

Diminishing Returns

By

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Brioc studied her reflection in the stained mirror and couldn't ignore it any longer: she was thinner than she had been in the last town and shorter than she had been on the other side of border. At first she had taken it for anxiety and the many miles she had traveled since assuming her role as a Lioslaith spy, but there was no doubt now she was losing substance.

She put her hand on the tarnished frame and leaned in, not sure why she couldn't cry. The weathered boards of the inn breathed around her, a thin barrier to the city beyond. She had to be careful now, could not shift her shape so frequently, but she could not stop – not when her home country had recruited her for just that talent, not when they were counting on her.

“Why didn't anyone tell me?” she asked the russet-haired blur in the mirror.

She calmed herself with an aborted shiver. If every time she changed she grew a little smaller, then, well, she could ration her changes, plan for them, keep an eye on her size. It might even be a good thing, for she had always been far too tall and built like a boy. She had something to lose.

She had everything to lose.

Brioc moved to the window, working the rusty catch until it popped out. She pushed open the shutters and let in a gust of late summer heat. Vendors hawked their wares in a melodic, aggressive cant and a rich, steamy perfume drifted down from the Avenue of Flowers. The city of Tennenun was a place of impossible variety to someone who had been born in a town that consisted of two crossed mud-paths and one brick building for shelter from bandits.

She leaned out the window until she could see the massive obsidian bulk of the Royal Archives. Deep within the twisting passages, a locked chamber housed the most secret portents of the House of Seers. Just the thought of holding it made her breath quicken. She would need to change once to get the key she needed, a second time to gain admittance to the chamber...

...she changed a third time to evade the guards on her way out, the bulky sheath of pages held close to her chest. Cold black stone loomed overhead. Brioc ran her fingers along the parchment, feeling disoriented. How could these plain pages contain such importance?

She kept her head down as she threaded into the servants' courtyard, burnt red and smoldering under the midday sun. A minor scribe leaned against the city gate, chatting with a dowdy woman with ribbons in Tir-Tennetun colors braided in her hair.

"None other than the Marchioness, Senara Isenham Tir-Elsdyn," the scribe said.

The servant rubbed her hands together. "What brings her to the city?"

Brioc would have stepped past them, but a cart blocked her way. She shunted the package against her hip and tried not to panic. It was just a matter of keeping calm a few minutes longer.

"Think she aims to court the young Tennetun heir. Would make the city part hers, soon as the family office changes hands."

"Not the father?" The woman looked surprised.

"Why waste youth and beauty on a—" The scribe cleared his throat. "Well, not to say that our good lord is without his charming qualities."

Brioc tried to edge through the space between the gate and the cart, but it was not quite wide enough. What was the use of growing smaller if she couldn't even squeeze through a tight space?

"But, my goodness, isn't Senara almost sixty?"

"She keeps young by changing her shape," the scribe replied with all the eagerness of a career gossip. Brioc smiled despite her anxiety. And people complained about country women! "Every day a new face."

Someone finally moved the cart, and Brioc slipped onto the street, relief carrying her halfway to the crossroads before she paused.

Every day a new face.

Sixty years.

She had no head for numbers, but she understood how impossible that must be. Even if Senara only changed once or twice a month, the most corpulent woman would be a mere wisp of thread after sixty years.

Senara Isenham had the answer.

Brioc spun into the oaken heft of the inn and sent word to the courier that the package was ready. As soon as the tome of portents was on its way to Lioslaith, she had a mission of her own.

The Tir-Tennetun estate was in such a fluster with the august visitor that Brioc found it easy to pose as a kitchenmaid, and only a little harder to intercept a tray on its way up to her ladyship. The guest chamber overlooked the harbor, the massive stone apertures ensorcelled to keep out the elements. Massive tapestries embroidered with roses dominated the walls, framing its occupant in a visual garden. Even the traveling trunks in the corner did not detract from that impression.

