

Beneath Their Masks

by Karalynn Lee

Emaris woke cradled in Tedraun's arms, a row of faces staring down at her. Masks lined the walls of every chamber in his home, every imaginable beast depicted in a cacophony of shapes and colors.

"It's a good thing Mayfly Night's finally come," she murmured into his ear. "There isn't room for any more masks."

"They'll all be gone by tonight," he said blurrily. He was not one for mornings. But unlike most of his sleepy promises, she knew this one would hold true. Then he'd start again, for next year.

Tedraun refused to store the masks elsewhere, although with the prices he commanded from the nobles, he could well afford a larger house. But that was her lover, patient and cautious to a fault. The most daring act of his life had been to stop in the market crowds one day and listen while she told a story. He'd fallen in love with the sound of her voice, he'd told her, since he knew visual beauty was easily manufactured.

She, on the other hand, felt fresh wonder each time she looked at the masks: a solemn stag complete with tines, then a winter princess, all pearls and trailing white feathers. How could she have resisted him? His fingers never hesitated over the beads and ribbons he used as ornamentation, or over her body, for that matter. And the storyteller in her loved the roles he crafted for others to wear.

Emaris kissed his shoulder. "I'm off to the library."

He mumbled something close to an assent. He didn't have to wake till later, when he would deliver the masks to those who had commissioned them for this single night.

She rose and dressed. Emaris went to the palace early each morning, where the librarian was collecting folktales. He paid her to come and tell him the ones she knew, so that he might write them down. Tedraun insisted that she didn't need

the money, but she told him how proud she was to have her stories, told her way, chosen for inclusion in the royal library.

In truth, the librarian didn't pay her in coin, but in trade. She thirsted after the rows of books she could not read, for she still knew their pages held truths and lies and beautiful words. After her tale was written, the librarian would read her a chapter of her choice.

The streets were quiet in the pre-dawn stillness. She encountered no one on her way, only a pile of rags that might have been a sleeping beggar, the smell of fresh bread when she passed the baker's, and the fluttering shadows of pigeons' wings. A cat watched her, and she thought about coaxing it out of its alley to stroke its head, but Tedraun disapproved of feral animals.

She was nearly to the palace when she saw a lean hound slink out of a shadow and in front of her. This was no wild creature, but a well-bred hunting dog. Before she could wonder what it was doing out of the kennels, her vision blurred. She blinked. There stood a man who had not been there before, she swore it, but now he was leaning with one hand pressed to the wall, the other covering his eyes as though against a world too harshly bright.

She must have pulled in her breath too quickly, for he turned and saw her.

Emaris remembered several paces between them, but there might have been no distance at all for the speed with which he wrapped his hand around her throat. “Tell me who you are,” he said very calmly, although she could feel him trembling slightly.

She said, “Emaris Lin. A marketplace storyteller.” But her mouth was dry, parched of any stories.

“Some tales are better left untold,” the man said. His grip tightened.

She knew what happened to those who witnessed something forbidden; legends abounded about their punishments. She closed her eyes and cried in her mind for Tedraun.

The pressure on her neck eased away. She sank to her knees, drinking in air, and did not open her eyes, even as his footsteps faded. She did not want to know where he went. She already knew too much.

She was a storyteller, as she had said. She knew the tales of the Miirazenu: the children of Miir, they called themselves, given the gift of two shapes. Some were myths of quests or

love. But those were ancient and forgotten. Today, if a raven circled a living man, or a fox eluded hunters with laughing eyes, men blamed the Miirazenu, and put their hands to their swords. They were not welcome; they accepted no man's rule, and lived in the wilds. There were tales of their viciousness, and how they delighted in teasing and tricking humans.

If a true Miirazen were found in the city, he might be stoned. He might be fed to the pit dogs in a twist upon his other form. He might be left exposed on the city walls, but it was sure that he would die.

She did not blame him for his threat. His fate would be terrible if he were discovered. She had seen him once before, on her way to the library, dressed in fine clothes, although he had not noticed her at all. Why should he have? He was a noble, and the court would dream up exquisite revenge against a filthy Miirazen who had infiltrated their number.

He'd been leaving the palace, though. She would be safe within. She entered swiftly and made her way to the library, where a sharp-faced man awaited her. He was already sitting at his desk, a fresh sheet of paper before him, ink pot open, quill sharpened.

"What happened?" he asked without preamble.

Her fingers flew to her neck. “Nothing,” she said, but the hoarseness of her voice told the lie.

