaving." Dianda looked at her gravely. "Saltmist is miles below the sea, and on the other side of two gates, first into a shallowing, then into the Summerlands. You won't be able to leave unless someone escorts you to the surface, and you won't be able to return without the use of a potion you'll have to trust someone else to brew for you."

"Papa?" August looked at me. "Do you help with the brewing?"

"I'm...I'm starting to," I said. "I'm still out of practice, but I want to contribute."

"So I can either stay here and be homeless, risk Mom deciding that you leaving means I can be hers after all, or, I don't know, go and beg October for a bed, which she probably wouldn't be willing to give me, not really knowing me for anything other than a ratbag who attacked her the first time we met, or I can go with you under the

sea, where I'm allowed to leave, it's just not going to be easy. Is that the slope of it?"

I nodded. "Essentially, yes."

"Then, please, Papa. Please." August bit her lip, and I realized there were tears welling in her eyes, like she expected that I would refuse her. "Please let me come home with you. I don't want to be kept locked up, but I don't want to be alone, either, and at least you'll open the doors if I ask."

"Oh, poppet," I sighed. "Of course I want you to come home with me. I've never wanted anything more."

With a hiccupping sob, she fell into my arms, and I closed them around her, holding her as closely as I could. The smell of campfire smoke and roses boiled off her skin, magic rising in response to her relief, and I pressed my face into her hair, and I held onto her like she was the best wedding gift in the world, like she was everything I ever could have wanted.

I was, as the Luidaeg so gleefully reminded me, a failure, the least and lowest of the Torquill siblings. How had I come to deserve this night? How could I possibly be worthy?

August cried against me, and I held her, and it wasn't until Patrick touched my arm that I realized I was crying too, and we were together, we were going home together, and I was going to survive.

Somehow, after everything, I was going to survive.

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A proper pureblood wedding is a confection of pomp and circumstance, ritual and response. There's an art to them, one that Amy brought fully to bear for our own marriage. At the time, I had taken it for a great compliment, that she was willing to go to so much trouble on my behalf. Now, with the wisdom of distance, it struck me

more as a display of dizzying self-absorption on her part. A day when she could play the princess she was, without being denied by the veils of falsehood and misdirection she had to maintain in our daily life.

This wedding was...different. Not only had it been conducted by the Luidaeg with very little preamble and none of the expected trials, but of our guests, only the Queen and the boys had realized they would be attending a wedding at all. The rest had been expecting a divorce, nothing more. As if a divorce were not event enough!

Queen Windermere was a dutiful liege, however, and for all that she had little expected to be hosting such an event before our arrival and request for permission--all contingent on the divorce going as intended, which, thankfully, it had--she had set her household staff to the task of feeding the assemblage as soon as that permission was granted. August had dried her eyes and was standing without my arms to hold her up by the time the head of the Queen's guard and her seneschal wheeled out a large cart, on which teetered a tiered cake done in a surprisingly modern mortal fashion. I blinked.

"I spent about as much time in the mortal world as your elder daughter spent absent from it, almost to the day," said Queen Windermere, from directly behind me. I flinched, turning to look over my shoulder. She was standing there, looking smugly pleased with herself, arms crossed over her chest and not a hair out of place. Teleporters can be tedious dinner companions. "If you wanted something made of boiled sugar, with a plum center, you should have gone to another court to be married."

"No," said Patrick. "This is...this is perfect."

The cake was frosted white, decorated with ripe berries and sculpted chocolate seashells, the sides accented by spun-sugar pearls. I blinked at his tone, returning my attention to the cake. Dianda had one hand pressed to her mouth and was staring at it, wide-eyed.

"The Chatelain keeps a record of every banquet and ball hosted here, and the menus for same," said Queen Windermere. "We have a different Chatelain now than we did in my father's day, of course, but the records are still accurate. We last served this cake on the night when Duke Morcan brought his daughter to be presented as the new Duchess of Saltmist, and a Daoine Sidhe Count brought his best friend, the Baron, to flirt with any appropriate potential partners. According to the records, all three of you were seen eating a reasonable quantity, and seemed to enjoy it well enough."

"I did," said Dianda, lowering her hand. "I mean, we did. Patrick and I. We sat in the kitchen and ate cake and he had no idea who I was, and I thought that was the sweetest thing I'd ever experienced."

