

The Stone Maiden



On the rocky beach below the villa on the cliff, there was a man who had been cast onto land by the waves. He had dragged himself up from the water and simply collapsed. From her balcony, Cecilia, in the villa, had watched him swimming and struggling in the surf, going under only to resurface and be flung further toward the beach each time, until, at last, through forces beyond his control, he had found himself coughing up water on sand as the waves pounded at his feet.

Cecilia noted his efforts, his will to make it, and she decided that it was an example of irony that his will had been less important than his luck. She watched him there on the beach, watched as the afternoon sun and the wind dried his hair and clothes, looked and considered what to do. She gazed out across the sea, wondering where his ship was, if it had sunk, or if he had been cast off it.

If she left him there, it would be no trouble, and, likely, he would die. But if she took him in, stray that he was, he would be company that was not carved but grown. It would be a change. She considered.

When it was nearly dark, she left the balcony, passed through her garden of statues and descended from the villa down through one of the passages through the cliff to the beach.

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There, she looked at him more closely. His hair was dark, his features refined. Despite his beaten and exhausted condition, he was handsome, as she had detected from above. She looked out to sea again, wondering what had become of his ship. She knelt and lifted him up, dirtying her white, linen gown, and carried him back up through the passages in the cliff.

“No man ever comes here of his will except to seek my secret or my death,” she told him, though he was incognizant, “but you do not appear to have arrived here of your own will.”

He came to not on the beach but in a bed with silks and furs over him and a pillow beneath his head. She had cleaned him up, and still he had not awakened. She had carried him from the baths to her bedroom, and still he had not awakened, but it was another day now, well into morning, and he awoke and looked up at her. His eyes were brown. She smiled at him to put him at ease, smiling the smile she had practiced while he had slept.

“Be at ease,” she said, “be at ease. You are safe. You are in my house.”

He seemed startled despite her gentle reassurance, but quickly found himself.

“I am grateful,” he said in a voice that was husky from sleep. He cleared his throat. “Thank you,” he said in a voice that was a pleasant baritone. He sat up in the bed.

“You are welcome,” she said.

There was a moment of silence. He looked around the room seeing that it was perfectly kept, like a guest room.

“You must be hungry, sir,” she said, finding that her voice was more factual than solicitous as she had intended. She tried to modulate her tones, seeking to remember how concern in a voice sounded. “Your clothes are clean now,

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and I have some food to prepare. Dress and then join me on the patio. We will eat and talk.”

He nodded his head with an expression on his face that she noted seemed confused. Again she stated, “You are safe.”

“Don’t you even want to know my name?” he asked.

She hadn’t thought of it. She had been something like content thinking of him simply as a “him” or an “other.” Almost wistful for that sort of feeling, she politely asked, “Yes, of course, what is your name, sir?”

“Rutgar,” he stated, “I am Rutgar.”

“I am Cecilia,” she stated in kind. She added, “You are on my island,” and then she left him to dress. In the kitchen, she conjured a quail, recalling that it was a common enough fowl eaten by people. She slew it with a very small spell bolt and then made it pluck itself, clean itself, stuff itself with herbs, and skewer itself on the spit over the fire she conjured in the hearth. It cooked quickly and thoroughly, but she did not allow it to burn.

“It smells very fine,” said Rutgar, standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

“I am glad you find it so,” she said. She, of course, smelled next to nothing.

They ate the quail at the table on the patio, and he told her his story. He was from the continent. He had been on a voyage to the Isles of Gold when his ship struck something, and he was cast overboard. He was in the water a long time and giving up hope when he saw the island and swam toward it. He remembered being cast up on the beach and then waking up in the bed.

She talked to him about the island, telling him of its trees and grasses and little creatures. She told him that the villa had belonged to her family from time out of mind, and

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now she was all that remained of her family. She told him that the many statues in the gardens and halls had been sculpted by great artists of bygone days. Some she had inherited. Some she had collected. Some she had been given.

They talked throughout the long afternoon.

He asked her if she lived alone.

She said that her servants were away. It was as hard to remember how to lie as it was to remember how to appear concerned. She had expected to feel some kind of pleasure in the company of another human being. Their conversation died quickly as she simply gazed away over the island's rolling hills.

"I must go now, Rutgar, we will talk again in the morning. You may sleep in the bed where you awoke."

He rose and bowed, saying, "You are a most gracious hostess. I thank you for your hospitality." He smiled, "Thank you for saving my life." With that, he retired as she had suggested.

She sat all night at the table on the patio, wondering where she would lie when she thought to dream. She had no other beds in the villa, having long ago given all the space over to artwork.

The next day came, and she summoned a hen to lay eggs for breakfast, and she summoned grain to turn into bread. It did not take long, and this time it was done before he awoke. They sat again at the patio table.

"You do a fine job cooking, my lady," he complimented her, "But I cannot imagine where you keep your livestock. It is so peaceful, and I do not hear the sounds of animals anywhere, with the exception of the gulls."

She assured him, "They are elsewhere."

