

He saw her at the river one day, stopping him dead in his tracks as he hunted for a meal. He thought her a dream at first, a hallucination at the middle of a warm day, but she remained as he had seen her at the first, dashing through the water with impossible speed and grace. She was unlike any other woman he had ever seen before. She seemed as much otter as she was human, with watertight brown fur covering her from her rounded ears to the tip of her streamlined tail. Her face ended in a blunt muzzle that somehow perfectly complemented her strange, exotic beauty.

She might have been easily confused for one of the otters that routinely made their homes in the river, but for her people's beads which were braided throughout her raven hair. They dangled loose about her shoulders when she stood... and stared back at him in wide-eyed shock.

A rush of motion, and her form shifted impossibly into the shape of a common river otter. She dove in and swam quickly away, her brown-furred form disappearing down the river far too quickly for the young man to follow.

"Wait!" he cried. He meant her no harm; indeed, he could not even fathom the thought of harming one so lovely. Yet even as his voice echoed from one riverbank to the opposite, the form of the wondrous creature disappeared down another bend in the river.

The experience stayed with him, and he often made excuses to return to that spot. Sometimes he carried a rifle in search of game; others he brought a hook and line with which to bring back fish from one of the small lakes that were fed by the river. Always he looked for her, sometimes jumping at the glint of the sun on the surface of the river as his imagination fashioned it into the shape of that lovely creature.

And yet, for years, he could not find her.

He never gave up hope, but as the years progressed he always wondered if his eyes had perhaps been deceived by some cruel deception of the light. The vivid vision in his mind demanded that something must have been there that day, but perhaps it had simply been a river otter after all.

His family had settled the nearby land to make a new home for themselves, but there were those who had lived on the land for years prior to their arrival. There were certainly disagreements between the

two for some time, but a series of unusually harsh winters had brought the people together. The native inhabitants aided their newly arrived guests by helping them learn of hardier crops that continued to flourish, even in the cold. The settlers returned the favor by showing the natives methods of treating hides that would help shield them from the cold. So a friendship was born from hardship, and when spring finally came, both peoples gathered for a celebration.

The young man accompanied his parents to the celebration, bringing gifts of food from the spring's first prosperous hunt. They shared this provision with their new friends, finding a companionship the two peoples had never shared before around a bountiful feast. Even as men formed new friendships around him, however, the young man was shocked to silence as he recognized the daughter of one of the village's elders.

She wore her hair in careful braids, each one intertwined with an array of fine beads. He had seen those beads before, falling across the shoulders of that mysterious creature in the river. He tried to convince themselves that they could not possibly be the same, that their similarities were no reason to assume... But her face, although now human by some working of a magic he could not hope to understand, was somehow still recognizable to him, so much so that it made him certain of her identity.

Although she often tried to avert her eyes, the way she smiled shyly at him whenever their eyes met convinced him that she had recognized him as well. Those eyes made him even more certain that he was not imagining. They were the same brilliant, liquid brown that he had seen from the mysterious creature several years ago.

He thought perhaps to talk to her later, but he was pulled aside instead by one of the elders. His heart sank as he realized that the man was the young woman's father.

"You have eyes for my daughter." The man spoke the language of the settlers with more clarity and confidence than most of his people, and the young man detected a hint of pride in his tone.

The young settler nodded, hoping to avoid any mentioning what he knew. "She is quite lovely," he managed to reply, keeping his voice quiet.

The man nodded sagely, a mischievous smile on his lips. "Yes, she is," he said slowly. "But that is not the only reason why you have an interest in her, I think."

The young man paled. "I'm not certain I know what you mean," he insisted. His voice lacked the conviction he had hoped to convey, and he winced as the man turned to face him fully. The smile remained on his face, however, even as he clapped a large hand on his guest's shoulder.

"My daughter was as afraid to tell me of your chance meeting as you are," he remarked with a quiet chuckle. "She did tell me, however, so I know that you saw her at the river some time ago. You and I both know what you saw there, and why you are so surprised to see her now."

The young man knew that he was found out, so he swallowed and decided to own the mistake. "I am sorry, sir. I was hunting down by the river, and I did see your daughter's secret that day. I was not certain of what I had seen for some time, but I know the truth now. I meant no disrespect by hiding that knowledge, I only thought that perhaps it was something you wished kept a secret."

The man laughed and clapped his shoulder. "It is a secret, yes, but one that we knew would be revealed in time." The elder glanced about to be certain that no one else could hear them. "My daughter was gifted to be a River Daughter from birth. Only a few times in each generation is one gifted so; each is given the form of some creature from the river and each is fated to guide our people at a critical point in our story."

The settler turned to watch the young woman, who was speaking with one of the settlers' wives in a quiet tone some distance away. "I am not sure I understand what you mean," he said slowly.

The elder considered. "Whenever a River Daughter appears, it means that there will be a great change soon. I considered for long years what my daughter's role might be in my people's future. I have come to believe that your brief meeting at the river was no accident." He looked seriously into the young man's eyes as though to emphasize the seriousness of what he was saying. "Our people came together in hardship, and this has made both of us stronger. I believe that my daughter's destiny is to unite our peoples even more fully. I believe the two of you are meant to marry."

The settler almost collapsed from shock when he heard the elder's admission. He had been taken with the young woman, but the idea of marriage so quickly and suddenly sent his reeling. The other man had evidently foreseen his coming shock, however, and he held the young man steady while he recovered.