"August and I shared a slice while her mother wasn't looking," I volunteered. "Amy never liked August to eat anything that might stain her clothing." Under the icing, I knew, the cake would be rich dark chocolate, layered with cream and more berries, their juices rich and sweet, designed to spoil a white dress like the one August had been wearing that night--like the one she was wearing now. I grinned at her, feeling suddenly as if the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. "You can have your own slice of cake today, my lovely, for no one will tell you otherwise."

"And you'll not be sharing with your father," said Dianda firmly. "The groom gets his own."

"Both grooms," said Patrick, and pulled me with him toward the cake, Dianda following after, laughing. August trailed at the rear, not a part of the wedding party but very much a part of the family.

Queen Windermere was waiting beside the cake when we reached it, a knife in her hand, which she offered to Dianda as the highest-ranking of the three of us and thus the one most deserving of the first opportunity to stab something. Dianda took the blade with a feral smile, flipping it over to study its edge before she nodded, said, "This'll do," and sliced into the cake.

Being a cake, it offered no resistance. Peter cheered. I cast a smile in his direction, and found that he was keeping company with Dean and Quentin, who were watching the cake cutting intently. Nothing like sweets to attract an audience.

October and her betrothed were elsewhere in the crowd, watching the whole scene with near-matching indulgent looks. No tears from that quarter, then, and as we were clearly in view, if October had wanted to seek sisterly bonding, she would have come over by now. Dianda offered me a plate of cake. I took it, and held it as she passed another to Patrick, and a third to August.

"Come, boys, sugar awaits your pleasures," she cajoled, and was promptly swarmed by her two sons and October's squire, all of whom were quite eager for cake. When they retreated, she claimed her own, and the free-for-all began as everyone else clustered forward to get their portion. It was very nearly overwhelming. My fingers tightened on my plate.

"The garden?" asked Patrick, voice close to my ear.

I managed, through my surging anxiety, to nod, and then his hand was at the small of my back, easing me away from the crowd, his other hand beckoning for August to follow us. She did so willingly enough--who else would she have had to talk to?--and together we stepped out into the cool evening air of what I still saw as Gilad's garden, even as it belonged to his children now.

He had been a good man, and a good king, and under other circumstances could have been a good friend to me, and because of the timing of his death, I hadn't even been allowed to mourn him. My keeper had had other things she wanted me doing, and had refused me the grace.

And of course, her other favorite toy had been the one to have the killing of him, meaning it might have been awkward if she'd allowed me the luxury of grieving. Oleander had never been fond of reminders that the people she cut down so cavalierly had been

people, capable of forming bonds and being missed when they were gone. She had always wanted to think of them as things, there for her to sweep aside.

Once we were outside, the jacarandas and honeysuckle perfuming the air while owls called in the distance, the bands that had been forming around my chest relaxed, and I could breathe again. I cleared my throat and looked up, finding both Patrick and August watching me with some concern.

"You don't have to stay places where it pains you for our sake," he said, almost chiding.

"I couldn't run out on the cutting of my own wedding cake," I said. "That was for my own sake, no one else's. I have to be...I have to be able to be myself, even in the aftermath of what's been done to me. Else what's the point?"

"The point is that we love you," said Patrick, moving toward one of the small stone tables scattered around for those seeking a moment's peace to eat during a ball. He had always been skilled at finding the quiet places, the spaces where he could be outside the main chaos of an event. I followed him, and August followed me, and in short order the three of us were seated with our cake, which looked as lovely now as it had then, on the night when I had unwittingly introduced my best friend to his bride.

August stabbed uneasily at her cake with the edge of her fork, casting sideways glances at Patrick. He looked calmly back.

"Ask," he said, finally. "I would prefer we not begin this association with things unsaid."

"Why did you marry my Papa?" she asked, putting her fork entirely down.

"Because I wanted to. Because I've loved him for longer than I haven't, and living this past century without his company was painful

in ways I haven't got the words for. The fae are built to live forever, but that doesn't mean time doesn't weigh on us. You must know that, if you wanted to escape three hundred years alone with your mother."