He tsked. “Someone set upon you?”

She had to tell him something, so she nodded. “He let me go. I didn’t have anything worth taking.” It seemed a simple enough explanation.

The librarian leaned back. “Well, you must save your voice for the market, then. There’s no point in forcing you to talk after such an experience.”

“But—”

He smiled. “I’ll read you something, though.”

He was a kind man, in his way. Without meaning to, she asked, “Is there anything here about the Miirazenu?”

His brows went up. “Curious,” he said, then, “Can you reach that slender book on the top shelf with the red spine?”

She was tall for a woman, a fact that had embarrassed her until Tedraun had assured her it mattered not at all, and until she had learned of this use for her height. She stretched up and tipped out the volume he’d described. It had been pushed deep between its neighbors, as though to stay hidden. Emaris handed it to the librarian, then seated herself to listen. She leaned forward, though, to better see the writing; its

shapes and lines fascinated her, a maze of meanings she could not unlock.

“This is the journal of Rumas Kerr, a noble in the court of our ninth last king.” The librarian opened the book and turned a few pages. “The last entry reads: ‘They call themselves the children of Miir, but they are bastards.’”

He closed the book.

“That’s all?” she said, startled.

“That’s all that’s written here about the Miirazenu.”

The abrupt end said something in itself, but she would muse upon it later. He was looking at her expectantly, so she rose.

“No need to come tomorrow,” he said wryly. “We’ll all be recovering, no doubt.”

Mayfly Night was notorious for its excesses. She planned a quiet evening with Tedraun without masks or any revelry but the enjoyment of his company, but she smiled and bade the librarian a memorable night.

She went to the market then, and bought a scarf to hide her bruises, and hot tea to soothe her throat. It helped; those, and the fact that she was more at home here than in Tedraun’s house, among the bright colors and smells that were a decade’s

worth familiar. Relaxing with the familiar motions, she set up her simple awning and rug and bowl, although she didn't need these things; she could sit anywhere to ply her trade as long as she had her voice, and had in the past, but there was no need to suffer the sun and hard ground anymore. It hadn't been easy in the beginning, speaking when no one was listening, hoping that some word snagged a passerby's interest. But she was known now, and people would gather when they knew she had come. The children first, sent by parents who wanted to bargain in peace.

So she began with a simple tale. To her relief, the rasp in her voice was almost gone, and there were only a half-dozen boys and girls, so she didn't need to speak loudly. The children laughed at the right times, and it drew the attention of other folk in the market. She took a long sip of the now-cold tea, then started another story, an old favorite that was easy for her to slip into. Then another, and another. The sun rose; she stopped to see the day's wares, and buy some baked rolls to eat; then she sat and spoke on. It could have been any other day.

But at some point the crowd suddenly began stirring. Someone was pushing his way through. No, not pushing,

Emaris realized. People were moving aside on their own, unwilling to stay in the way of a noble. It was the same noble from this morning, the one who turned into a hound.

“Let us speak of stories, storyteller,” he said coldly.

Her listeners were already moving away, unwilling to share the brunt of his anger. She sighed—unfinished stories always bothered her—and stood.

He seized her shoulder and pushed her deeper back into the shadow of her awning for some semblance of privacy. “Who did you tell?” he demanded.

“No one,” she said quietly. She did not want to die for a falsehood, but she had no proof, and it was for him to believe her, or not.

He released her. “Then why did I get this?” He thrust his hand toward her.

She stared at the mask dangling from his fingers. A hound, with the same slender muzzle as his own.

Admirers sometimes sent masks on Mayfly Night, since they could then recognize the object of their affection if the recipient chose to wear it. She knew this mask had not been sent out of admiration. It was a taunt, a challenge.

Yet someone knew what he was, and had not publicly

announced him. To exact a private penalty? Or perhaps even a sympathizer?

There was a story buried here.

Against her will, her fingers crept out and touched the fur. It felt amazingly real, even where dyed another color. There were very few mask-makers who turned out work of this quality.

“I told no one of what I saw,” she said, raising her gaze to his. He was watching her steadily, the hard edge of his desperation still showing in the line of his shoulders, the tenseness of the arm he held out. This was not a man, she thought, who had ever hurt her because he wanted to frighten her, but because he himself was frightened. “But I know who made that mask.”

His eyes narrowed. “How?”

Emaris swallowed. “I live with him.”

“And he’ll know who sent me this?”

