

# *Mayfly Night*

*by Karalynn Lee*

Kinari had yet to choose which face to wear on Mayfly Night. Her cousin Dayamies mocked her, “You’re wingèd so much that your human face is a mask anyway.” He himself already had a lion-mask, framed by a tawny mane: a proud piece of work, won through much flirtation with the mask-maker’s daughter, Kinari knew.

She frowned at him. “It’s not just play for me.” She let her fingers trail along the extravagant feathers of a peacock, but she wanted a female guise, of course. And Day was right; she spent too much time as a bird anyway.

The mask-maker was watching her wearily. She was a patient woman—had to be, to labor over creations that would

not see use except but one night a year. But Kinari was keeping the others waiting.

She closed her eyes and let her hands drift where they would. Softness greeted her fingertips. She opened her eyes and found that she was touching a fox-mask.

“I can’t think of an animal less like you,” Day said. “It’s a good guise.”

The mask-maker bowed as she lifted it off its place on the rack. But, decision made, Kinari felt only more on edge as she took it to her own tent. She walked past the others who waited outside the mask-maker’s tent, not bothering to share words. She had only a few hours till sundown, and Mayfly Night.

It was the first year she was old enough to go to Kendros for Mayfly Night. She was the only one to come of age this year, which was why she had first pick of masks among the Miirazenu. She would have rather have year-mates with whom to argue, but they had both been killed before they reached this day.

She tried the mask against her face. The world narrowed, and she had to turn her head in order to see her cousin, who had followed her. “Day,” she said as a thought

suddenly occurred to her, “do you keep the mask on even during...?”

He laughed. “That entirely depends. But I’ll tell you that it can be awkward during some situations.” As if to illustrate his point, he leaned in and kissed her furred cheek. She barely felt it. “You need to get ready now, and so do I. Enjoy yourself, Kinari.”

That was easy for him to say, she thought resentfully as he left her. He went to amuse himself. She went for duty.

Like most of the Miirazenu, she’d been conceived on Mayfly Night. She went tonight to seek her own mate.

Suddenly rebellious, she pulled off the mask and her robe and strode out of the tent. The sky called; she slipped into her swan-form and answered.

There was nothing in the world of men that could compare to this: the dance of the wind, the world laid out to her view below her.

There was a pond close by; she flew there and landed in the water. A family of ducks voiced their resentment, but she ignored them. The water calmed, and she tucked herself into resting position.

What could the other Miirazenu do if she didn’t go

tonight? A few of them had shapes with wings and might find her, but no one could take her to Kendros and force her to find a male.

—And if they did, would it be so terrible? She had watched enviously as Dayamies teased the females, wishing for the same easy intimacy. But it was for the females to ensure the continuation of their lines, and no union of two Miirazenu had ever produced offspring. Here was her only chance to know someone's touch without feeling as though she were betraying her kind. There weren't many of them left, between their unwelcome in men's territory and the curse of their infertility.

Some said it was Miir's blessing, so that they would have call to walk on two feet, and not forget themselves in their animal shapes. Kinari didn't think that would be such a terrible thing. Except, of course, that there would be nothing to bring them together when they each took after varied beasts.

A noise interrupted her musings: a human voice, exclaiming. Someone was here.

She should have been more careful; the regent of Kendros was known to encourage hunts into the Eyrim Forest, and even lead some of his own. Some of the Miirazenu thought

that he suspected the truth, that not all beasts in the forest were nothing more than animals.

She stirred, then stretched out her neck and began to beat her wings and claw at the water to give herself some height. On the fourth stroke her feet lifted clear of the water.

Just as she was about to clear the line of trees, out of sight by anyone who might be lurking by the pond's edge, something struck her shoulder.

She tried to fly faster, but on the downstroke her left wing exploded with pain. She cried out and barely had the presence of mind to keep her right wing outstretched so she could at least somewhat control her plunge.

She struck the forest canopy with a force that shook leaves loose in a maelstrom. The next layer of branches was barely softer. Kinari changed to human and tried to catch hold of the tree she struck, but the effort wrenched her shoulder again and she could do nothing but let herself fall.

At last she dropped to the ground. She wanted to curl up around her pain, but she knew the hunter would be coming for her again. She took hold of the arrow in her shoulder and recklessly tore it out of her flesh.

A moment of darkness. She came to only a few minutes

later, judging by how little the shadows had moved, but those minutes were precious. She pushed herself to her feet, pressed her hand to her shoulder to staunch the bleeding, and began to run.