"I spent most of the last hundred alone in Annwn," she said, glancing down at her cake. "It wasn't fun. I didn't enjoy it. I want...I want people now that I'm back. I want people, and I want things to *happen*. I want to be there while there are courts and parties and-- and *people*. I can't do alone anymore."

"Won't this be fun?" asked Patrick, of no one in particular. "A man who thinks he doesn't deserve the company of those who love him, and a girl who doesn't want to be alone. Well, I told Di this was going to make things interesting when she suggested it as a solution. I suppose it's nice to be proven right."

"Wait." I blinked, leaning away from him. "You mean this wasn't your idea?"

"Simon..." Patrick hesitated. "I was never the witty one, or the quick one, or the clever one. I was never *you*, no matter how much I sometimes wanted to be. I loved you even then, when we were the careless boys of San Francisco, when you had your Amy and all seemed right with the world. In the days before the woman who would separate us--"

"Don't say her name," I said hurriedly.

Patrick looked at me like I had just said something completely foolish. "In the days before *she* got her claws into you and began pulling you away, I loved you, and it seemed you didn't love me. What did I have to offer that your Amy lacked?"

"Sanity," I said. "Softness. The ability to love me as a partner, not keep me as a pet. So many things."

"And how many of them did you see, when we were those men? How many of them could you possibly have admitted?"

I looked away.

Patrick sighed. "I thought as much. I loved you, Simon, but you were happy, and wanted nothing of my love. So I found my Di, and you helped me court her and catch her--or be caught by her, I suppose--and we've been happy. We have two sons. We have a good life. I would never have risked damaging it. Not even for you, beloved as you have always been."

I swallowed, still looking away. Turning my face back toward him felt like an effort too great to be undertaken.

"My lady has always been braver than I am. She was the one to remind me that she knew I loved you when she married me, and that she had never tried to chase my love of you from my heart."

"That's because unlike *some* people, I know how to share," said Dianda, dropping into the open place at our table. "Don't look so nervous, Simon. I'm not leading a charge. Peter's basically tangled in the same net as his brother, and the two of them are having cake with Quentin and October. We'll probably see them when it's time to swim away, and not before."

She untensed, then, as the smell of waterlilies and amber oil briefly filled the air. I felt her flukes brush against my ankle.

"I, on the other hand, had to stop mingling and listening to the mixture of congratulations and politely worded 'clearly there is something wrong with you'-s that was on offer inside before my legs vanished between one step and the next. I can maintain them for a long time. I can't do it forever."

"Longer, now, than you could when we met," said Patrick.

"It's almost like I've had cause to practice." She smirked as she turned to look at me. "Simon. Yes, this was my idea, but only in the sense that Patrick wouldn't allow himself to consider it before he knew that I wasn't going to disapprove. He's a loyal one. To both of us."

"Always has been," I said, struggling to meet her eyes.

"Then you understand that he would never have gone along with my suggestion if he didn't love you well enough to take the risk. If he'd loved you any less, he would have said 'no, things are good and I'm happy, we'll find another way to save our friend.' Instead, he was very enthusiastic about the idea. If I'd been offering just to be kind, I might have been offended, he was so enthusiastic about it. And now you're stuck with both of us."

"And gladly so, fair lady wife," I said. "I have stolen the greatest treasures of the sea."

She laughed. "You see, your tongue will come back to you with time. You're already remembering how to flatter. And if anyone's been stolen here, it's you, Baron Torquill. You're to be swept away beneath the waves, and kept by a mermaid who has no intent of letting you go."

I opened my mouth to protest, then stilled and settled. That discussion could wait until we were safe at home in Saltmist, far from the land and any lingering influence of Amy. I finally allowed myself to look back to Patrick.

He was watching me with sympathy and aching tenderness in his eyes, and it made me want to lean across the table and kiss him as he had never been kissed before.

I might never be prepared for anything more than the kisses shared by the unwed at harvest balls, but it seemed that kissing was once again something my body and mind were willing to agree upon as worth doing on a reasonably regular basis. That was a pleasant

development, and one better left explored outside the company of my child.

Instead, I forced my shoulders to relax and forced my lips to smile, and took another forkful of cake. Patrick nodded, very slightly, and turned his attention back to August.