“Let me take it to him, and ask.”

Her offer surprised him. His fingers loosened enough for her to take the mask out of his grasp. He did not try to take it back.

“Why would you help me?” he asked instead.

She did not know how to make him understand. She was quiet for a moment, then said, “What does it feel like?”

His face softened. “I always close my eyes when I shift,” he said, “because it is like dreaming. And that dream settles over your skin and then into your bones, and when you open your eyes, you are the dream. You never feel more like yourself than just after a shift, because everything has changed, and yet you’re the same.”

She said, “I have heard and spoken of such wonders, but you are the first one I’ve encountered.”

“You don’t fear me.”

“No. I...envy you.”

It was his turn for silence. Then, “I’m sorry for this,” he said, touching her bruised neck with a butterfly’s gentleness.

She remembered his harsh grip from before. This tender touch was nothing like it, and when his fingers paused for a moment along her jaw, she almost lifted her head to expose more of her throat and encourage the downward slide of his hand.

The quality of his breathing changed.

Emaris was not a beautiful woman, certainly not when compared to the nobles in their jewels and finery. Tedraun had

been an unexpected gift in her life, a man willing to look beyond her appearance to find something to love. He had courted her slowly, steadily. And so she had never truly experienced this: the utter certainty, without words, of a man's sudden interest in her; the heat of his gaze, the rising beat of her heart that she knew echoed his.

She eased away with the merest of movements. He was, she told herself, the ultimate fantasy, a creature from myth made solid before her. Nothing he could offer would be better than Tedraun's love.

He sighed. "Learn what you can. I'll find you later."

She said nothing as he turned and left.

There was no point in staying at the market, with her audience frightened away. It was darkening anyway. Besides—she couldn't stop stroking the mask—she was curious what Tedraun would have to say.

To her disappointment, he wasn't home. And it took her a moment to recognize his house, with its walls stripped bare, as Tedraun was delivering his year's worth of labor. Still, she felt curiously betrayed that he wasn't here to share her adventure with.

Hardly an adventure, she scoffed at herself. She had

done nothing save being near-strangled.

She should stay here and wait for Tedraun, but she chafed at the notion. Outside, the revelry was starting; she could already hear music, and it filled her with a sudden urge to go outside and partake in the wildness of the night.

She tried pulling the hound mask over her head. She was tall enough that she could pass as a man, with a heavy cloak to disguise her shape. Whoever had sent the mask would surely seek her out, thinking that it was the noble who wore it. It seemed appropriate; dogs were used in the hunt to flush out game.

But her hair was far too long, and the design of the mask didn't allow her to cover her head. She almost abandoned her plan then. Then she remembered how Tedraun constantly reassured her that he didn't care how she looked. And weren't there always women in the stories who had crept out of their narrow roles to pose as men and find glory?

She didn't let herself consider the matter too long, but found a sharp knife and kept a steady hand.

Her head felt curiously light, but the weight of the mask helped balance her. She kept the knife. Then she drew the cloak about herself and stepped outside.

She didn't know where to go, except where she would be seen, so she walked the streets slowly, stopping to watch tumblers or musicians or lavish costumes. As the sky dimmed, the music grew wilder, and people strolled off in pairs. She took a polite sip whenever she was offered wine, careful of the mask, and wondered what face the other would wear.

He was a stag.

He came upon her from behind, but just as she was turning. She was slow to react; she was wondering where she had seen that mask before, and then she remembered—

In the morning, waking. It was one of Tedraun's creations. And it was Tedraun's voice, saying, "I must speak with you alone."

His hand clamped on her arm and pulled her down an alley. She could not protest; a sharp point pricked her ribs.

She didn't know where he was taking her, but he stopped at the last door and fumbled with the lock before opening it and shoving her inside.

It was an unused storeroom, empty of all but dust. Her first thought was indignant; he could have kept the masks here. Then the knife dug a little into her side, and she cried out as Tedraun roughly gripped the mask on her face and tore it

aside.

He rocked back. “Emaris!”

Then from outside, an echo: “Emaris!”

She felt the blood drain from her face. It was the noble’s voice. And he skidded inside now, unkempt from running hard, a non-descript half-mask dangling about his neck, and he saw her and said, “I knew it was you, I saw you come in here with the mask on—”

Tedraun seized him and put the knife to his throat. The noble quieted.

“Tedraun!” Emaris couldn’t fathom this. Tedraun had his occasional rages when his art wasn’t effortless, but she hadn’t imagined him capable of harming a man.

