

Their Color

Cecilia felt the burning red rays of sunlight come through the window behind her and warm the soft, rich russet fur on her back, filling her slender, straight, almost frail body with comfortable warmth. It had stopped raining, the dull grey thud on the walls and the sharp slap on the windows that was just as grey ended several minutes ago; the vixen had counted the ticks on the clock – bland, black and white, monotonous sounds – since the thuds and slaps ended; that is, in between the flurry of notes Abel played.

Abel, her husband, played saxophone, and was quite talented. Every day the lion would go into the small, dark brown wooden room that adjoined the kitchen, that had the distinctive smell of varnish and layers of shine to keep it from rotting, a smell that was as dark as the wood, close the door and sing to the house, his horn becoming the voice of the purest and finest gold. His warm-ups and scales were like an artisan setting his tools down and selecting the metals he was going to work with that day. He would go over them with greater and greater precision, finding the tiniest of details and repairing it, looking for more and more minutia that would affect his sound, until seamlessly, no sooner conceived than done, he would begin practicing runs and slurs and riffs and licks.

His tail swished against the floor as he played, the fuzzy tip making just enough contact to beat a light and steady rhythm, a metronome in time with his playing. Sparks would fly as he sang; red would leap up when he came across a rough spot, and Abel would refine it slowly into orange, then yellow, until the material that was his song shone gold with perfection before him. He would move from the base-work of the song, the broader themes and shapes, to more intricate and finer aspects: which notes to bend and how, how sharply attacked should that note be, should this note trail on just a bit longer than the rest; each intricate and subtle detail was carefully attended to. Slowly but surely, the beautiful statue he was sculpting would take form. He always played the full song when he was finished, his golden throat singing the statue of the most beautiful goddess ever worshipped, no delicate detail lost or overlooked in even the quickest of glances – even from her eyes – and hewn in shining, lustrous, pure gold.

Abel was almost done now, she could tell, his playing was becoming more and more sure, on top of the fact he had been at it for a few hours now. She never applauded him after practicing, she found it gauche to clap when she was such a small audience and he agreed, but she always had something ready for him, tea or coffee most often, or cookies if she was in the mood to bake them, or, on rainy days such as this, hot chocolate.

She lifted his mug and then hers to her muzzle and inhaled the pale brown scent of the cocoa powder in the ceramic mugs – white, clean, smooth in her fingers, cold when they were empty but jumping to life when filled – making sure there would be enough powder to give the mixture a full chocolaty flavor. She never bothered to follow the instructions on the powder container; she never had much patience for them, and developed a way to determine how much was in the mug by smell alone. Abel often told her how remarkable her cooking was despite her disdain for written instructions and recipes, even if he had a knack for joking that she'd burn the house down.

Just as he hit a particularly high-pitched series of runs the kettle decided to whistle, billowy white steam pouring out the mouth like a great steam engine, the vapor rising into the air until it dissolved into transparent heat. Cecilia rushed to pull the kettle off the red-hot stove, grabbing the stiff black hard-rubber handle, with the unnatural, unyielding pebbled feel that was somehow somewhere between metal and flesh, and lifted the mottled silver-grey kettle. She switched the stove off, hoping the searing whistle wouldn't interrupt the playing in the other room. He didn't even seem to notice, however, his song continuing to move fluidly, the shining gold of his horn untarnished by the brief outburst. She sighed lightly in relief, letting her shoulders drop slightly and her ears lower in relaxation.

She carefully poured the boiling hot water into the two mugs, stirred them until the warm scent of the mahogany-colored mixture, its trails of white, hot foam spinning in the mug around even hotter dark bubbles, with resistant flecks of cocoa powder swirling in the currents, wafted up to her nose, telling her they were perfectly blended, and reached for the cool blue steel cylinder of whipped cream. She carefully made sure the plastic nozzle was on the rim of the mug and added the whipped cream in a swirl, making a mountain on top of each mug. Satisfied, she picked up the deep brown jug of chocolate syrup and drizzled some thick, pitch black ropes onto the cottony hills of cream. The almost bitter scent wafted up to her nostrils, making her grin at the success of her sweet concoction.

His song was finished now, Abel was warming down. The much simpler, much less coordinated strings of notes he was singing now were no less golden than the statue he just completed. It was his way of looking over his work with pride, telling any who witnessed "I *am* quite proud of it" or "I really like how this one turned out." He would shoot out smooth, relaxed ribbons of gold into the atmosphere around him until they weren't really gold at all, or had any depth at all, they were just notes, and that was when he would put his horn away, his day's work done.

