

Dar-Otter, Pearl Otter, Can't find me

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It was the heat.

The glare of the twin suns off the lilac colored sea, the rhythmic rocking of the barge, and the stillness of the air, suffocated me, made me reckless. My chest ripe was to burst.

Across the bay the surface of the water was broken by the bronzed bodies of the dar-otter slaves as they returned to the surface with another haul of oysters. Their skin gleamed in the sun, slick with water.

I stood to watch. Without their fur the dar-otters were men. Without their fur they could never be free. My husband-to-be's slaves, diving for the pearls he valued above all else.

"What do you watch Mina, dear?" Husband-to-be tried to grasp my hand, as if I were already his. His dead fish eyes narrowed.

A slave with a scar that ran from shoulder to hip worked steadily towards the barge. I would recognize that mark anywhere, Tarn.

Each dive brought him closer to me.

Three hundred heartbeats and Tarn resurfaced. He brushed his black hair off his face; his skin like honey lit with life as he smiled. The air became trapped in my lungs. He was close enough for me to see the flash of his white pointed teeth.

"The fish." I forced the words out, as a school of red darters swam beneath the boat.

A plan already in motion, I leaned too far as I pointed.

One moment I was trapped on the barge with the marriage negotiations binding me, the next I was falling through water. The heat of the suns diminished the deeper I fell. I should have panicked; only slaves could swim. Instead I was filled with relief as the water cradled me.

My descent was stopped by Tarn. As I smiled bubbles of air escaped from my lips. My eyes widened. My lips froze. I needed air. Tarn kicked towards the surface, but not to hand me back to my father or husband-to-be on the barge.

We surfaced beneath the twin hulls.

I drew in the thick air enjoying each breath.

Above they called my name.

Beads of water ran down Tarn's face melting into the sea. I reached out catching one on my finger. What would it taste like?

His rough finger tips traced my cheek. Tarn's ink black eyes drew me in. I didn't resist when his lips touched mine. Tentatively at first, then he grew braver. He didn't kiss like a slave should...but then Tarn hadn't always been a slave.

The slave hunters had brought him into my father's dokt-house. Cut during capture, his blood had stained the floor. I watched unnoticed. The otter

seemed resigned to death, snapping at my father when he tried to look at the jagged wound.

The otter turned his head and looked at me. His eyes bright with pain-not those of an animal. I had never seen a dar-otter still in fur, as an otter instead of a man. Instead of the fear drummed in to us as children curiosity made me stare in wonder. He was as long as a man is tall, without including the tail.

A large wild animal, a predator of the sea.

I couldn't bare the thought of his eyes dull with death. I knew in that moment why my father was the only one who would treat the slaves. They were men, trapped by circumstance.

The dar-otter pulled at the fur on his stomach with long claws. Only he could remove his fur and become human. He shrugged out of the rich brown pelt unveiling the man inside. He was wet with water and blood, like being born.

The slave hunters kicked the fur out of his reach and left.

"What is your name, slave?" My father spoke more gently than if the slave hunters had been there.

"Tarn." His eyes never left mine even as they closed.

My father didn't bother to look up from the dar-otter as he spoke, "Mina, stitch the fur or he shall never heal."

I carefully sewed up the tear. By some strange magic it mended. The same magic that gave the dar-otters their twin forms.

Forgotten, the fur had remained in my care. It had warmed to my touch. Each night I had opened the fur and spread it on my bed, enjoying the silken feel of it against my bare skin.

I pulled away from Tarn, lungs burning, my lips aching for more.

"I have your fur."

"I know. I felt your touch."

My cheeks burnt as if absorbing the heat of the suns. I hoped in our shadowy refuge he wouldn't see.

My father's desperate calling of my name intruded. We both looked up at the underside of the barge. Our stolen time was over.

"I will return it."

"No. I cannot ask that."

"You didn't." I placed my hand on his jaw and kissed him softly. We both knew the penalty for escape.

The dar-otter's fur would be burnt in front of him. As the fur burnt so would the man, his skin blistering and blackening as surely as if he were in the flames.

The punishment for assisting escape was no better.

