

Third Life

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First Life

Sated and glad, Still-Without rests. Languid and lost, seems the man below, his arm limp over the side. Is this comfort? Should oble risk disturbance to lift it to the bed?

Instead, oble waits. He is so beautiful--languid, lost--a wonder within a marvel, a tender integument the colour of alabaster.

Alabaster or pearl? Oble has a thesaurus. Marble might be more apt, given veins of sapphire beneath, yet all are wrong. His body resembles polished stone. It is not. It is so terribly fragile. Oble must be gentle and was.

The man has more of the growth called hair where his limbs and torso meet. Oble does not and wants a better word. Thinks of the weavings in the booth, of why they've come on the long startrain trip from Home to this, for the twenty-fifth Fair of Goods.

Thinks of oble's deepest need.

Oble will call them threads. Golden threads to frame his intricate eyes and, oble gives a soundless laugh, his pleasure, as if that could be missed. Oble has orifices. First life lacks markings to say this for air or that for secretion, but the man asked and oble showed him. The ones giving oble pleasure. The ones for love and binding.

Oble regrets nothing. Lowers from the ceiling, holds by two limbs and their sucker tips. First life is lithe and strong. As is the man. They have other similarities. Paired eyes, though oble's are larger and superior. Oble's been told this. Now doubts it.

His eyes see oble as no other has. Knows oble. As oble's see and know him.

Oble's antennae poise to stroke his pleasure again, quivering and ready, but he remains languid and lost. Asleep?

Or dead. Oble chills with concern until seeing the rise and fall of his chest cavity. There is bone inside him, pressing at the tender layer as if to escape. Oble's body is hard out and soft in, but there are other kinds of body. The movement means breathing in his. Life.

Oble trembles with relief. He must not die. Ever. He's given oble names. The one oble likes best is Joy. The word feels as if it enters oble's pleasure orifice. As if it stays.

Oble strokes his golden threads, suddenly in need of more.

~*~

Delegate Samoth Alan went through the next day of the Goods Fair in a daze, unable to keep his thoughts from straying—as he had, last night, unforgivably. Unforgettably.

Disappointment and frustration--they'd failed to find what they'd come for, a novel style of weaving, new threads for the Weavers Collective, anything to set their work apart offworld and gain a market.

No, to be accurate, he'd refused to part with their scarce coin for what Terra made better, grew better. His colleagues, seeing failure, had the right to doubt his leadership.

He'd the right to storm away in fury—

Losing the hard edge of it, wandering aisles near closing time, aimless and alone while delegates flocked to bars and restaurants to celebrate or drown their sorrows.

To find himself where he'd come many times before.

The Nuarysen booth was small and plain, easily overlooked amid the flashier, polished offerings of the Seven Systems and their associated hinter worlds. Rented posts supported a dull canvas roof and walls. The only indication this booth was special was the shimmering sign over the door, a tapestry of threads the like of which had never been seen here before.

For what might be the hundredth time, Samoth stood, staring at the sign. This. This was what he'd come to find. If only--

If only every offering hadn't been snapped up within seconds of the Nuarysen's opening. If only speculators hadn't driven the price for the tiniest spool to unheard-of levels.

Beyond theirs.

Even the sign over the now-closed door was marked as sold. Someone would take it apart, thread by thread, selling those as well. He hoped they were careful. Respectful of the craft.

The door beneath the sign drew back.

The unexpected dazzle of a carapace caught his eye, quickly hidden by a cloak, itself a work of art.

Thinking back, Samoth knew he'd had no reason to believe it an invitation, that his presence had been noticed. He wasn't a buyer. Was at best a mediocre weaver, his skill and passion thread itself.

He was through the door in a heartbeat.

Whomever he'd glimpsed vanished, not that he'd cared. Textiles like clouds formed an inner maze and Samoth moved through what embarrassed silk, mocked the finest weaves he'd ever seen.

Humbled, he eased his way through the hangings, enchanted as they caressed his face and neck, slipped through his fingers until what he touched was a cloak.

Being worn.

"Oh." The gasp was melody, liquid and pure.

Samoth jumped the wrong way, found himself tangled in the cloak. Lost his balance and grabbed—what he absolutely had no permission to--and let go hurriedly, stammering, "Apologies. I'm not usually this clumsy--"

An arm—he thought it was an arm—went around his waist to keep him on his feet. "Are you all right?"