"To your question: our Simon has never done well alone, and we fully expected you to choose your mother's company, for all the reasons I know he's already shared with you. That he must divorce her was absolute fact: that we couldn't leave him here without protection was equally true. October is to wed soon, and begin her own household--"

"As if she hasn't already," interjected Dianda. "That girl collects people like spindrift from the beach, and she won't be happy until every room is packed to bursting."

"--and so we didn't expect her to be able to care for him. We might have preferred a longer courtship, to make him feel less as if he had no choice in the matter, but then again, we might not have. He tried to talk us out of loving him several times before today."

"I only wanted you to understand what you were doing," I protested. "To take a villain to your bower is no small decision."

"Which is why we didn't make it lightly, and now you're married to us," said Dianda. "Congratulations, you failed to talk yourself out of the best thing that ever happened to you--except for the girl, of course. I think we're going to like her."

"Good?" ventured August.

Dianda laughed. After a moment, I joined in.

"We were concerned," said Patrick. "That if we convinced him to divorce Amy without immediately asking for his hand, we'd leave him here and he'd find a way to get entangled with another of the

Firstborn. At least in Saltmist, he'll be out of reach of the bulk of the ones we know of, and I doubt Amphitrite would see fit to torment him. She seemed to like me well enough."

"So you married my Papa to protect him from my mother?"

"Yes," said Dianda, bluntly. "Or say rather that we stole him from the land to protect him from your mother. We married him because Patrick loves him, and I think I could easily learn to love him, and we decided we wanted to keep him. It's easier to keep someone when they're already married to you. Takes the edges off the arguments, you understand."

"No," said August.

Patrick leaned toward her. "It's easier if you just agree. Say that you understand and she'll get all calm and accommodating. Make her explain herself and she's likely to keep us here all morning."

"I will not," protested Dianda. "I'll move us down to the coast and into the water, like sensible people."

"You just want to get us underwater where we can't argue," said Patrick.

She shrugged, beaming. "Can you blame me?"

"I suppose not," he said, and ate a bite of cake.

This was all so...easy. Not complicated, not regimented, and most of all, not *cruel*. They teased, but I never got the feeling they did so because they didn't care for one another's company--and knowing that they would tease in front of me, that they would tease *me*, made it all the sweeter. I put my arm around August, leaning in and pressing a kiss against her temple. She turned to look at me, pale eyes gone wide.

"Well, my dear one?" I asked. "Are you sure it's the depths of the sea for you?" More than anything, I wanted her to say yes. I wanted her to confirm that she was coming with us, that she was coming with *me*. That she was going to stay.

Hesitantly, she nodded.

"Yes, Papa," she said. "I'm not a child any longer. You'll have to learn to let me go when and where I will, within the Duchess's pleasures. But I can't stay here, and I missed you so very, very much. Please, can I come home with you?"

"All our children are forever welcome in Saltmist," said Dianda. "Of course you can come home with him."

And that, such as it was, was that.

#

The rest of the reception passed pleasantly, and with a remarkable quickness. We ate our cake; we spoke of little; we responded with civility if not enthusiasm to interruptions, of which there were surprisingly few.

The reason came clear as dawn approached, when October came all but swaggering into the garden, a pleased expression on her face and the King of Cats following along behind. He looked less smug than she did, which was no small trick, given his essentially feline nature.

"We've kept them off you as much as we could, but I have to get home," she said, no preamble. "I'm a growing part-mortal girl, and I need my sleep."

"As the one who suffers most directly if she doesn't get enough rest, I'm afraid I have to agree," said Tybalt. He bowed his head to me, formally polite. "It is an odd relief to see you with a clear path before

you, Simon. Your sister would, I think, be very pleased if she were here to know that you have finally found your way."

I blinked. "That's very kind of you to say."

"She worried about you," he said, and nothing more.

October kept her focus on myself and the Lordens, steadfastly not looking at her sister. That was fair, I supposed, as August was equally not looking at her, but off into the foliage, pretending to study some bud or blossom. "Turns out people who really just want to ask nosy-ass questions about your future sex life are pretty easy to distract with a hero of the realm who really, really *needs* to be told how to handle her own wedding," she said. "So that's my wedding gift to the three of you: nobody got the chance to ask, although wow did they ask *me* some shit." She made a sour face.