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“Well, you have a fine talent, being able to act as cook and hostess at once. You show no signs of the effort, and you are always radiantly beautiful.” He smiled at her steadily as he said that, his brown eyes searching her face.

“You are too kind,” she said. She deemed it appropriate to smile back and did so, remembering that, even though she did not feel it now, it felt nice to exchange such smiles and compliments.

“You must have some magic to be able to do such things,” he persisted.

She paused before responding. It had been a long, long time since anyone had come to try and kill her. Surely, if such were his intention, he would have already attempted it. “Yes,” she admitted, saying it as she remembered light, flippant and meaningless things were said, “it must be some kind of magic.”

His eyes searched her a moment longer and then flicked away over the landscape. She suggested, “Let us take a walk, Rutgar, if you feel sufficiently recovered.”

“If you like,” he said.

She led him around the grounds of the villa, showing him the sculptures. She remembered the stories behind each one and told him them all, but when she arrived at the granite statue of herself, she deemed it best that he did not know the story. She simply said, “This one is of me.”

He was too polite to press her. When they arrived at the next one of her, the one in gray diorite, she simply breezed by saying, “Oh, that one is of me, but here, this next one is of Heracles.”

And again at the third one, carved out of jade, she brushed by only saying, “That was a gift from a friend.”

He did not ask about them, only commenting, “You are more slender, and I think your pale skin, black hair, and gray eyes suit you better than the green of this stone,” and

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she considered that it was better not to have been forced into another lie.

As they left the villa grounds and strode out into the grassy fields, she looked at him carefully, recalling again that he was what she had always considered as handsome. How long had it been?

It had been a very long time.

He asked her, "When will your servants return, my lady?"

She remembered that she had given him her name, but it seemed unimportant whether he used it or not. She answered him, "They will return, soon."

Perhaps she would conjure some for the morrow, so that he would be satisfied.

He changed the subject. "It is said by sailors, and fishermen, all along the coast of the continent, that there is an island out here, somewhere, on which lives a magic woman, a witch or a sorceress, like Circe, or Morgan Le Faye. She is said to be evil beyond compare and that in times past, she ruled all the islands out here as a tyrant, demanding sacrifice of human blood. It is said too that she has a treasure men have died for."

"It is said?" she asked, feigning ignorance some more, wondering if she was feigning it correctly.

"Oh, yes, it is said that she is as fresh and lovely as a girl just come of age, and as ageless and unchanging as a statue carved in stone. It is said that she can be harmed by neither weapons nor words and that she turns all who displease her and all her enemies into fish and flings them back into the sea over which they came to take her treasure."

"It is said?" she asked again, feigning, she thought, wonder. It seemed the appropriate response, if she remembered correctly.

"Yes," he said, turning to her, "it is said."

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“It is an interesting story.”

“Indeed,” he continued, “The treasure they seek from her is not gold or jewels, or anything of such economic value, but a secret knowledge.”

“How interesting,” she said.

There was a pause, in which he seemed to study her face then he continued.

“They seek the knowledge of her fresh and ageless state, her apparent immortality.”

“I see,” she said.

“Have you never heard of this legend?” he asked.

“No,” she lied, “never, but I have lived a very sheltered life.”

“I see.”

“Why is it that she has enemies?” she asked him.

It seemed to her that he took some time to consider the question.

“It has always seemed to me,” he said in a tone that she thought very measured, “that men want her secret and feel free to take it, because she is a witch. Witches are, according to all accounts, evil, so any good thing they have, is surely stolen. They think, I suppose, ‘What right has an evil being to a thing of good?’”

“I see.” She said no more, wondering if she would have to send him back into the sea.

“For my part,” he continued, “I think it a foolhardy adventure to chase after a witch’s secrets. Why not let her have what she has and remain on her island, far from us? What could motivate a man to seek more time than is allotted him by God, except a desire that is vainglorious and evil in itself? So the assumption that the witch’s possession of immortality is a good thing, is probably a wrongheaded assumption, to my mind. No, I would not seek her out for any reason, except perhaps to avenge a wrong.” He paused a moment, and in that moment, as they

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trod through the grass, she tried to read his expression, but was unsure of what the contortions upon his face might mean. Was he thinking hard on the question, or perhaps in the grips of some emotion? She was not sure.

He continued, "I might seek her out if she had slain my father or otherwise hurt my family, but I would not accept her treasure of secret knowledge were she to offer it to me." He turned to her, and it seemed that he searched her face.

She found herself perplexed and suspicious. "Is that all there is to the story?" she asked him.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is." He bowed to her. "I find myself tired, my lady. With your permission, I shall return to the bedroom and sleep."

"As you will," she said, knowing that, long ago, such a perplexing man would have vexed her terribly and caused her to change him into a fish and cast him into the sea. But no such vexation rose in her. She merely let him go on his way, invulnerable as she was.

He walked several paces away, then turned back to her and said, "You are beautiful, my lady. There is no arguing that, but I find your face strangely cold. You are as impassive as your likeness in stone."