Tarn dragged me under and then he thrust me into the heat and light of my world. Hands hauled me out of the water coughing and gasping as if I had indeed drowned.

Tarn slipped out of reach. He was as trapped in the sea as I was on the surface.

One week later I visited my husband-to-be. The marriage arrangements were finalized. My father just doing what was expected. Our marriage had been decided by the Fates and their reading of the stars at my birth.

My life, I acted out for the pleasure of others.

Another week and I would be as dependant on my husband-to-be for survival as the dar-otters.

“What have you brought for me Mina, dear?” His dead fish eyes already claiming his prize.

“Lunch. I’d like to go out on the water again.”

Husband-to-be laughed. “You would drown.”

“I won’t drink wine today.” As if that were my mistake last time.

Today, I was more careful. Today, the wine was drugged. Just enough powdered verin root to make him sleep. I couldn’t kill him, though I doubted he would show me that much compassion.

He assessed his newest possession.

“We could be alone.” I prompted.

I smiled as his hand landed on my leg, his fingers creeping higher like a demented spider. My skin died under his touch.

The rickshaw took us closer to the piers, I relaxed, husband-to-be had fallen for the lure.

He took me out on a small barge. We sat under the canopy while the boys took us out to where the dar-otters dived. Husband-to-be always enjoyed watching his slaves. As did I.

Resting next to me the lunch parcel looked large.

I poured him wine and pretended I liked the wet kisses he pasted on the side of my face.

“Animals, masquerading as men.” Husband-to-be sneered. “Without their fur they are naught but slaves. Mine.” He pressed his fleshy lips to my palm, as if he cared for me.

Once again Tarn slipped closer. New whip marks marred the beautiful skin of his back. He had been punished for touching me, not rewarded for saving me.

He dove again, I caught a glimpse of his buttocks before the ocean swallowed him.

“Let us eat.” I said unwinding the cord around the parcel, knowing Tarn would surface very close next time.

My drugged husband-to-be nodded, his eyelids heavy. I almost felt sorry for him. I folded back the course fabric covering. Husband-to-be’s eyes widened in shock as he realized what I had planned.

There was no lunch.

In one move I tossed the fur into the sea. Tarn would only have to wrap it around himself for the magic to work. To become otter. To escape.

But I had misjudged my husband-to-be.

He wasn't too drugged to yell for guards.

Their bells sounded loud across the bay, echoing in my skull. My heart beat fierce with excitement.

Tarn was free.

I fought for one last glimpse of Tarn as husband-to-be dragged me into the bottom of the barge. His fists swung in time with the bells. No otter in sight; better for Tarn to escape than be captured and waste my sacrifice.

The drugged wine saved me. Husband-to-be fell. His head bounced on the side of the barge. His eyes rolled back into his head.

I would pay.

It was the heat that was killing me now.

I was left perched on a rock surrounded by sea. Even if I could swim, land was too far away and they would just return me. My father had pressed poison into my hand for a quick death. The tiny vial still held tight in my fist.

For the first day I watched the horizon until the glare brought tears to my eyes and I could no longer see.

No sail boat came. It was only then I realized I had hoped for one.

Tarn's people were seafarers, as at home on the surface in skin as they were below in fur. I closed my eyes and waited.

I had nothing better to do than wait.

The cool of the night was like balm on my blistered skin. The slapping of the waves on the rock sung to me the child's rhyme.

Dar-otter, pearl otter

Searching in the sea

Dar-otter, pearl otter

Can't find me!

We would run and hide from the child pretending to be the fierce dar-otter. I dreamt I was running to him. I didn't blame Tarn. My choices had led me here.

Mine.

Night faded to day.

The rock that had cut into my skin I no longer felt. I couldn't muster the energy to move anyway. The vial of poison still lay in my palm. It didn't matter anymore. I wouldn't need it.

The desperate thirst that had clawed me at first was gone. My heart and lungs kept going because they didn't know how to stop.

I dreamt again.

The creaking wood of a small sail boat. Voices calling my name. Gentle hands pried me off my rock home.

Tarn was singing, willing me to live. The cool water he slipped between my cracked lips woke me. I uncurled my hand and watched as the vial of poison rolled off the deck.

Accepted by the cool sea.