Animals, though— She remembered how he’d once shoved a hungry cat away with his boot, muttering about how unsafe such creatures were, and her heart chilled.

He looked at her now in the same way he had then, pleading for understanding. A cat had caused his mother’s death, he’d explained, and she knew there were fevers that could come from untreated scratches. But now?

“What are you doing?” she asked, keeping her voice even.

Tedraun drew a breath. “I have to take care of him, Emaris. I first saw him almost a year ago. I was outside, looking for inspiration for a new mask, when I spotted a hound. I followed it—and it turned into this man.”

“What did he do to you?” she asked, although she did not want to know.

He looked at her. “It turned into a man, Emaris. A dog.”

“I know,” she said impatiently, and then she understood. “He never even saw you.”

“No. I hid. He’s a noble; no one would have believed me. I had to deal with him myself, later.”

Bile rose in her throat. “You planned to murder him on Mayfly Night, when no one knows who anyone is. Unless you give him a mask you’ll recognize.”

“It’s not murder. He’s a beast, Emaris! Strutting about in court with no one the wiser, when even the kennels would be too good for him.”

The noble did not make a noise. He was watching the man who held a knife to his throat.

There was something indescribably graceful, she had thought, about taking either one of two shapes with ease.

Nothing to stir up this disgust.

She tried to make him see. “His animal form doesn’t make him one in mind. He’s a man, just with a different body sometimes.”

But it was the noble who glanced at her, astonished.

“A Miirazen killed my mother,” Tedraun said.

“You said it was a stray cat,” she said, thrown off-guard.

“That was only how it appeared.”

“Did you ever see it turn human?” she asked.

His lips thinned, and the last shred of her restraint fled.

She struck Tedraun’s arm away. He wasn’t expecting it; the knife fell to the floor. She set her foot upon it, and in a swift decision, drew her own blade out from under her cloak and pressed it into the noble’s hand.

Then it was a familiar tableau, reversed: the noble, holding Tedraun captive with his weapon.

She did not want either of them to die. She had known Tedraun would kill the noble; she did not know what the noble would do.

He set the knife very carefully against Tedraun’s throat, and drew the barest line of blood. Tedraun was pale, anger fled in face of terror.

The noble leaned close and drew in a deep breath. “I have your scent now,” he said. “Your fear, your blood. Leave this city. Run far enough, and I may not follow the trail all the way. But if I ever catch you...” His words became a growl, and for a second sharp jaws snapped in Tedraun’s face.

Tedraun moaned and stumbled away, then broke into a run. Emaris did not call out, or go after him, although she felt the urge to do so, briefly. She didn’t think she would see him again.

“Can you do that?” she asked. “Track him?”

The noble shook his head. “As well as any hound, I suppose, but no better. A stream with a strong current would be the end of it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t kill him,” she said.

“I couldn’t have. He meant something to you, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“And yet you were trying to help me. Why did you wear the mask? You must have known it was dangerous. It took me a minute to realize what you had done, even after I saw you, because I couldn’t believe it.”

“It was a chance at adventure, I suppose,” she said. “I’ve

told many of those. I wanted to live one.”

He wasn't listening, though. He had tilted his head, was studying her. “You cut your hair,” he said.

Heat rose in her cheeks as she remembered her hasty work. “Yes.”

“It becomes you.”

She turned away. “I know that's not so. I did it myself, with a knife.”

“I didn't mean in beauty, necessarily,” he said. “But it befits your courage, somehow. How you care for more than pride.”

She could not control her blush now. “My thanks.”

“No,” he said, “mine. I owe you more than gratitude, though. Is there some way I can repay what you've done for my sake?”

Her first reaction was to brush off his question. But a thought arrested her.

“You live in the palace,” she said.

He nodded, a trifle wary.

“I go to the library there, some mornings. The librarian reads to me, but only a handful of pages, and I have to wait till the next day for more. I know he's busy. I know you must be.”

She faltered as she realized what she was asking. “But perhaps you’d be willing to read something short to me?”

He held up his hand. “Emaris,” he said, “would you like to learn to read?”

Her heart leapt. Not because the entire library and its volumes of knowledge would be opened to her if such a thing came to pass—but this noble was offering to spend the time necessary with her.

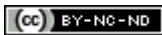
She didn’t even know what he was called. She said shyly, “Can I know your name?”

He smiled. “I’ll teach you how to write it.”



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