

Mooncalf

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The woman sat on the grass between the highway lanes, rocking a baby in her arms as the trucks howled past. The hot gusts of the trucks' passage flung her dress about her legs, spat grit against her cheeks, tousled the baby's wisps of hair.

She gazed at the trucks as they came. Atop the nearest one, a small figure stood and swayed and uttered long, ecstatic shrieks. As the truck passed, the figure leapt from the cab, all six limbs splayed like an oak leaf, and landed flat on the grass.

"I *love* that! I *love* that!" He flopped over onto his back. He was larger than the baby, but smaller than the woman. His dirt-colored body was covered with curly hairs, although his limbs were smooth skin. His eyes were large and dark, and right now they darted with nervous excitement.

"Did you hear? Mara, did you hear?" He sat up and looked at Mara, waiting for a response, then continued without one. "Prosper is dead. You can bring him back." He gestured with his chin toward the baby, who had quieted. "Mara!"

Finally, she spoke, and her voice was like fog, like moss underfoot.

"Prosper or no Prosper, we can't go back. Babies are frail, they die every day, everyone knows that. No-one would think twice."

"I...get your point."

They sat side by side, breathing the sickly-hot exhaust and feeling the ground rumble as the trucks thundered past.

The beast said, "It's not like he's anything special. No prophecies, no royal blood. Just someone's baby. Big deal."

The woman turned on him with a jerk that made the baby start crying. Over the yells and the sound of the truck engines, she said, "He's still alive, Cali! That doesn't mean anything to you? You're a —"

"A monster?" The beast laughed. "Oh, I wish you were the first who's said *that*. But it's a bit much to hear it from you." His voice became bitter. "I've followed you through a dozen worlds, done everything to keep you and the baby safe —"

"I didn't ask you to do any of that."

"— this just-a-baby. Not even your baby."

"I'm just a woman. Not even your woman. But you follow." She rocked the baby, who quieted.

"That's different," the beast said softly. He got to his feet and wandered from one side of the grass strip to the other.

"I have to find some food for him," said Mara.

"I don't suppose you want to grab onto a passing truck? Really, it's more fun than it looks."

Mara started to get awkwardly to her feet.

"Here," said Cali. "Let me hold him." He reached out two arms and took the baby. They gazed at each other's faces.

Mara pushed Cali's shoulder gently, and they started walking.

"We could go live someplace nice," said Cali. "The three of us. I could help you look after him."

"They find him sooner every time."

One of the trucks veered off the asphalt and bore down on them. Cali jumped with the baby to the top of the cab and back down, a freakish, flea-like leap; Mara flung herself to one side. A moment later, Cali and the baby were beside her. The truck swerved back onto the highway and was gone.

Mara's raised eyebrow said, *See? They've found us already.*

"Fluke," said Cali.

"Keep walking."

They walked for hours. As the sun set, they began to pass the first buildings of a small town. At the first shop, Mara took the baby from Cali's arms and went inside. It only took a minute for Mara to beg a small bottle of milk, some crackers, and a cup. They walked on until they found a place sheltered from the rising breeze. Mara crumbled crackers into the milk and patiently fed the soggy mess to the baby, scooping a bit on the ends of her fingers, over and over.

"What do you do when *you* get hungry?" Cali asked. Mara didn't answer.

The night grew chilly, and Mara shivered. Cali looked over in quick concern.

"Maybe we should go."

The cold began to cut, then to beat, then to burn. "They've found us again," said Mara, clutching the baby close.

"Where are we going?" said Cali as they got to their feet.

"I'm finding a place."

The baby slept, lulled by Mara's steady pace. The stars blurred and danced. The air squeezed in and rushed away and pressed close again. Icy gusts alternated with winds that felt like truck exhaust. Their feet stirred dust that smelled like mud, and made sucking holes in mud that smelled like dust. Their teeth ground on ash and they spat pond slime.

Finally the ground became fine gravel and stayed that way. The sky here was violet, the air warm and welcoming, the gravel covered in places with a velvet-leaved herb that gave off a minty scent.

"It's nice here," said Cali.

"Don't be fooled," said Mara.

The voices — low, oily voices murmuring wordless threats — came from a black cloud that rushed toward them like a truck.

Cali reached a hand toward Mara as the cloud engulfed them.

But Cali was alone.

I stood beneath the violet sky and howled.

After a while, I lay on the minty grass, all my arms and legs spread out. I took deep breaths that were supposed to calm me but really only made my stomach hurt, and I listened. Well, not listened, exactly. There was always something that buzzed and glowed and pulled me toward her, the best thing in the world. I never knew if she could feel it. I never brought it up.