"I do not expect you to wed her immediately," the man noted quietly. "I am, however, giving you my blessing to court her." The older man smiled at the confusion of the young settler. He knew that he was being rather presumptuous to suggest such a thing, but his advantage of age made it awkward for his fellows to question him. He believed that this was the fate that awaited his daughter, and he meant to give that fate free reign.

The world was a whirlwind to the young settler after that. He had known since he saw her that day in the river that he loved her. He knew that, if there was any opportunity in the world, he would find a way to marry her. He had simply not expected that the opportunity would be presented to him like a gift. Now he had only to win her affection in return.

As it happened, she felt much the same way about him. She had been frightened of him at first when he had discovered her secret, but his face had been etched on her memory all the same. He had not looked frightened or angry at the discovery; instead he seemed fascinated by her strange gift. She thought to herself that, perhaps, a man who would not immediately react against her secret form might love her. When that same man came to her now and sought her hand, it was all she could do to keep from jumping to her decision then and there.

In only a short time, only the settler's own parents stood as an obstacle to their union. They were hesitant because of the differences between the cultures, but the combined voices of the other interested parties turned their decision. They finally accepted their son's decision as the final step towards unifying the two peoples.

The wedding itself occurred just half a year after the settler had been given permission to seek out his lover's hand. The ceremony blended the traditions of both peoples, as many came to see the two married. Only few knew the story of how they had met, but all who saw them could tell that it had been a match made in the heavens.

That is precisely where both of the newlyweds felt as though they were as the ceremony drew to its conclusion. Neither of them could believe that they were wed to the only one they could ever have

loved so dearly. The circumstances of their first meeting were nearly forgotten, leaving behind only their joy that the meeting had taken place.

There were no luxurious penthouses or expensive bottles of champagne for the new husband and wife, but neither of them would have minded if they had been left to sleep in the woods on their honeymoon. As it was they were given the use of a small cabin in the woods, coincidentally not very far from the river where the man had first seen the River Daughter.

They simply held each other close for quite a while, enjoying each other's presence and whispering sweet declarations of love in hushed tones. Only after many moments spent like this did the two step back still clasping each other's hands. The woman smiled brightly.

"My love," she breathed. "You told me once that you loved me from when you first saw me. You did not see me first as a human, however." As she smiled to him, her form shifted before him. Thick brown fur grew over her skin, a wide, tapering tail extended behind her, and her hands, still clasped in his, grew webs of skin between each finger and sharp claws at their tips. Her face, although still smiling to him, became an otter's muzzle. Only her braids, the very same ones he had recognized at their second meeting, remained unchanged, falling across her shoulders just as they always did.

"You are lovely either way," he responded. He pulled her close again, brushing his fingers through her thick fur. She could have purred as he embraced her. She had always feared what others might think of her secret, but her husband accepted her and loved her no matter how she appeared. He looked into her eyes, brushing one of her braids behind her shoulder before kissing her long and deep on the muzzle. He did not seem to be bothered at all, even as her fur and her whiskers brushed his cheek.

When they finally parted, she stepped back and smiled. "I have a gift for you, my love," she said with a coy smile. He arched an eyebrow, but she continued to smile, placing one of her webbed paws on his chest. Before he could ask her what she meant, he felt a strange flush of heat from where her claws touched his skin. As she removed her paw, the heat seemed to spread like a liquid fire. It touched every part of his skin before any visible effect emerged, but it did not remain a mystery for long.

All at once he felt all over much like his face had felt when it was pressed against his wife's fur. At this feeling the warmth was released, and he watched in wonder as a coat of fur grew across his entire body. It grew in layers, the softer lower layer growing just before the emergence of the upper, watertight layer

of fur. He watched his hands as they changed to match his wife's, each finger bound together by a thin webbing. Dark claws replaced fingernails, and his palms grew rough with padding. His legs and feet changed as well, becoming more suited for swimming in the river's cool waters. His tail grew to match his wife's, thick at the base and tapering down to a point that dragged on the ground behind him. Finally, his head reformed, his ears growing round and preparing to close out and water that attempted to enter, and his face became a blunted muzzle. His whiskers twitched as they emerged into the air, sensitive even to the small movements of air around them.

"You can change me to be like you?" he asked breathlessly.

His wife nodded. "It is an ability I am not certain even my father is aware of. I am not certain how I knew of it either. All I know is that I may only use it once, on the man that I love." She pulled him into another kiss; it was different now that they each had muzzles, but they could not have cared less.

"Is it permanent?" he asked as they parted briefly. He curiously did not sound concerned at all.

She chuckled quietly, still holding him close to her. "It is permanent, but I have given you a power much like mine. You may shift at will from human to otter, much as I can. Later, I will show you how to take on several different forms in between. For now..."

The new couple only spent some of their first night in the cabin. Although no one was there to see them, the two returned to the stretch of river where they had first seen each other, and there they swam and played together in the light of a dim crescent moon. For years, rumors were whispered quietly that the river was guarded by two shape-changing spirits, and neither the man nor his wife had any reason to correct their neighbors.

In the end, the union of the settler with the River Daughter did help unify the peoples. Many others followed in their footsteps as the years progressed, and soon it was impossible to claim any distinction between the two. The longstanding peace between the two peoples was over, for the two were now one and the same, and none were happier than the River Daughter and the man who shared her secret.