He smiled, suddenly. "I do not mean to insult you, but I wonder at you."

"I am not insulted," she replied, honestly. "I wonder at you."

"You are unlike other people."

"If I remember correctly," she replied, "You are like other people. I do not hold it against you though, for you may also be different."

"Different?"

"I do not know. It is not an evil difference, I do not think."

"Isolated as you are, you may not know all the faces of evil."

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“Nevertheless, I do not suspect its presence, and, in times gone by, I knew the feel of evil.”

Another expression, whose import she no longer remembered, twitched across his face and lingered in his eyes.

“I bid you an early good evening. I retire.” He bowed.

“Good evening.” She nodded.

She watched him go, then turned and walked slowly after him, back toward her garden of statues. Still not vexed, but thinking hard, she considered him. He had described her story as well as anyone on the continent might have. Indeed, many men had come to seek the secret of her immortality. As time had worn on, she would have simply shared it, had she known it, but the secret was secret even to her.

She paused before the statue of herself carved in jade. It had been a gift, after all, and while she knew its function, she could not duplicate or even explain its working. The friend who had made the statues was a more talented user of magic than she.

She sat on a bench and stared at her likeness until the light was gone from the sky, then she stared into the dark.

Morning came and found her still upon the bench, and thus Rutgar found her also. She did not acknowledge him as yet, though she knew he was there.

He sat beside her, and, after a while, she heard him sigh.

“I have been thinking,” she said.

“As have I,” he replied.

“And what is it that you have thought?” she asked.

“I think that you are the witch in my story,” he said, not turning his head, “the one who ruled the islands, required

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blood sacrifice, and still lives, jealously guarding the secret of her immortality.

She replied, "I think that, upon a time, I must have slain your father or transformed him into a fish and cast him into the sea."

They sat on the bench looking forward rather than at each other.

At length, Rutgar asked, "What do we do now?"

"I do not know," Cecilia admitted, "you are no threat to me, and, though I am not sure, I think you are pleasant company."

"When I boarded the ship to seek your island," he said, "I had an enchanted sword that could pierce even the hardest stone."

"You lost it in the sea?" she asked.

"I think so. It was aboard the ship, but the ship must have sunk."

"I see."

They sat for a time in silence.

He asked, "What was he like?"

"Who?" she asked.

He turned to her, more emotion playing across his face, emotion she could no longer name, though she recognized fire in his brown eyes.

"What was my father like?" he asked.

"I am not sure," she said.

"Have so many men tried to kill you?" he asked, rising from the bench and staring down at her with those eyes.

"Very many," she admitted.

"It was thirty years ago," he said, "thirty years ago in the spring time."

She stared at him, trying to remember what anger felt like. Surely, he was angry.

"Is that how old you are?" she asked him.

"Nearly," he said, "I am nearly thirty."

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A nebulous shadow of longing filled her. “Do you want to kill me, Rutgar?” she asked.

He did not answer for a moment then said, “I don’t know anymore.”

“That is why you came here, though,” she said, staring up at him.

He did not look away, “It is.”

“I have no desire –” she began, but he cut her off.

“I can see that,” he said.

“To hurt you,” she finished.

“You feel nothing,” he laughed.

She looked at him and nodded slowly, impassively. It was true.

“I wanted to hate you, but I pity you instead, which angers me, for it is my duty to avenge my father by killing you.”

She felt a memory of something, but it was ineffable. She merely blinked and wasn’t sure if was simply time to blink or related in some way to that ineffable recollection.

“What I mean, and I think that you could never understand, is that your secret is its own punishment. Would that were enough to satisfy my blood, but I think it is not. If I had my sword, I would be honor-bound to pierce your cold heart with it.”

She did not feel cold, but a thought occurred to her. “Does the fact that I saved your life, and have thus far spared it, in any way mitigate the fact that I destroyed your father?” If this was curiosity, she was sure that it was only of an intellectual sort.

He regarded her with what she decided was pity, which might once have offended her, but now did not. He said, “If your action were motivated by any sort of good intention, then perhaps so, but I can see that the only motivation left to you in your pitiable state comes from boredom, and that has no nobility to it. You brought me up

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here with indifference, only because it was something to do at all.

“I see in my mind’s eye, lady, that you have spent weeks at a time sitting on this bench staring, or standing at your window gazing at the sea. You do not need to eat. You do not need to rest. Though you can move, you have no actual need to, and that dilemma is likely the only thing left to you at all. You long ago stopped craving the worship of the islanders you ruled, and stopped fearing the resentment of those who fear you, and the greed of those who covet your secret. You are a creature protected beyond need or use. If not for thought, you would be no different from these statues that surround us. Your destruction, could it be attained, would be a mercy to you, except that you do not know you are in misery.”

As she listened to his speech, she realized again, that he would have angered her in times past. Lacking the capacity for anger, she was unsure what sort of response was appropriate. She said, “What then, do we do? You do not have your stone-piercing sword. I have no desire to harm you and no need to defend myself. I think you would be pleasant company, if I could experience what was pleasant, but as it stands, you have been something to do, because I remember the days when I did things.”