Beside me, August made a small, almost inaudible sound of amusement, still not looking around.

"We do appreciate it, my dear," I said, rising. "It's been a long night, and we should be retiring to Saltmist in our turn. August will be accompanying us."

"Will she?" For the first time, October looked directly at her sister, one brow quirked upward in what could have been either curiosity or amusement. "Mom know that?"

"I chose Papa in the divorce," said August, sounding subdued. She didn't turn. "Saltmist seems the best place for me now."

"Huh," said October.

"Toby," said Dianda. "I just married the man you declared your legal father, so that means I'm kind of in a sideways parental role to you now."

"Because that's not weird as hell," muttered October.

"You're telling me. Anyway, August is going to be living with us, and I think she *needs* a little sideways parental support more than you do right now, so if you could not start something that I'm going to feel morally obligated to finish, I would really appreciate it."

"If you ask me to call you 'Mom,' I'm going to laugh at you, but sure," said October. "Anyway, we're heading back to the house, and Quentin wanted to know if you were planning to ask Dean to come back Undersea with you. Apparently, they want to sit up until noon playing video games with Chelsea and Raj. How did I wind up running a daycare?"

"Not all the lessons you learned from your first mentor were terrible ones," I said, gently. "We appreciate your efforts, and everything you've done to bring us to this point. This--none of this--could have happened without you."

"Pray, don't remind me," said Tybalt, expression darkening. "What she did for your sake...I would have killed you, had it not been so quickly resolved."

"And I would have allowed it," I said, solemnly. "What she did was more than any child should ever do for a parent, acknowledged or not, and I will be working for the rest of my life to be worthy of it. But this is a happy night, and there should be no place here for regrets."

"Dean is free to go with his little leman; we'll have a celebration for the family in a few tides time, and he'll be expected to attend." Dianda rose, on legs again, her dress falling to hang around her ankles as if she had possessed them all along. She smiled at Tybalt and October. "This was good. I'd say we should do this more often, but I'm not planning to do it ever again. Maybe we can spend the evening being antisocial at yours."

October looked briefly terrified. I managed not to laugh as I turned and offered my hands to August.

"We'll away, then," I said. "Please give our regards to Dean."

"And send Peter to meet us," said Patrick. "I'm surprised he hasn't dried out already."

To my surprise, October looked guilty. "We threw him in a decorative fountain when he started sprouting scales," she said. "He's been in there for hours."

Patrick laughed, loud and joyous, and Dianda smiled as she placed a hand on my arm.

"Welcome to the family," she said. "Too late to back out now."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I said, and smiled at her.

And for once in my long life of lovely lies, I meant every single word.

#

August handled her first trip to Saltmist with about as much equanimity as I had, clinging to Peter's hand as he hauled her through the currents, eyes wide as she fought to take in the wonders all around her. He had insisted that, if he was to have a new sister, he would be the one to bring her home, and as Dianda had her hands full with her two husbands, she had readily agreed.

How odd, to include myself in such a count, and to allow myself to be considered family, even if only for now! How odd, further, that the wonders of this journey were no longer enough to command my full attention, which was divided between my best friend and new husband, the fanned flukes of my wife, and the wondering eyes of my daughter, who had chosen me--*me*, simple, useless failure that I was--over her Firstborn mother.

I must surely still be elf-shot and slumbering, for such nights as this did not come for men such as I had been, such as I must always be. But if this was all a dream, I was willing to allow myself to dream it for so long as it might last. Even my keeper would agree to that small indulgence, because it would hurt me all the more on waking. She

always did like for her torments to be innovative. This allowed me to torture myself without her direct intervention.

The palace loomed ahead of us, and as always, Dianda pulled Patrick and I inside and up the long corridor to the arrival pool that would grant us access to the air-filled level kept for our use. Patrick immediately got up to head for the basins kept to allow us to expel the water from our lungs. I sat in the pool, waiting for August and Peter to appear. We had a good twenty minutes remaining on the potion which allowed us to breathe beneath the waves.

The potion...

"If you'd trust me with a sample of your blood now that we're married, I might be able to come up with a better solution for the transition between land and sea," I said, to Dianda.