But now I only got the smallest flicker of something, and it felt a lot like wishful thinking. I got up and followed the flicker anyway, across a few places, until it became the familiar, yearning glow. She was here. But as I looked around, my heart pounded and froze, and pounded again. Even Mara could not last long here. Even I couldn't. Sharp needles of ice covered the ground in a painful mockery of grass. The air was bitter fumes. The moonlight was harsh and grey.

"Cali!" I heard her voice from across the ice. I can cover distance quickly. Once I could see her clearly, my fear twisted to despair. She'd been beaten. And the baby was gone.

"Cali," Mara whispered. Her face was all bruises and blood; the blood glistened in the moonlight. Mara held out her empty arms and stared at me.

"Come on," I murmured. I picked her up as gently as I could.

As I carried her, she talked through her split and swollen lips. "The baby is a real. Prosper wanted to kill him. I wanted the baby, too, but not to kill him. To love him. I do get hungry. Just not, just not for food."

The baby was a real — that explained Prosper's blood-lust, and his followers' persistence, even after Prosper's death. You'd think we'd pity reals. They can't move from world to world unless we take them. Their hearts are so sluggish, half of them can't even properly feel love or hate unless we show them. But whenever we can, we all steal close to their deep, twilight powers.

"Find him, Cali."

"Who took him?"

"Find him!" And she wept. Soon she stopped. Then she died.

I almost liked this cold, grey place. I thought I might lie on the ice and stay there forever, until the frosts and snows covered me and I became as icy outside as I was inside.

Find him, Cali.

I set Mara's body down. *Find him.*

I'd seen him, heard him, held him. I tried to feel the same sort of pull I'd had toward Mara, but at every thought of her the fists of loss struck me, and then I couldn't feel anything.

A different way, then. I held out the two arms that had cradled the baby. I imagined his weight, the heat from his skin, the odd, squirmy feeling of holding something alive. Our two chests had beat at such different speeds, finding new rhythms of breath and blood. He was a real, so heavy with life.

That's how I found him: by sliding downhill into the dent he made. They stood around him as he lay on the ground, and they were ready for the kill, as Prosper had taught them. The baby writhed and wailed.

Each of the captors was at least twice my size, and there were five of them. My only advantage was that they were focused on the baby. Grab and run, then, and hope to hell I was faster.

I crept as quickly as I could toward their backs. This place gave a little cover, and I'm quiet when I want to be.

I could hear their eager panting and the baby's cries. One of them reached for the baby. I ran into their midst, past their grabbing hands. I took the baby as his cries turned to shrieks.

Of course, they followed. And, damn them, they *were* fast. I gasped and darted and looked for tunnels and keyholes. It was hard, carrying a real. *We* can unhinge our forms like rats and slip through any opening. But he had *substance*. All his bones needed to stay in the same order. His eyes needed to stay round. His shoulders snagged on doorways, his bony little behind stuck out and banged against cliff sides.

In an agony of exhaustion and panic, I scouted for a way to go. By chance, I found a path and began to stumble through the brush that partly hid it. I shifted the baby around to the front of my chest, and felt an unexpected surge of stamina and power. It tasted dark and rich and sweet and bitter all at once, like molasses. I glanced down and saw that I'd pressed the baby's sternum against my own, heart to heart. His

tear-wet, panicked face was turned up toward mine. I paused for a moment, stroked the sweaty strands of hair from his forehead, and started to run again.

I felt myself grinning. I could last now. I could find him a home. I crashed through the brush, all attempts at stealth abandoned. I was full of the heavy, sweet, dark power of a real, and it drove me through obstacles as though they were curtains of grass. I wondered if reals felt like this all the time. It would explain a lot.

Little by little, the path widened and became clear of brush. When the dirt gave way to cobblestones, I knew I was nearly there. I slowed to a walk, and moved the baby into the crook of my arm. He'd stopped crying. As I took him away from my heart, my steps became light and quick again. I felt like the cool inside of a cloud, like moss resting gently on a rock. It was a relief, frankly.

The houses loomed over the streets. People pounded past with their heavy-shod feet, and exchanged greetings in booming voices.

I came to a house where a woman was crying. I thought of Mara. For a reason I had no words for, I went inside. There was a dead baby wrapped in bloody cloths on the floor. The woman knelt above it, rocking, rocking. She looked up as I approached.

"This one," I said, lifting my baby. "This one is alone and scared. Take him as your own."

"A changeling," she said, but showed no anger or fear.

"Not a fairy child. A real. He's real. He's...like you. He's hungry."

"He's very new," she murmured.

"No-one will notice he's not your own. Look, his hair is like yours." And it was, a reddish brown. "Do what you need to do for the little dead baby and bury him in secret. Take this one instead. Need there be two dead?"