Rutgar just shook his head.

“If it is an action you wish to take,” she said, “and it is action that I used to take, then perhaps we are made to take action. If this is so, I can solve the problem for both of us.”

He snorted derisively, “Have you remembered enough of yourself to threaten me, then?” he asked.

“I do not know,” she admitted, “but perhaps you are correct that my remaining source of motivation is boredom.”

“If it amuses you to transform me as you did my father, I cannot stop you, and it is an ironic fate.”

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She decided that perhaps it was appropriate to reassure him at this point, so she mimicked a smile as she stated, “I have a different idea.”

“Please stop doing that,” he requested, pointing at her face.

“Smiling?” she asked.

“Trying anyway, yes.”

“Very well.” She supposed that she had not been doing it properly.

He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

She chanted the proper spell to change him. His eyes grew wide as he felt himself altered. He gazed in what she assumed was wonder and maybe fear at his hands as the webbing grew between his fingers. Then he lifted those webbed hands up to his neck to feel the gills she had added to his neck.

She noted that the changes should be quite effective and waited for him to respond.

He knelt suddenly and began removing his boots. When he took off the first one, he saw that his feet had indeed grown webbing as well. He looked up at her with an expression she found it too hard to interpret.

“You want me to go find my sword?” he asked.

“It seems appropriate,” she said.

He shook his head as he stood, “Do you think this will alleviate your ageless boredom, Cecilia?”

“Of all the possible choices, I think it is one I would not have made in the past.”

“An experiment?” he asked.

“It allows us both to act.”

“Why would it concern you that I get to act?”

Concern? She could not remember what it felt like to be concerned for someone else, or at all.

“I am not concerned,” she stated.

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He shook his head and turned to go. "I will be back," he promised. His footsteps slapped away down the garden path.

She sat on her bench and waited.

It was not until darkness came again that she realized that time had passed.

It was not until light was coming again that she thought perhaps she was feeling a slightly different, ineffable memory of emotion.

She waited.

The day passed as days pass.

Another night came and went.

Around noon the following day, she remembered that by now a mortal would have been worried or anxious. She considered how long it should take to make an effective search for a lost ship on the floor of the ocean. She spent the afternoon and night calculating the variables before taking any further action.

She stopped when she heard slapping footsteps approaching. It was morning again. As she began to turn her head, the blade of a sword suddenly rested against her neck.

"Is this how you want it?" Rutgar asked.

He had approached so quietly that she had not heard him until he was very close. In days past, she would have never been so unwary.

"I asked you a question, Cecilia," he said.

"You did," she acknowledged. She considered the sword against her neck and felt the stirrings of something she recognized. She remembered the catch of breath and the rush of blood that came with the need for self-preservation. She remembered it, but vaguely. There was no repetition of it in the here and now. She eyed the sword

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blade that rested against her neck beneath her chin, analyzing its magical properties.

“Well?” he asked. “Does this in any way please you?”

It did not. She stated factually, “No.” Then she added, “Neither am I displeased, Rutgar.”

He changed the subject, “I find myself in a dilemma.” He held the sword firmly against her neck. Her eyes left the blade and wandered over the garden. The sword was barely sufficient to injure her. It was unlikely that it would pierce her enough to do serious harm. Responding to the vaguest of promptings from the memory of curiosity, she did not tell him. She let her gaze rest on the jade statue of herself.

“In what sort of dilemma do you find yourself?” she asked.

“I can kill you now, but, if I do, I will be left a fish man. I know of no means to alter this, other than to have you change me back. I know next to nothing of magic, Cecilia. I do not think it prudent to let you wave your hands and utter magic words at me.”

“Reasonably,” she suggested, “you should avenge your father, since you have placed this as more important than your life already.”

He circled around to her front, keeping the sword blade against her throat at all times. His hair and clothing were still damp from several days in the sea, but salt crystals were showing up on his skin and eyelashes. His expression was that of anger or outrage again, she guessed. “Is that the last desire left in you? You want to die?”

“No, I am merely pointing out what is reasonable for you.”

He stared at her, then slowly, looked away. “The prospect of death is less fearful to me than the prospect of a life bereft of human contact. Who would accept me like

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this?" He spread out the fingers of his left hand showing the webbing. He gestured at the gills in his throat.

"I suppose," she concluded, "that it would leave you in a similar situation to the one in which I have been placed."

He nodded, "I have no desire to kill my enemy only to become as isolated and inhuman as her."

She supposed that she might have smiled at him in days before, but she made no attempt as she stated, "You could wear a high collared shirt, keep your boots on your feet and gloves on your hands."

He laughed, "A masquerade."

"Would it not serve a purpose?"

"It would fool others, but how would I keep my shame from my wife and close friends? Is this how you intended it? Do you wish me to end your boredom, but for you to have some sort of vengeance on me anyway? You are still capable of pettiness. Perhaps there is reason to kill you, after all."