She blinked, lifting her eyebrows. "And here I was expecting your acknowledgment that I married you too to start with kisses or flattery, not a request to bleed me. You're not your honorary daughter; what are you going to do with it?"

Not a direct refusal, then; that was good, to know I hadn't already overstepped. "I may not be October, but I've always had far more skill with blood magic than dear Pat."

Patrick, preoccupied with clearing the water from his lungs and stomach, amiably flipped me off. I laughed, trying to hide my growing anxiety at the absence of the children.

"I've also got some small skill with transformation."

"I'm sure Dean and October would be happy to confirm that," said Dianda.

I winced. "I didn't mean--"

"I'm just playing with you. Please, continue."

"It's always been an interest of mine," I said. "It makes so little sense that it should be tied to flower magic, which stems from Titania, as she's the least protean of our ancestors, and yet it is, at least on some level. Given blood, my laboratory, and time, I may be able to find a path for borrowing the magic innate in your ancestor's gifts to you, and transform us, however temporarily."

Dianda blinked, clearly nonplussed. Patrick, on the other hand, turned, a broad smile on his face.

"Now you're thinking like the man I know," he said. "What better way to celebrate your freedom and your marriage than by planning for a better future?"

I smiled back at him, finally hoisting myself to the edge of the pool in preparation to stand, and paused as Peter's head broke the surface, followed by August's a moment later.

"There you are," I said. "I was beginning to worry."

"August wanted to look at the corals," said Peter, unrepentant. He swam to the edge of the pool, hoisted himself out, and stood, tail splitting into virtually normal legs. They retained patches of silver scales, and small fins at hip and ankle, his transformation forever slightly incomplete. Looking at his mother, he asked, "Can I go to my room now? It's late and I'm tired."

"Have you eaten anything apart from cake?" she asked. When Peter shook his head and glanced away, she sighed. "Ask Helmi to bring you something small, and yes, you can go to your room. Sleep well, my starfish."

He waved to Patrick as he went skittering out of the room, and I moved to help August stand. "Come, darling, the potion that carried us here will be done with us soon, and the discomfort will follow."

"Discomfort?" August blinked at me. "What kind of discomfort?"

"We haven't got gills, so the water has to flow through us if we're to breathe," I said. "Right now, your lungs and belly are full of it, and when the potion wears off, you'll either vomit or start to drown. We can expel it with slightly more decorum if we do so now."

"All right, Papa." August took my hand and I led her over to the basins, where we both busied ourselves with extracting the excess water from our systems. Patrick rubbed my back as I did so, and when I was finished, I straightened and did the same for August.

She smiled at me through the wet tangle of her hair. "And that's to be the passage, then, Papa?"

"When we want to come or go, we find a member of the Undersea who's willing to transport us," I agreed. "It's often Helmi, whom you'll meet shortly, or one of the other members of the staff. But as it takes them away from their duties, it's best if we not travel frivolously."

"Knowing that I *can* travel is enough for me, for now," said August. "But I'm afraid I haven't any dry clothing with me, and this dress wasn't meant for swimming. Is there a place I can go where there are towels?"

"I'm sorry," said Dianda, looking stricken. "If I'd known we'd be bringing you home, I would have had Hydor waiting for us, to pull the water away. We should be able to find her easily enough, if you think you can walk some small way before the discomfort becomes too much."

"Of course," said August, with the brittle politeness she had been so meticulously gifted by her mother. I offered her my arm. She placed her hand gently at the bend of my elbow, and together we followed Dianda out of the room, with Patrick bringing up the rear.

August gasped a little as the hall unspooled before us, but only a little; she had been well-schooled to the ways of seeming unimpressed with the world, first by her mother and then by her century spent absent. We would have to discuss that soon, she and

I; I was sure she had as many questions for me as I did for her, and all of them would be answered in their time. We had time now, finally. Maybe for the first time in our lives together, we *had* time. Amy wouldn't interrupt to drag her away for lessons or me away to pay attention to her; my former mistress wouldn't demand my attendance. Patrick and Dianda would have their claims on my time, of course, but they were parents. They would understand my need to be there for my daughter.