Sense came back. "Forgive me. I'm Sam--Delegate Samoth Alan, Terra System Imports."

"I am not. A delegate, that is."

The voice. He had to hear more. "The threads, the weaving. It's wonderful work."

"It's my mother's."

"Please convey my admiration. Ah. May I have your name?"

"You may call this oble what you like, Samoth. In first life, I am Still-Without."

Trapped as much by the lilting voice as the precious material of oble's cloak, Samoth succumbed to the ridiculous, beginning to laugh.

"My name is funny?"

"No, no. This. This." He couldn't stop. "How do I—how do we—"

Oble's laugh was like spring rain. "Carefully."

They freed themselves with a mutual exploration he wasn't sure he started or oble did. He breathed in a scent, rich and intoxicating. Breathed again greedily. Found himself regarded by eyes like—

They'd gone to his rented room, both of them laughing, both urgent. Discovered one another, each a treasury of strange growing familiar, growing dear and precious. He'd whispered endearments, weaving words like thread to bind them as they were, his heart too full for his chest and afraid, even then, this was but a dream.

Called oble Joy. The beautiful Nuarysen had trembled in his arms, eyes gleaming, and held him tight. "A gift, Sam. One I will carry always in my hearts. As I will you."

Today was after, *always* a dream, not a word to dare remember regardless how he thought he felt.

Hormones, weakness, poor judgement--those were the shameful reality he'd added to his failure. Terra Imports would not be invited to the next Fair. The Weaver Collective would might even disband.

Samoth stayed in his delegation's office, counting the hours until the ship took him home.

What he'd carry in his heart was for him alone to know.

Second Life

Oble is no longer Still-Without. The others discover this on oble's return to the booth and the two who'd followed oble from Home, who'd competed and sang and been thorough fools—in oble's opinion—are destitute.

Oble ignores their pathetic wails. Scorns their complaints and accusations. Knows them as unworthy of what oble is to be, that oble cannot become alone.

Before, was oble not ready to give up? To die, as oble is? Only to see him, who came not for oble but for the makings of Home. Who loves what he cannot have. Oble sees in this one what the others lack. Selflessness. Awareness. Appreciation.

His laugh wins oble's hearts, frees oble's pheromones. His body fills oble's needs; his words oble's soul. Ready to become, oble is now and forever With-Samoth, who calls oble Joy.

Who doesn't return.

Oble refuses to leave the booth.

Who doesn't return.

The Goods Fair ends. Others take the booth down around oble, delivering what was sold. Oble has the right to wait.

Who doesn't return.

Has no choice, but wait.

~*~

Word of a Nuarysen who won't leave the Fair reached the spaceport an hour before Samoth and his colleagues were to leave the world and his heart soared.

He knew who it was. Hoped he knew why. Had to go and be sure.

The others were aghast. There'd be fines for any delay, fines draining the last of their savings, but he didn't try to explain.

Samoth took a taxi back to the Fair. What remained of it. The aisles were gone, leaving a windy open courtyard girded by stacked posts and rolled carpets, to be stored until the twenty-sixth Goods Fair. Street lights cast more shadows than glow. Litter tumbled. Samoth ordered the taxi to wait and walked into the gloom.

Desperation. Illusion. With every step, the weight of his choice grew, crushing him with doubt. There was nothing for him here.

Until there was. At the sight of a cloaked figure, sitting alone on a small trunk, Samoth begins to run. "Joy!"

~*~

Joy-With-Samoth's new world is beautiful, as full of different colours and tastes as each day is with love. Their new home is perfect, for Samoth built it to please them both--Human and Nuarysen—the cost but a fraction of what oble brings in the small trunk, oble's mother's gifts.

There is large and airy building where oble teaches Samoth and his friends to weave as oble was taught. They are clever, adapting Nuarysen techniques to the threads of this world. The results are remarkable. The Weaver Collective of Terra has a standing invitation to every Goods Fair, not that they themselves leave.

At night, oble and Samoth bring each other laughter and joy. He speaks of always, being happy and as he is to be.

Oble shares his happiness, but oble is not.

This dawn, as every dawn, Joy-With-Samoth clings to the

lattice on the ceiling. Beneath, languid and lost, is the one who means everything. Oble watches breath move his alabaster chest, prepares to take the last dose of the medicine that delays the inevitable, that keeps oble what Samoth can hold and love.

Tosses it aside.