The attempt at curiosity was failing her. She let it go without regret. "The sword cannot do me real harm. You hold nothing over me."

His eyes narrowed.

"I will change you back, since that is what you seem to wish for. There is no dilemma."

"Do not make any move, Cecilia," he warned her.

She put a hand up to run it over the edge of the blade. Much faster than she thought a mortal could move, he flicked the sword hard and fast around catching her on the other side of her neck. Sparks flew from the blade and from her skin.

She felt.

Rutgar stepped back, looking at the notched edge of his sword.

Cecilia stood up, placing a hand on her neck. There was a chipped spot there beneath her fingers and an ancient

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feeling emanating from it. She took her hand away and looked at it. On her index finger was a tiny, red spot. It was hurt she was feeling then. It was extraordinary. A flood of memory rushed through her. She remembered pinpricks, stubbed toes, stings, aches, pimples, the accidental biting of the tongue when eating. After a clinical moment of analysis, she realized that she was probably feeling astonishment as well.

“Extraordinary,” she said.

She realized that Rutgar must have been feeling something similar. She realized that her face was contorted in an actual expression. Rutgar’s eyes narrowed again.

“You can still bleed,” he warned, leveling the blade at her again.

“Yes,” she said, noting that her voice was unsteady. Was she angry at him, or merely surprised? She wasn’t sure. Her eyes flicked to the jade statue. Her body was supposed to be harder and stronger than jade, granite, and diorite combined. She had only been harmed twice since the enchantment of the statues had been enacted. It had been so long ago.

She looked down the sharp, notched blade at Rutgar. Those narrowed eyes regarded her intently. Was it fear, wrath, desperation? She didn’t know. Without changing expression, he turned swiftly and thrust the blade into the jade statue, piercing it through the breast, straight where the heart would be. Sparks flew. Chunks and splinters of stone showered them both. The feeling of astonishment grew in her. The acuteness of the pain in her neck grew, and she noted that a red stain was spreading on the shoulder of her white gown. Was it rapture or agony? She was unsure. She stared at Rutgar. The sword was again leveled against her neck.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said.

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He was making her mortal again. She knew it. Dimly, she felt something lurch in her chest. A heartbeat? Something rolled down her brow into her eye. She blinked. It made her eye sting.

“Rutgar, I am afraid.”

He stared at her. “Take me to the other statues of you,” he ordered.

She stared back.

“Take me to the other statues,” he ordered.

She blinked and then turned, leading him away.

They arrived at the statue in gray diorite. He cut it in half from top to bottom in another flurry of sparks and scattering stones. She staggered under the weight of feeling. She could feel the sweat all over her body, the blood still oozing from the cut in her neck and running down her shoulder. She felt her heart beating in her breast.

She looked for Rutgar, but he was gone. She heard his slapping footsteps on the path ahead of her, then a great, shearing sound as the enchanted blade cut through the granite statue. She fell to the ground.

She came to, finding herself on a bench in the garden of statues. The first thing she was aware of was how great her discomfort was. Her neck stung from the cut. Her skin was pressed hard against the pitted surface of the bench. Her wrists were bound tightly with something. There was a something around her neck as well. Her eyes stung.

She blinked and panicked, because she could not see, then, slowly, everything came into focus. Rutgar was seated on the path before her, his sword beside him.

He regarded her steadily, his expression set. She could not remember what men were like with expressions like that, but it caused her fear. She knew it was fear.

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“Have you ever been beneath the waves, Cecilia?” he asked her.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Just what I asked,” he replied, “have you ever been beneath the waves, Cecilia?”

“No,” she said, “I have never been there.”

“It is a strange world to which you sent my father, that you enabled me to visit. There are wonders there, forests of stone through which the fish swim and in which they hide, forests of weeds that bend in the tide and the currents. Where the water is not so turbulent, the sunlight can penetrate deeply beneath the waves, and there I saw creatures that perhaps not even fishermen ever see. I did not know there were so many kinds of fish beneath the waves. I imagined that it was only the abode of the kinds that we eat and the monsters that would eat us and that it was the graveyard of all sunken ships and drowned men, but I saw wonders.”

He fell silent, looking away.

“I did not know,” she said.

He looked at her and shook his head. “There must be much we do not know,” he admitted.

“I am hurting,” she said, “the bonds are so tight.”

“If I untied you, would you cast any spells upon me?”

“I could already have done so, just by speaking, if I wanted to,” she said, realizing that she could have, but had forgotten, because of all the sensations. Why was she shaking?

He nodded, and rose to his feet. He loosed her bonds and sat again on the path. She sat up, wondering why she had not used a spell to free herself or to destroy him before he could swing that deadly blade at her again. Why had he not killed her once she was vulnerable?

“Fish sleep,” he said, “did you know that?”

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“No,” she admitted, sitting there, rubbing her wrists. Despite the discomfort, she felt very alive.

“They do,” he said, “They just float and sleep.”

He set the sword across his lap.