She knew the Eyrim Forest better than any human hunter, but she didn't want to lead anyone to the temporary settlement the Miirazenu had established. So she took an arduous, roundabout route that would surely shake off any pursuers. She stopped by a stream, to hide her scent from any dogs and to wash her wound. By the time she reached the tent, she was light-headed from the pain. She wrapped a spare length of cloth around her shoulder, gritting her teeth against the awkwardness of doing so with only one hand.

Normally there would be others like her in this tent, sharing the anticipation of a first Mayfly Night. Her two year-mates had been killed by hunters, as she almost had this night. The dwindling numbers of the Miirazenu was why she still should go. During the festival everyone would be masked, and a band of strangers unnoticed; names were stripped away by the moonlight, and whatever silvered truths discovered were understood not to survive into morning. It was the only safe time for their kind to enter the city of Kendros. The sky had

fallen dark outside; it would soon be time to go.

There was a rustling outside. “Kinari, are you done yet?” Careless as always, Dayamies ducked into the tent.

They stared at each other. Kinari made no move to cover her nakedness; the Miirazenu were used to each other’s bodies, and Dayamies had already seen the bruises that covered hers.

Quietly, he said, “You’ll need a gown with sleeves, to cover the bandages.”

Relieved that he did not scold her for recklessly endangering herself before Mayfly Night, she acquiesced to letting him rebind her shoulder and choose a dress for her. It was a silken affair, traded for or woven by one of the Miirazenu who remained human for such purposes, and for all that it covered her shoulders and arms, much of her breast was exposed.

“Men like bare skin,” Day said.

She thought of a man’s finger tracing the neckline, drawing lower, till he could touch the vulnerable point above her heart—but with no threat of death. It stirred her in an unfamiliar way.

Day was watching her; he smiled. “You’re ready.”

They made their way to Kendros on feet that were unfamiliar with long distances under their soles. The Miirazenu did this year after year, and had known not to set their tents too far away, so the walls of the city soon rose above them.

Kendros had been raised and destroyed by wizards; remnants of their power remained, enough that the Miirazenu never entered by the North Gate. Its stones had survived the war that killed the last of the wizards, and they were carved with eyes which were said to let the gate watch and guard itself. It would have been a simple matter to creep into the city or fly over its walls in their animal shapes, but for the fact that clothing did not transform with them.

Instead, a Miirazen bribed the sentry of a small postern to leave it unlocked. It led into the orchard of a nobleman with ties to smugglers. They slipped between the rows of trees and let themselves quietly out the gate that led to the street.

“You can find your way back here?” Day asked her.

Kinari already felt overwhelmed by all the stone and straight lines surrounding her. How was she to tell one square building from another? But she could tell that Day was restless, so she nodded.

“Good hunting,” he said, then turned and was gone.



She went the other way. It was quiet here, at the edge of the city; further in she could hear music. She followed the threads of it, until one strand solidified into a raccoon-masked fiddler in a ring of torches. People were laughing and dancing while he played to the furious pace of a tempest. He finished with a flourish; a ladybug-girl sidled up to him. Some people kept dancing even without the music; one couple moved in a different rhythm. She could not help watching as the man's hands moved down the woman's back and began gathering up the folds of her skirt.

There was nothing elegant about the following grunts and thrusts. She rather missed the music; it wasn't something they had much of in the forest, so she listened for more. There were drumbeats in the distance, calling her. As she came to another circle of dancers, she she realized that the drum was accompanying a flute: an odd combination, but that was hardly rare tonight, she thought wryly as she passed a rat and a snake coupling.

"I could use some fox," a man in a horse-mask said, reaching for her. He made the mistake of grabbing her left arm. She bit back a gasp as her wound flared in pain and tore his hand away.

“No,” she said, wishing for the force of a swan’s wings with which to discourage him. She gave him a fox’s grin instead, the kind that meant unpleasant mischief.

He stared at her a moment, then moved off, muttering.

A girl in a mask of shimmering fish scales winked at her and passed her a flagon. “That’s the way to handle them,” she said.

Kinari tipped it back and drank deeply of the mulled wine, then handed it back. Its warmth spread through her. Emboldened, she stretched and then began to let her feet move to the music. The girl with the wine grinned and joined her. Her dance was more primal, her hips twisting, hands sliding down her own body, and a tall man with an owl mask touched her shoulder in a question.

The fish swam away to dance with the owl. Kinari watched a bit wistfully, then stepped back to give them room and bumped into someone. Hands settled comfortably at her waist.

“Where are you going, little fox?”

She turned to face the speaker: a cob, she found to her amusement. She relaxed, even as she asked, “How did you know what my mask was from behind me?”

