

The Mermaid Cabinet

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Series.1

"What knight in shining armor would not travel an arduous path for his fair lady?" I asked myself as my horse's leg sank almost to the knee in the thick mud of another false trail. "I'm on the right track," I said outloud, as I dismounted to help the poor beast out of his predicament. "No broken leg, this time; luck's with us," I stroked his muzzle and he gave me that sideways look that horses do. I walked him around the worst of the muck and mounted him again, my armor clanking against his. We were fully armored as though to do battle. Even my face was covered with metal. Small holes allowed me to breathe and there was a slit for my eyes.

When I had ridden away from the muddy track, I came to a place where the forest seemed sparser and suddenly, looming before me, was the tower of a castle. There was a peculiar and almost secret quality to this tower. And so I knew that my lady dwelled therein. In fact, I imagined that I glimpsed her leaning out of the window at the very top of the tower and I was struck with fear, for I did not wish to make a fool of myself in her eyes.

I moved quietly back into the forest. I dismounted, tied my horse to a tree and sought some hidden place where I could regain my composure. I came upon a beautiful garden surrounded by high walls. I followed the paths and trails around it until I reached a gate situated in a remote spot. Raising the latch I entered and found myself alone within the garden walls. I wandered until I came upon a small cabinet, standing quite alone in this garden, but surrounded by rose bushes in full and wondrous bloom. On the door of the cabinet was a lock, and the key to the lock was in easy reach, on the ground near the door, as though someone had dropped it in haste to leave that place. I picked up the key and turned it over and over in my hand. Was there something to fear inside the cabinet or had something outside startled my predecessor? Whatever it was, I was more than prepared to do battle. I touched the handle of my sword and inserted the key.

Inside the cabinet was a small box made of glass with many wondrous objects inside: bright corals from distance oceans, anemones and other sea creatures, some that looked like small horses with curved tails, others, brightly colored fish. Among them, most fantastic strange creature of all, there swam a mermaid. Her hair was golden, like my love's hair, and hung down past her waist almost to the bottom of her tail. Her tail, most horrible and awesome appendage, was shimmering with green shiny scales. I thought at first that she might speak to me; her eyes seemed to say that was her purpose. But when she moved to the top of the glass box, the only sound I heard was a long drawn out mournful sigh.

I grew deeply despondent at this sound and at the way I had left my lady as I did without the courage to make my presence known to her. Now I saw clearly from my own experience that the heart of a lover who loves deeply is now joyful now mournful, now laughing now crying, now singing now lamenting, now hot now cold.

I closed and locked the cabinet, so that I would not have to look at the mermaid who reminded me of my cowardice in love. I absent-mindedly dropped the key into my sword's sheath and wandered aimlessly in the garden. I found myself once again in the place I thought the cabinet had been, but this time there was a sort of cave there. In the opening of the cave, there sat a very old man with a mad joyful expression.

"Kind sir," I said, kneeling down to get close to him, "have you seen a cabinet here in which is locked a strange creature, half woman half fish. I have the key, but have lost my way."

"Large things near at hand appear far off," he replied. "And there are glasses which will burn things up. Some make phantasmic forms appear to one who looks therein or even make appear outside in air or water, living shapes. There is no man who sees so well that he may never be deceived in vision."

I pulled my sword from its sheath and although at first the old man cringed at the sight of my aggressive act, he soon understood my purpose. I shook the sheath until the key fell to the ground. "Keep this key safe," I said to him. He has it still.

And so I left the garden - its marvels and its wisdom - and set back upon the path to true love's tower. My lady waited there at the window, brushing her long gold hair. I sang to her and called out her name and begged her to admit me to her presence. I was washed over with a fierce desire for her, for her perfect beauty, and I wished to gaze upon her.

"There is no entrance save this window," she said. "You must climb." At the same moment, she flung her hair out the window. It billowed in waves of silken gold. I had not known it was so long or that any hair could grow so extravagant in its thickness and strength. But there was nothing to hold on to in this flowing mass of hair. She soon saw my distress and feeling pity for my despair, she began to braid her hair into a shining rope. I climbed.

As I reached the top, it was as though I climbed on air. I entered the tower to see a sight most wonderous and long imagined. My lady lay on a bed of white linen, naked. I lay down beside her, fully clothed in my heavy armor. She was sleeping peacefully and I was careful not to wake her. I spent the night gazing at her perfection, memorizing the fragments and opportunities of her soft flesh. My eyes grew weary from their caresses and I fell into a profound slumber.

When I woke I found her gone. I stared at the place where she had been and wept. Then, looking up at an arched doorway, I saw my perfect lover enter. In her hands she held a plate and on it were her eyes. These she handed to me, solemnly and in silence.

As I took the eyes, she began to loosen the headgear that still sat upon my head. Although I saw everything quite clearly, the sockets where my eyes had been were hollow as were hers. Again she lay down beside me, but I had her eyes.

The change was infinitely gradual. The first result was a stripping away of a kind of unseen layer of accumulated resilience. I felt at the same time physically freer and more vulnerable.

I had no armor. I seemed to feel not only the heat and the cold more, but also the stimulants of the world about me. My body seemed to be growing more complex, more quivering in its responses.

Stripped of my clothes, I was a chimera, half male, half female, an object of wonder even to myself. I woke to find my lady gone and left by the door through which I had seen her enter only hours before. This door led to a long winding stairway, which I took down to another door that led me outside. I made a pilgrimage to a little lake that I had passed in the forest outside the garden wall. The light was pale and misty; the air tangy. The silence was absolute. There I stood like a figure of mythology, monstrous or divine, like nobody else that forest had ever seen.

"So this is where love leads," I said, and plunged my body into the lake, thinking to end my wretched existence there and then. But I could swim - better than ever and, miraculously, I could breathe under water.

Again, the change took a long time. As my male half fell away, as I became more and more the image of my lady, I also began to grow a tail - a fish's tail with green shiny scales.

I lived for years within that lake, under water dark and deep, yearning for something I could not define. "Perhaps I still love my lady," I thought, but then I had become her and such love would only be a selfish love of my own distorted form. "Perhaps I love myself as I had been, a man," I thought, but I could not find that man, covered over in armor as he had been.

My body ached with a desire that had no end, a yearning that had no object.

Then, one day, as I swam listlessly among the fish and anemones and corals of my world, my home was flooded with light and I looked into the astonished face of a knight. He stared at me and could not stop from looking. I wanted to ask him where he had found the key. Had the old man given it to him or was there another, lying on the ground waiting, as one had waited for me? For when I opened that cabinet, I had beheld a secret so profound, so hidden, that it had changed me forever. I wished to tell my story to the knight and rushed to the surface of the water. But words would not come and the only sound I could utter was a sigh.

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