“When I grew hungry,” he said, “and had not yet found the wreck, I caught a fish and took it to the shore, where I made a fire and ate it. When you made my father into a fish, and cast him into the sea, he must have eaten as the fishes eat though, simply swallowing another creature, raw. I imagine that, eventually, he was devoured in turn by some larger fish.”

She listened to him, trying to catch the feeling in his words, very unsure of what he was getting at, feeling very confused. She was sure now that it was confusion mostly that she felt.

“There are wonders,” he said, “but it is not for man. I found the wreck, and went through it, searching past the corpses of the crew and passengers.” He shuddered, almost convulsing at the memory.

She just sat, observing, almost too inundated in sensation to make sense of anything. Why hadn’t he killed her? She felt at her neck and removed the cloth that was tied around it. She felt something pull at her wound, and suddenly fresh blood ran from the cut. She gasped.

Rutgar shook his head, seeing what she had done. “That was holding a bandage on,” he explained.

“If you want me dead, why bind my wound?” she asked, aware that she was almost shouting. It seemed that there was wind all around making leaves rustle in the trees. A clamor of birds calling and insects humming assailed her ears.

He rose and examined the wound, then rebound it. “I’m sorry if this is uncomfortable,” he said.

Trying hard to stay focused, she said, “I asked you a question, Rutgar.”

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“It goes against the grain to kill a helpless opponent.”

“May we go inside?” she asked.

He helped her up and held her arm firmly as they walked to the nearest door into the villa. As they walked she noted the sensations of her body, the workings of her muscles. Not only did she blink occasionally, but she felt the need to do so. They entered one of her galleries of art and sat on a bench in there. Some of the sounds assaulting her ears were not so loud, and the pounding of her heart seemed to diminish some, but things seemed to be swimming before her eyes.

“What is wrong with me?” she asked, then she slipped forward and passed out.

He caught her before she slid off the bench and carried her to her bedroom, where he set her on the bed and left.

There was no food in the villa without Cecilia to conjure it and prepare it, so he wandered the grounds searching for things. The place was furnished with nothing that would help support human life other than shelter and the well that was outside the kitchen. On a more accessible cove down the shore from where he had washed in, there was a rotten old pier and the battered remains of several old boats. He was not a great sailor, but he judged that none were seaworthy.

He stood on the sand watching the waves roll in, and realized that it might be years before anyone tried to approach the island again. He had no idea how to build a boat, and only the vaguest notion of how to sail. He walked back to the villa and checked in on the witch. She slept.

He wandered the galleries gazing at paintings, tapestries, sculptures, and mosaics. They were doubtless masterpieces, but he was impatient and bored with them no

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matter how he tried to use them as a distraction. He pulled a jar of water up from the well and drank but was very hungry on the next day when she awoke, laughing.

She had been dreaming, and it was amazing. She fairly bubbled with mirth and could not stop giggling for several minutes after she awoke. He was seated in a chair he had brought in and put next to her bed. His sword was out and across his knees again.

“I was dancing,” she said.

“A dream,” he said, regarding her steadily.

“A wonderful dream,” she admitted, “I was a girl again, playing with a puppy. I sat to hold it in my lap, and it jumped on me and licked my face. It tickled. I picked him up and swung him around. My father was playing a flute, so we danced.”

He said nothing.

“I haven’t laughed in a hundred years,” she said.

He looked at her.

She wiped the tears from her face, unable to repress the smile that she had awakened with. “I am remembering things,” she told him.

“Have you forgotten much?”

“Oh, much,” she said, “I didn’t realize how much memory is tied to feeling. As I feel things, they remind of things that I’d forgotten through lack of feeling.”

He shrugged.

“I haven’t laughed for a hundred years,” she said again, “and I think I haven’t laughed for simple pleasure for longer than that.”

She looked at him, a sudden thought striking her, as she touched the sore spot on her neck where the wound he had given her was beginning to mend. “You did this to me, whether you meant to or not. I can laugh, and I owe this to

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you. I didn't appreciate what I was giving up when I accepted the statues and the magic they worked."

The expression on his face was clearly dismay.

Her smile faltered a little, but she said to him, "Thank you."

His webbed fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword, the gills she had given him actually flared like his nostrils were flaring. "I think you will find that you have a painful knot in the pit of your stomach, Cecilia. It is hunger. You can thank me for that as well. I have been feeling it for several hours now, myself. Since I allowed you to wake, would you be so kind as to conjure breakfast?" His scowl was fierce, but she smiled back, reveling in the wash of feelings. He was right. She was hungry. It was exciting.

"Gladly," she said, and, indeed, she felt glad.

When breakfast was conjured, prepared, and eaten, Rutgar rose from his chair and stood solemnly before her. He was so sad and dramatic that she was sorry she could not stop smiling. The world was humorous to her. She had delighted in hearing the sound of the eggs cooking in the skillet, of the fire crackling in the kitchen hearth, of the pork chops sizzling in a griddle. She felt that she was in love with the saltiness of the air and the feel of the breeze against her skin. It felt as new to her as it had when she was young, and the memories that it brought back were of youth. She knew well enough that she had not reveled so in sensation after achieving maturity, which was probably why those memories were not so clear and sharp to her yet, but she did not dwell on it, for they were less joyous to her.