The vixen walked carefully from the kitchen to the living room of the small house. She preferred a small house, it was easier for her to get to know the rooms and where everything belonged. Cecilia had gotten to know this house impeccably well, and could maneuver her way around with graceful ease. She stood in the living room, directly between the TV she never watched behind her and the couch in front of her, and gazed absently out the large window at the front of the room, drinking in the world outside.

Though the rain had ended just a few minutes ago, the sun was indeed shining. Late in the day, the red rays that filled her body with unmistakable sunset heat in the kitchen were reflected off the windows of the houses across the street. She inhaled deeply, drinking in the bitter chocolaty scent coming from her mug and smiled. Hot chocolate was the perfect complement to a sunset.

A soft breeze moved through the tops of the trees, peacefully knocking rain drops off the viridian leaves with a gentle rustle. Birds were causing heavier avalanches of rain drops to fall as they flit from one branch to the other singing songs of joy now that the rain had ended. Her husband had stopped playing, she realized as she heard one bird trumpet his proud song. Turning her hearing toward his practice room, she heard a few soft thumps as he packed up his horn.

Taking a sip, she turned her attention to the neighborhood children. Doubtful the rain had even interrupted their summer play; a small group of them were playing in the grass and mud of their yards. Their wet clothes made soft sloshing and squishing noises as they moved and ran, very nearly drowned out by their mirthful laughter. They drenched themselves in mud by leaping into puddles, the splashes sending out the earthy smell of mud and rainwater, both clean and dirty at the same time, through the glass of the window. The cries and laughter permeated the scene outside, seeming to fill the air with the blissful yellow in the sky instead of the setting sun, and for a moment Cecilia wished she could join them.

Her husband's hand landed on her shoulder, the soft yet strong feel of the lion's arm stretching across her shoulder blades. She wasn't surprised at the contact, she heard his heavy footsteps as he left the room to get his chocolate, as he came into the living room, and heard him take a sip before he reached to hold her.

"Want me to describe what's going on outside?" Abel asked after another sip.

"I can see it myself," she replied plainly.

He hesitated. She knew he closed his eyes in discomfort. "It will *always* be just a *little* creepy when you say that."

"I know," she replied, her voice still plain.

"Mm. Though it'd be creepier if you could pick out a pair of matching socks." He chuckled as she slapped him in the gut, the gentle pudge from all the treats she made him absorbing her blow. His laugh sounded just as golden as his horn. "I love you though," he said, kissing the top of her head and burying his short feline muzzle in her soft fur, "mismatched socks and all."

She laid her head on his strong shoulder, letting her arm wrap around his back. "You sounded great today."

"Thank you sweetie. For the hot chocolate, too."

"I can make cookies if you'd like."

"I'm good, thanks."

"You sure?" she asked, nuzzling herself deeper into the crook of his neck and thick mane.

He pulled his hand off her shoulder and used it to lift her chin, to make her blind eyes look into his. She didn't know why he did it so much, it wasn't like it mattered, but it was a sweet gesture nonetheless.

"Do you want to make the cookies, hun?"

His eyes shone as he said it, she could tell. Something in the way his voice . . . somethinged. There were no words for the change, but she knew something was different. The difference was almost

imperceptible, very nearly nothing at all, but she could hear it, and she knew it was the shine in his eyes leaking into his voice, giving it the quality only she would ever know. And it gave his eyes a color only she would ever be able to see, not attached to any labels or descriptions she had been told about all the different colors of the world; it was a color beyond sight, too beautiful for it, and she twisted her mouth into a broad smile knowing that all the fussing and worrying he did when they first met, that he still did sometimes because he just didn't know what it was like, was meaningless when she could see such a beautiful color. The color Abel's eyes lit up with when he looked at her.

Their color.

"I would like to make the cookies," she answered him, her voice bright through her smile, a crisp baby blue hanging in the air.

Careful not to get any hot chocolate on her, he wrapped his arms around her petite frame tightly, pulling her into his large, fit yet bulky body. She returned the squeeze, drinking in his scent, a sweet, yet masculine smell of brown mane and fluffy yellow fur and pink flesh and traces of orange soap. "Then who am I to stop you?" he whispered, kissing the top of her russet head again.

He let her go so she could move to the kitchen. He didn't try to help her; she wouldn't have accepted it even if she didn't know her way through the house better than he did. "Just don't burn the house down."

Scowling with bemused indignance, Cecilia reached in vain to give him a good whack. The sound of his golden laugh filled the house as he watched the vixen smile with frustration, her arm flailing about as the lion playfully dodged his wife.