Her hand was warm against my arm as we walked, the four of us, stopping at a doorway that had no door, only a sheet of water hanging like a soap bubble in the air. Dianda looked back at the rest of us, smiled encouragingly, and stepped through the film, appearing on the other side obviously submerged. Her outline shimmered, shifted, and was replaced by her more natural aquatic form, gills opening and fins unfurling before, with a flick of her tail, she swam off into the depths of the room on the other side.

"We don't have many flooded rooms on this floor, but those we do have, it's not safe for air-breathers to enter; they're truly submerged. Not even air pockets at the top," said Patrick, speaking to August more than to me. She nodded, wide eyes still fixed on the shining sheet of water. Apparently reassured, he continued, "It was an adjustment for me when I first got here. learning the rules of the place, where I could go and where I couldn't. It would have been a relief to have some other air breathers already in residence, to help me out. The Selkies--now the Roane--used to come and go, but they never *lived* here. Everyone else is amphibious, to one degree or another."

"Pardon, but aren't the Roane amphibious as well?" I asked.

Patrick shook his head. "Not technically. They don't breathe the water, their magic pulls the oxygen out of it and lets them breathe *that*. No gills, no porous skins, just magic."

"Fascinating," said August.

Motion on the other side of the watery wall caught my eye, and I straightened as Dianda swam closer, her hair a floating cloud around her head. She was beautiful in the water as she was out of it, but before this unexpected and somewhat compressed courtship, I had never had the pleasure of seeing her so. To watch her now was a gift.

Her head emerged through the barrier, sending a ripple dancing across it. Unlike the three of us, her hair was already dry as she looked in our direction. "Hydor is willing to help," she said. "Do the three of you truly wish to be dry?"

"Please," said August, plaintively.

Dianda nodded and emerged the rest of the way, stepping into the hall. Two women followed close behind her, invisible until they pulled themselves out of the water. Both were tall, thin and pale, with skin roughly the shade of a waterlogged corpse and long blue hair that hung, sodden, around their faces. Their gowns were as white as August's, and as soaked as their hair, which was odd only because Dianda was perfectly dry. The pair looked at us, cocking their heads.

"Outside water only, if you please," said Patrick, in a civil tone. "The inside water is still ours to keep."

One of the women looked disappointed. The other simply shrugged. Both of them lifted their chins, imperious as queens, and the water that had soaked our hair and clothing began to run off of us, gathering in a pool at the center of the hall. When we were all three perfectly dry, it split itself into two matching halves, then flowed toward the two women, puddling at their feet for the long hems of their dresses to wick up onto their bodies.

"Shore water," said the one on the left.

The one on the right nodded. "Shore water, and tears, and deep sorrow," she said.

"It will wash away," said the first.

"Yes, it will wash away, with time. Wash your sorrows in the ocean and see them dissolve into spindrift and salt."

"You are very weary; you have traveled too far. It's time to stop, for a time."

"Stay, and remember what it is to be at peace."

The pair looked at Dianda then, faces equally serene. She bowed to them, shallowly.

"Your service is appreciated, and you are free to go," she said.

The two women turned at that, walking back into the wall of water and vanishing as soon as they were through.

"What was *that*?" asked August.

"Naiads, if I'm not mistaken," I said.

"That was Hydor," said Dianda.

August looked more perplexed. "Were they Naiads or Hydor?" she asked.

"Both," said Patrick, taking pity. "Naiads aren't big on individual names. They're made of water, like Undine, but unlike Undine, they have no physical anchor. So all the sisters of a given grouping will tend to take the same name, and these ones took the name 'Hydor.'"

"Oh," said August.

"They're very useful," said Dianda.

"I can see where they would be," I agreed. "The ability to dry things quickly when this far below the sea is nothing to dismiss."

August yawned, then looked ashamed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize--I wasn't expecting--is there a place I can sleep tonight? Please?"

Shame washed through me. I should have seen how tired she was. What sort of father was I, to have missed her discomfort for so long?

"Of course," said Dianda. "We'll see about getting a room of your own started for you tomorrow. For now, there's a spare room in the nursery complex, so long as you don't mind sleeping where Peter can wake you in the evening."

"That would be wonderful," said August.

"This way." Dianda started walking, clearly expecting the rest of us would follow.