"Say what is on your mind, Rutgar," she suggested, as he stood before her, his face almost contorted.

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“Will you make me a whole man again? You will owe me nothing more. I will find a means to leave your island, or, at least, to stay out of your way until I can find a means.”

“Of course,” she said, delighted to do so. She rose from her chair and sang out the spell airily. The gills on his neck and the webbing among his digits faded and were replaced with skin. He shuddered, running his hands over the spots as they did so, then looked at his fingers and toes.

“Thank you,” he muttered.

“You no longer wish to kill me?” she asked, experiencing a definite sadness and noticing a catch in her voice as she asked. Even as she felt sad, she felt exhilarated to feel it. It was heady.

“Having passed the proper opportunity by, I do not know how to pursue your death with honor,” he explained. He added savagely, “Since I have granted you your life, it is unseemly for you to complain about it.” He stalked out of the villa, passed through the surrounding statuary, and wandered away over the grass. She stood in the kitchen doorway, blinking in surprise.

Memories came to her as she watched him disappear. Only, instead of bitterness at this rejection, as she remembered feeling in the past, she felt only wistful about this one, so giddy with joy as she was. And, since she was not bitter, she felt like trying again. After a few minutes, impulsively, she set out after him.

She found him on another cove, several miles away, staring at the sea. She was winded, actually winded from her trek through the forest, and she approached him walking in an ungainly fashion across the sand, huffing and puffing as she came. He heard her coming, turned with his

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hand on his sword, then his shoulders sank, and he turned from her again.

She came up beside him and stood as well, enjoying the sensation of the sea breeze on her face and neck as it contrasted acutely with the sharp pain of sweat in her neck wound.

“You have made me new,” she told him.

He did not respond, and she did not look at him to see what was on his face.

She said, “I was almost as good as dead when I was all but immortal, and in making me mortal again, it is as though you have brought me back to life.”

She paused, but he had nothing to say.

“I thought about it as I came through the forest,” she explained. “I have taken things from you that I cannot return, and you, whether you meant to or not, have returned to me things that I did not understand when I first had them.”

She looked at him, but his face was stony and his eyes on the sea.

“I am in your debt,” she explained.

Still nothing. She knelt in the sand beside him and looked up at him, tired from her walk but exhilarated nonetheless. “You may not like the fact that you have given me a great gift, but who could deny that you have? You gave it by chance, I suppose, but I am grateful to you. Let me live this life you have given me by being your servant.”

He turned to her, at last, stunned.

“I don’t,” he began, then broke off, his expression almost aghast. “Why would I want you around?” he shouted, laughing with pain in his eyes.

Her exhilaration finally ebbed and simple disappointment eased into its place. Her shoulders sank, and she sat back, still looking up at him.

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“What good am I if I do not do this?” she asked him, “I owe you, owe you all I have done to you and others before you. I owe you what you have done for me.”

“I release you,” he declared. “Go, go back to your villa. Laugh and feast.” He flung his arm out dismissively, but she sat, looking up at him.

“What you do with yourself is for you to decide,” he said. “I want nothing more to do with you.” He turned his back on her again, pacing away over the sand and standing resolutely, looking out over the waves.

Nearby, she still knelt in the sand, absorbed by her disappointment. The sea breeze played with her hair as it blew carelessly past them. After a little while, she realized that she was crying, and she put a hand up to her face, amazed. This too brought back memories of her childhood, but of her childhood only. She realized that, as an adult, she had never shed tears.

As she wiped at them, she looked at Rutgar’s stiff back, and it occurred to her that he had no means by which to leave. The thought brought a swift rush of pleasure to her. She laughed again, but was vaguely displeased that it was not the same laugh with which she had awakened that morning.

“Rutgar,” she called to him in the same tone as her laugh.

He did not answer her.

“Please don’t resent this,” she continued, “it is not as if I have made you my prisoner. I didn’t wreck your ship or toss you into the sea. I rescued you, after all. Forgive me if it seems that I am taking advantage of the situation, but I cannot bear to have you go.”

He half-turned, then seemed to think better of it and resumed his previous stance, still silent.

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“You cannot leave, so I shall simply see to your needs for as long as you are here. I owe you. It is the least that I can do.”

He kept his back to her.

All the same, she began a spell, summoning timber and bricks, nails and mortar, and constructed a house a little off the beach. With her magic, she furnished it with all the comforts she remembered from soft bed and covers to a cozy hearth with a boiling kettle and roasting pig. Then she added grounds around it, a well kept lawn and garden, a fountain, a pool, a hedge, flowering trees, a stable, a horse, a friendly mutt that trotted across the beach to his side.

It took perhaps an hour, and there was sweat trickling off her brow when she was done. She wiped it away and then presented the house to him. He stood there on the beach with his back to her, ignoring the dog that sat beside him, its head pressed against his knee. She called to him, “Rutgar,” and he did not respond.