“I saw a group of people dressed in chicken masks running away, squawking,” he said solemnly, and she laughed. “No, I’ll confess: I saw you dancing, and I wanted to ask you to dance with me.”

She wondered why he seemed so familiar; it was his swan-guise, surely. When he offered her his hand, she took it, and he spun her under the arc of their arms before drawing her into a light dance-partner’s hold. She didn’t recognize either the song or the steps, but his hand on her back guided her deftly, assuredly. As the flute trilled on and the drum pounded its rhythm into her bones, he drew her closer, and by the end of the song her hands were twined behind his neck, their hearts racing against each other.

“You dance beautifully.” He lifted one hand and traced her mouth; it was one of the few parts of her face exposed by the mask, and the touch was unexpectedly intimate. “Would you join me for the rest of the night?”

Day would laugh at her choice—how predictable, he’d scoff—but it was hers to make. This man was well-formed, with a hard body that did not speak of a soft city life, and a touch that was confident yet not presumptuous. “Yes,” she said.

“Come to my home,” he said. “I won’t keep you beyond the night. The servants are all out tonight, of course. And I promise not to light any lamps. But I would like to kiss you, and between your fox’s muzzle and my swan’s bill I don’t think that will happen out here.”

She laughed. They couldn’t take off their masks in public, of course; bare faces weren’t shown under moonlight on Mayfly Night. And she wouldn’t mind being able to explore his body in a leisurely fashion.

He led her to a house away from the crowds and noise; in silence they entered. It was completely dark, once he closed the door. “There are stairs,” he said, and in the darkness he guided her hand to the rail so she would not stumble. He did not let go, though, even when she tentatively made her way onto the first step.

Their heights matched now; he began to delicately trace her earlobe with his tongue. His hardness pressed against her from behind, and she tilted her hips to meet it. He groaned. “Witch-fox,” he said, hands busy with the ties of her mask, then reached around her and lifted it off. His must already be off, she realized, and she twisted around, somehow hoping for a glimpse of his face. She could see nothing, of course, and yet

his mouth unerringly found hers.

His teeth raked over her lips before his tongue entered her mouth demandingly. The ferocity of his kiss left her limp, clinging to the rail for real support. She pulled free for want of air, and want for more. On the stairs she was too busy trying to keep her balance, too penned by the rail. They needed a surface, any surface. She turned around and lured him up the stairs, step by backward step, keeping her mouth tantalizingly out of reach. He pulled her tight against her and kissed her breathless to let her know that he was allowing her to tease him this way, then released her.

Light-headed, she climbed the last of the stairs. He took her hand and led her into his bedchamber. She knew because he drew her down onto the softness of his bed. “Lie down, little fox,” he said, and she stretched out across it, feeling his weight settle next to her.

He unlaced her gown and drew it down her body. His lips followed the whisper of the silk, then lower, lower... His hand smoothed over the flare of her hip, and then he kissed the hollow by it. She drew up her leg and hooked it over his shoulder, and she felt the breath of his laugh against the inside of her thigh before he licked into her folds.

She shivered, although she felt unbearably hot. His mouth moved over her with a deliberateness that told her he knew how urgent her need was. Her fingers roamed through his hair.

He grasped the ankle of the leg she'd kept straight, and drew it up until she was spread completely open to him. His palm stroked its way up the length of her leg.

Then he pushed his fingers her. She bucked against his hand at the suddenness of it, the sensation of entry. He withdrew a little, then plunged his fingers back in. And all the while his tongue stroked over her, again and again. She tried to twist away as she tensed against the building rhythm, but he held her against his mouth and his fingers.

She froze, then uttered a sharp cry as the world crashed in on her. He still did not stop, and she knew she was completely helpless before him. It was like flying on the highest, sun-scorched gales; like the sudden liquid drenching she'd felt once when she passed through a waterfall; it was nothing but him, rooting her into this body more deeply than she'd ever dreamed.

When he finally pulled away she could not help sighing.

He chuckled. "We're not done yet." His hands turned

her onto her side, then her stomach; then he pulled her hips up and back toward him, so that she came up on to her hands and knees.

Then she felt him nudging against the center of her wetness. “Yes...” She arched. He kissed her shoulder, then thrust hard into her. A sound escaped her throat as he stretched her to her fullest. Then he dragged his cock out of her, and the loss made her whimper.

He wrapped her hair around one hand and pulled her head back. He captured her mouth just before he slammed into her again, and so her cry was swallowed.

“Little fox, how tight you are,” he murmured. “I wish I could see you glistening in light. And even in bed you move like a dancer, do you know?”