In my limited experience, the Undersea seemed to treat architectural design as a form of agriculture. Their halls followed seashell curves, sinuous and organic, and their rooms were in little clusters off a single central chamber, as if they had been budded like coral. The door Dianda led us to was a familiar one. This was where Peter slept, nightly, and where his brother had slept until he left to become Count of Goldengreen on the land above. When opened, the door revealed a chamber very like the one I shared with his parents, large and circular, with six doors arrayed around the outside.

"The first is Dean's, the second two are Peter's, and the other three are open," said Dianda, waving a hand. "You should find a bed behind any of those."

"Your hospitality is deeply appreciated," said August, and whirled to embrace me briefly before taking herself away behind the first of the three doors Dianda had indicated.

"Do you think she'll want to share with Peter, or should we look into claiming one of the guest clusters?" asked Dianda. "And does it honestly matter before she's had time to settle herself?"

"I would think not." Patrick claimed and kissed one of her hands. "But she's right. It's late, and we're all weary."

"And wed, mustn't forget that," said Dianda.

"And wed," Patrick agreed. "Shall we be wed and soundly sleeping? It seems preferable, now that the children are sorted."

I sagged, suddenly exhausted by the weight of the last day settling on my shoulders like a cloak. "That would be *lovely*," I agreed.

"That's the problem with you Daoine Sidhe; no stamina," said Dianda. "Why do I keep hauling you home?" She folded her arms, only to ruin the effect with a bone-cracking yawn.

"Because your stamina matches ours quite nicely," suggested Patrick.

"Fine," Dianda relented. "To bed with us, then."

"Yes, to bed," I said. "And tomorrow, what wonders may we find."

"Decorating your daughter's room, most likely," said Dianda.

I smiled. "And won't that be a wonder?"

#

We walked the long loop of the hallway to our room in companionable silence, Dianda taking first my hand and then Patrick's. She didn't lead us, as we all knew the way, and didn't pull, but matched her pace to ours, making sure we would remember that we were united; that we were all here together, and not a one of us walked alone, nor would ever truly do so again. her skin was warm against my own, and the scent of mayflower and waterlilies perfumed the air, setting my long-troubled mind at ease.

Given time, we reached the door that led to our own cluster of rooms, and through, to the main chamber beyond. Dianda dropped

my hand, smiling sweetly. "Good night, Simon," she said. "Sleep well, and dream of us if it suits you. We'll still be married when we wake again."

I stepped closer to her, close enough to keep the ambient scent of her magic in the air. She stilled, eyes on mine, and remained so as I leaned in.

As I kissed her.

It was the first time I had sought a kiss from her in any context, chaste or otherwise--and while I may not have a vast library of kisses to reference from, I felt comfortable saying that this one was distinctly *not* chaste. I held it until she leaned into me, until I felt her body mold to mine, and only then did I pull back. Let it be done now, before I lost my nerve; let me try.

"If the bed is big enough, I would prefer to come with you," I said, voice low. "To sleep, mind; kisses and a kind embrace are the limit of what I can currently consider. But as it is our wedding night, I would prefer to spend it with the ones I choose, the ones who have chosen me."

Patrick stared at me, delight and gentle awe in his expression. "Are you sure?" he asked. "We've not--if we've given the impression that this was somehow expected of you, I swear, it isn't. It never would be."

"And that, my love, is why I can propose this." I looked between them, the two people who had chosen me--*me*--out of all of Faerie. The ones who were offering me home and harbor, if only I could be brave enough to claim it. "It's been so long since I was allowed to decide anything for myself. Even your proposal, sweetly meant as it was, carried with it the taste of fiat. But when I said I might never come to your bed, you left it open to me, and now, if you'll have me, I'd like to sleep beside you."

"Sleep only," Dianda said--not a question, but a confirmation. "And perhaps the natural shift of bodies seeking warmth."

"She's like sleeping with an iceberg," cautioned Patrick. "Cold scales on your skin are an unpleasant shock when you don't expect it."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. This time, I leaned over and kissed Patrick, who kissed me back without hesitation.

"You are a ridiculous man," I said, pulling away. "A glorious, ridiculous man. Will you have me?"

"I thought we already did," he said, and he smiled like the sunrise we were too far beneath the sea to witness, and while I might have thought before that I was, I hadn't been quite, not yet, but I was sailing into harbor.

I was finally on my way.