“Look what I’ve given you!” she said.

He did not respond. She walked up and stood before him. He looked past her.

“Look at what I have given you,” she requested.

“I want nothing but to be gone from here,” he stated.

“You have no means to leave. I am sorry, but it is true. You will need a place to sleep and to live. I have provided this. Look at it.”

He turned and looked at it then turned and looked at her shrewdly.

“Cecilia, if you can conjure and build a house, then surely you can conjure and build a boat.”

She blinked stupidly for a moment. The thought had not occurred to her at all, as she did not want to see him go. It was true, all the same.

“Can you not produce a boat with the same magic that produced a house?” he asked her insistently.

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“Yes,” she answered.

“I see,” he said. He walked around her and, with his back to her, stared out to sea again. The dog followed, sitting again beside him, pressing its head against his knee. He reached down and scratched the top of its head. Irrationally, she hated the dog and wanted to send it away as she had conjured it. But the thought came to her sharply and irrefutably that she knew exactly how to conjure and supply a boat for him. She could even supply sailors, though they would surely be less easy going about being yanked there from their nearby islands than the dog was.

“Must you go?” she asked.

He turned his head, regarding her only over his shoulder. He said, “You must see it that way, if you think about it. I have no purpose here, but I have a wife and a home to which I should return.”

“Oh, yes, a wife,” she said, having quite forgotten that fact. She resented the wife as much as the dog. “I could...” she began, then saw that it was useless to continue.

“You could what?” he challenged her, sharply.

“Nothing.” She shook her head.

He turned his back on her again.

“A boat?” she questioned.

“Indeed,” he stated.

She began to conjure and construct a boat. It took less time than the house and grounds had taken. It formed on the beach before them, taking shape trimly and sturdily. When she was done, it rested neatly there, drawn up on the sand with its keel just out of the waves and its rudder being brushed by the tallest of the rollers that came in. Its striped sail was half furled, hanging on a mast that rose about twenty feet. Oars extended out on either side, their broad tips resting on the sand. It was large and sturdy enough to take the voyage, no mere coracle or skiff, but small enough

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to be sailed by one man. Rutgar walked around it then jumped in it, inspecting it. The dog jumped in behind him. She watched him find that it was securely caulked and properly made. All the proper tools were in place and all the proper provisions too. He jumped back out of it onto the sand and walked over to her.

“I take my leave of you now, Cecilia,” he said.

She only said, “You saved me,” and watched for the aloof demeanor to crack, but it did not.

He said, “I find small comfort in that. Would that you had spared my father as I have spared you.”

“I would that I had. If I could undo all the things that I have done, I would undo them.”

“You will, at least, do the like no more?”

“I am not what I was,” she assured him, then she suggested again, “I could go with you, Rutgar, and serve you.”

The aloof demeanor did crack then, but the disgust that she saw cross his face was like a slap in hers. It was quickly replaced by something vaguely kindly.

He said, “I do not think that would be wise.” He turned to go, then stopped and suggested, “You should not remain here. I will hardly be the last to seek you out for whatever reason.” He pushed the boat into the water and turned it to point out to sea. He climbed in and took the oars, his eyes resting on her from time to time as he rowed off. The dog stood beside him, looking out over the water, barking from time to time. Once clear of the cove, he raised the sail. It caught the breeze smartly, and the boat moved away under that power. She watched it until it was gone over the horizon.

“What do I do now?” she asked herself. Aware of how cold and exposed she felt, she walked back over the terrain to her villa. At length, she found herself standing on her balcony, looking again out to sea. Even from that height,

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there was no sign of the little striped sail of Rutgar's boat. She had not expected it to be there, but she had looked, all the same. Her eyes came to rest on the spot where Rutgar had come ashore. At length, she walked down to the passage through the cliff, descended the long steps to the rocky beach, and stood at the water's edge.

"How many?" she asked herself. How many men had come to free the islands of her tyranny in years past? How many men had come to steal the secret of her immortality? How many men had she changed into fish and thrown into the sea?

Rutgar had told her, "There are wonders." She had always had the power to go under the waves, and she had never done so. She stared at the sea. How many more men would come over it seeking her treasure? She could not know, but Rutgar was surely correct. More would come. She could defend herself against their greed, even though she had been unable to defend herself against him. She did not want to face it. She had told him she was not as she had been.

She simply did not know what she was now.

"There are wonders," he had told her before he disappeared over the sea. He had found the wonders too dark for a person, but he had faced them. She stood there, staring at the sea. Would facing dark wonders help her find or decide what she was now to be? She didn't know, but she would do as he had done, and find out. She would arise from the foam and walk up on the unseen shores across the sea.

There, at the spot where Rutgar had been thrown up by the waves several days before, she transformed herself as she had transformed him. She took strange comfort in the slight pain, the discomfort that the shape change afforded her. Her hands and feet grew webbing. Gills slit open in

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her neck. She walked into the water, disappearing beneath the waves.