She wanted to respond to him, but she couldn't do more than make wordless sounds of need as he began to fuck her in an unrelenting rhythm. She lost herself to him again when his fingers came around her and pressed her just so. And when she began to recover her breath he was still pounding into her, so she tried to meet him each time, and each time their bodies met it was more forceful than the last, till he thrust so strongly that she was thrown forward onto her

stomach. And even then he tried to push more deeply into her, and she felt him tense as he came inside of her. “You’re beautiful...” he whispered as his body began to relax.

He pressed his lips to the nape of her neck, then dropped onto the bed beside her.

She lay there for a moment, then slowly stretched out in contentment, deliciously sore. She could feel the heat of his body all along her side, but that wasn’t enough for him; he let one hand rest on her hip in casual possession. When she slid a hand onto his chest to feel his slowing heartbeat, he chuckled. She looked up at him in curiosity.

“Just amazed at this, with you,” he said. “I usually don’t bother partaking in Mayfly Night—it’s all the same, year after year. Except this one.” He kissed her temple. “I’m glad I was restless tonight.”

She wondered suddenly who he was. But she could not ask, not tonight. She turned onto her side to face him and stroked her hands over his face, as though she were blind; he had straight features and a smile she could feel against her palms. Their paths would never cross again after this night, but she liked to think that if she ever encountered him again, she would be able to recognize this smile as belonging to the man



who had given her so much pleasure.

She felt she owed him something of herself, so she said, “I’m fond of swans.”

“I guessed that much,” he said dryly. “I, on the other hand, could have cared less if you’d been wearing a boar’s mask, or a lizard’s.”

“All the time I spent trying to choose,” she said mournfully, and he laughed. She liked the sound, liked the sound of his breath catching as her hands moved down his body and her fingers circled the head of his cock. It was stiffening again.

She curled downward and took him into her mouth. This time he groaned out loud. She swirled her tongue around him and felt him swell in response. His fingers tangled in her hair and urged her head down so she could taste him more fully.

“Your mouth is so sweet...” His voice trailed off when she filled her throat with him. Then on the next stroke, he pulled her head away. His hands drew her up the length of his body. “But I want to take you again.”

He rolled them over so that he was above her, then pinned down her wrists. She opened her legs instinctively, to

cradle his weight between them. He was so close... She tried to urge him closer, but he let only the very tip of him rest against her.

“I want you begging this time,” he said.

“Please,” she said, fighting his hold.

He bent his head and caught a nipple between his lips, almost idly.

“I want you inside of me,” she said softly.

He entered her slowly, deliberately, and she cried out in relief. He released her wrists and skimmed his fingers along the undersides of her breasts, then up along her collarbone. His hand brushed the bandage on her shoulder, and he stilled.

She arched her body. “It’s fine,” she murmured, “don’t stop...”

Instead he pulled away completely. In a strained voice he said, “I may be going mad, but were you hit here by an arrow?”

A different chill crawled down her spine, and she sat up, crossing her arms over her chest with her hands over her shoulders—less to cover her nakedness than to hide the bandage. “What do you mean?”

He said slowly, “I went hunting yesterday. I shot a

swan, but where it should have fallen I found only a bloodied arrow that no bird could have pulled out on its own, and the imprint of a foot.”

There was some way to laugh this off, lightly; she could tease him for his outlandish assumption. He would feel a moment’s foolishness, then try to distract her. She knew how it could go, how it should happen. Must. And yet she did not want to mock this man who had taken her so seriously on a night of illusions.

She threw her legs over the edge of the bed and said, taut, “I must leave. The night’s near-ended.”

He moved as if he wanted to stop her, but then he subsided. “I said I would not keep you,” he said, but there was an undercurrent in his voice that belied his acquiescence.

He had already begun hunting her.

She stepped into her dress, then found her mask by touch. She couldn’t help turning and looking at him; his silhouette was a dark form against more darkness, statue-still. “Fare well,” she whispered.

She made her way down the stairs, wishing she could simply shift shape and fly instead of bearing the soreness between her legs with each jarring step.

Just inside the entrance was a stand. And there, where she had not seen it in the black of night, perhaps tossed in anger when he strode inside after a frustrated hunt, was the arrow. Next to it, as though to taunt her, was the swan-mask he'd undonned.

She considered breaking the arrow, marked with her blood. But her hand drifted to her stomach, where she might soon feel another heartbeat. No, she thought. Let him keep this much of her.

She walked into and out of the streets of Kendros. By the time she reached Eyrim, twilight had already begun banishing shadows, unveiling what Mayfly Night had hidden. She uncovered her face and closed her eyes, savoring the air against her cheeks and letting the fox-mask dangle from her fingers. But it didn't matter; he had already unmasked her, in the darkness.



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