The change must come. All oble can do is hope for understanding. To hope he will stay.

When Samoth wakes, oble reaches down to gather him up to oble, holding him high and safe and close. He laughs.

When oble tells him what oble must, he stops.

~*~

Samoth left the house, their home. Walked somewhere, anywhere that was away, because it wasn't the hell *fair*. None of it. Not falling in love, not finding a partner who brought out the best in him—in everyone oble touched—not their success—not a happiness beyond his dreams only to—

--lose it. Samoth stopped, sinking to his knees. Birds were starting to sing. Oble asked that of him. Only that. To sing. To stay and sing.

To that? Bent by pain, he lets his tears fall to the earth.

It was their way. To form a bond. A bond that, if strong enough, trusted and sure enough, would usher in change. The second life.

What life? Their love doomed them, that's what it meant.

He'd wondered about the tower oble had wanted built above their bedroom. Thought perhaps it was an observatory, that oble was homesick and missed the stars above another world. But it wasn't that at all.

It was to be a coffin. One with a chair for him, windows for him, a door for him. For oble, only a dreadful hook.

He'd managed to stay, to watch his love climb with unfamiliar stiffness to it. Turn to grip it, those supple limbs that had caressed and cradled him locking in place, losing their brilliant colour as the rest did, the sleek carapace turning dull, oble's eyes the last to cloud, the love in them gleaming until it was gone.

Then he'd run.

Stay and sing to that?

Samoth spread himself on the cold ground and sobbed until he was spent.

~*~

He climbed the stairs. Oble had used them. Preferred climbing up walls and swinging along the ceiling like poetry become light-- unless they'd company who might be startled. Grief shuddered through him. He was out of tears. Out of anything. He'd have to tell the others. Some would grieve with him. Others be relieved, not that they'd ever say it, but what he and oble had—

Samoth reached the top. Opened the door. Stared.

He'd left a convulsed, dull body. What hung before him glimmered as if covered in gemstones, aglow with an inner light. "Joy?"

Was that a shiver?

Samoth sat in the chair. "I don't know why you want me to sing to you. I can't hold a--" The long narrow shape trembled, sending prisms dancing over the walls.

Joy still heard him.

Oble wasn't gone.

The realization changed everything. "I'll try." His voice came out hoarse and thick. "In the town where—" He didn't know the words. To anything.

So what? Joy-With-Samoth didn't know them either. He began to laugh.

The shape bounced.

"All right. All right." He coughed to clear his throat. "Here goes nothing. La la laaa. La la la laaaa."

The shape remained still. Judging, that was. Samoth put more into it. "LA LA LAAAAA!"

To his astonishment, threads formed on the surface.

"Lala DA da DAH."

Formed and slowly spun free.

The Nuarysen's great secret. Mother's work. Oble had called the fabric in the booth her mother's work. Being Human he'd thought of hands, of skill, not of biology.

Now oble's gift to him, to them all. Oble's precious thread.

He found words to sing after all. "Joy, you are my darling, my darling, my darling."

Third Life

His songs become strong and confident. Love's first life, full of

hope.

Slow, soften. Turn intricate and beautiful. Love's second, granting gifts.

Falter, forget, and cease. Love's third and last.

The time is now.

Forever-Joy convulses, tearing free of what was oble and is no longer, fluids coursing through a body unfamiliar and yet oble's own.

Oble flutters to the floor, what oble is to be.

The wizened figure in the chair stirs with a little cough. He is wrapped in a magnificent blanket of oble's thread, his weaving.

Forever-Joy knows oble's love in any shape.

Yet, hesitates.

Can he see oble as this?

~*~

A dream. He'd had many, these years. This glorious shape in front of him, of shimmering blue feathered scales, was new.

The eyes weren't. The eyes *knew* him and Samoth came fully awake. He reached with both hands.

Hands changed by time. Spotted and gnarled, as he was. "Joy." He had no more words, no excuse. He'd done his best to wait. "I'm sorry."

"For what, beloved?" A laugh like summer rain. Arms around him, strong and sure, lifting him up. "The third is the last. I won't leave you again."

"I will leave you, soon," he admitted, but it wasn't sad. How could it be sad, when they were together?

"Then we won't waste a moment. Let's go outside. Show me all we've done."

He confessed. "I can't walk."

Forever-Joy hugged him close. "My love, you won't need to. Ever again."

And unfurled wings.