She was weak — I was guessing not a little of the blood I saw all around was hers. But she held her arms out for the baby. I gave him to her, and she opened her

clothing and began to suckle him. Tears still leaked from his closed eyes, even as he sucked. The three of us sat in the firelight, weeping silently together.

"Cali, come and listen," the man called softly.

Cali was his lifelong companion, the comforter in his childhood fears and the one who still listened to the stories in his head. The man didn't know where Cali waited, but just a word would bring him.

"What have you got for me?" Cali said as he stepped from the shadows where the candlelight didn't reach.

The man read him the first scene, a shipwreck. "A good beginning," Cali said. "Tell me again the father's name."

"Prospero."

Cali looked at him for a long moment. "Prospero."

"Is that an ill name?"

"I once knew someone...."

"I was thinking of putting you in this one," the man said.

"No," Cali whispered. "No, don't." His eyes were wide.

The man laughed. Later, he would remember that. "Don't be shy, Cali. It's just a play."

Cali said, "I will tell *you* a story. Once, long ago, a woman fled with a baby in her arms. The criminal Prosper sought the child's life. The baby's parents lay dead, victims of the rampage that had given Prosper strength. Prosper hungered now for the baby's sweet life, for he could sense that the baby had great power. But the woman saw only a baby alone and in danger.

"Through a dozen worlds she took him. Prosper and his servants pursued her, and each time they were hindered by a creature, the least of monsters, who nevertheless found ways to trip and fool and distract them.

"One night, the monster in his spying found Prosper asleep. The monster did what he had never done. He killed. For the sake of the baby, and the woman. He never told her, for she would have turned away from him, who was now a monster in truth as well as in aspect.

"The woman died at the hands of Prosper's servants, and they took the baby. The monster found them, snatched the baby from their hands, and brought him to a distant place."

"What was this baby's power?"

"The baby was real."

"Nothing more?"

"What more would you want? He made everything around him heavy with truth. As the baby grew, so did the power." He looked at the man directly. "If you write Prosper, you will bring him back."

"I will write him to be good, then, and noble."

"You will try. He will fight you, fight to be what he is. And he is trouble, and sorrow, and death."

"Nonsense. If I have the power you say, I have power over this Prosper. I'll show you."

Cali sat near the wall, rocking, his limbs clasped around his small, strange body. From time to time the man would glance over. Once, he saw Cali furtively wipe tears from his cheeks. The man's amusement became annoyance. Perhaps that was why the play went the way it did.

The man had meant for Prospero to be kindly; instead, he growled and chastised and deceived. Oh, he declared his fatherly love many times — "I have done nothing but in care of thee (of thee, my dear one! thee, my daughter!)" — but in truth he showed little enough concern for her. The man put the paper and pen away, deciding it was his own peevishness that made Prospero so ill-natured. In the morning he would try again.

But Prospero was no better the next day — in fact, he berated and threatened his servants, mocked them, tormented them, betrayed them. It occurred to the man that his wise and benevolent magician must have his reasons for brutalizing the little monster Caliban. Thus he wrote it that Caliban was the vicious, ungrateful, blighted spawn of a witch, that he had tried to rape the daughter.

In the corner, Cali crouched and whimpered.

"Can't you be still?" the man said.

"What have you done?" Cali cried, and his voice was thick and brutish.

"Do you see this Prospero of yours here with us? Has he leapt from the page?"

"He guides your pen!" shrieked Cali. "He bids you change me! Thus does he take revenge! *Look at me!*"

He crawled into the patch of sunlight from the window. His six lithe limbs were wizened and crooked, his hair harsh, his body hideous with deformity and scars. And his eyes were red-rimmed, dull, narrowed in hatred.

"My God," the man whispered in horror. "My God." He reached out, for this was his Cali even now, but Cali slapped the hand away and spat at it.

"I'll write you back to your true self —"

"Too late. I could not stop you. 'Abhorred slave, which any print of goodness will not take,'" Cali said in his new, terrible voice. "Too late, too late," he keened.

Do you yet wonder why Prospero gives his wizardry over? Or why Will Shakespeare writes no more plays?

To be sure, I, the villain Shakespeare, have not yet granted Prosper the victory. Each morning here in Stratford, I give Cali food and what little conversation he will have, lock the door upon us both, and write, searching for the poetry that will heal him. Sometimes what I write pierces him like spears and he screams. But sometimes, for a moment, his eyes are almost as they were.

And you, when you read of poor Caliban, or see him upon the stage, look closely. See in his twisted form and twisted heart that which he once was, before Prospero came to him. I finished the play for this, for you. I will die in time, and likely with the task unfinished. But you — perhaps you share this power with me. Perhaps you can heal him.

ENDS