Senara Isenham, Marchioness of Elsdyn, was the prize flower of that garden. Skin the color of shaved ice served as canvas for features of impossible luminosity, her lips scarlet, her eyes azure. Even knowing that Senara's appearance was a handy shapechange, Brioc was intimidated. She didn't need to remind herself to keep her eyes on the floor and her posture humble.

Senara accepted the tray without looking at its bearer. "You may go."

The voice reminded Brioc of winter winds, and she knew that was one thing that was genuine because sound and voice could not be wholly transformed.

Now or never. "Marchioness, I beg an important question of you," said Brioc.

Senara ran one gilded nail along the arm of her chair. "Yes?"

"I know someone who is a shapechanger." Brioc plunged into the question.

"Every time she changes, she loses a little piece of herself. You who are so wise and talented, is there a way to prevent that?"

It did not move Senara. "Do you think I would share such secrets with the common clay? There is a reason I have been so fortunate in my changes. I have earned it." The woman drew breath to dismiss her, then softened. "Tell your friend that to have the ability is a gift unsurpassed, and to use it frugally and with care. It is worth the small price you pay."

Brioc sucked in a breath and with it pulled down all the protests that would say too much. "Then there is a way? Can one become worthy?"

Senara looked her up and down. There was blood in the smile that finally surfaced. "Oh, little one," she said. "You don't want to do that."

She started to protest, then realized there was nothing else to say, not without coming too close to betraying herself. However important it was to have the answer, it would do her no good in the estate dungeons. As she bowed her head and backed out of the room, a small stack of journals on the desk caught her eye.

The estate's defenses did not extend to the guest wing, but Senara had a personal guard. Brioc had several harrowing moments trying to evade them. Had the guards not been a trifle tipsy...well, best not to think about it.

The lock proved impossible, the seams of the door guarded with a spell. Brioc found entrance through the bathroom fireplace, a pit inlaid in the wall that warmed the water pipes. It took her three changes to get through. As she became herself again, she wondered if her fingers were stubbier, her bones brittle in the heat. She bumped into a trunk and winced as something rattled. She peeked inside the trunk and found burgundy wine stored in fine bottles. Why would Senara bring her own vintage? The bottles had no labels, and even Brioc knew that there was no point in a house gift that didn't display its lineage.

She slid the first journal onto her lap with a shuddery breath. It took her several minutes to focus on the words and longer to escape the creeping sensation of grave robbery. Senara made scattered references to her daily ritual; Brioc finally discerned it was some kind of bath. A more recent entry discussed bottling up the substance for it....

The bottles! Could she take one, and not be noticed? Brioc hurried to the chest, a soft tinkle of glass answering the tremor of her hands. One of the corks was loose, so she popped it and dipped in a finger. She recoiled at the taste. Blood! It was blood.

She went back to the journals, trying to find out what kind of animal's blood it was. Maybe only a little bit could help her.

"My guard captain whipped a thief today," one entry read. "Who knew such a brawny lad would not have the strength to survive it? Well, that is more for my bath."

At that instant, silence became of the utmost importance to Brioc. All the cries she could not utter overwhelmed her as she read the words. The blood bath might save

the body from changes, but it could never be worth the price. She thought about running away with the right journals and a bottle, but she could not carry them through the pipes.

Brioc turned for the door, barely thinking this time as she prepared to change. Anything to get out of here. Best to flee now and forget all about this. Brioc set the book aside. Tennenun and allies like Senara were the enemy, of course, but she had thought of them as a pleasant sort of enemy that was only by chance. Now she felt that truth spin around her.

“Well, well.” Senara’s languorous voice wrapped around her, tightening slowly into a vise of iron. “What have we here?”

Brioc whirled, all the prey instincts of the mouse she had almost become bubbling up inside her. “Milady! I—” What excuse could there be for this? “A house servant. Didn’t you send for one? They told me—” Her mind dashed along the lines of the lie, finding the pieces.

“I did not send for the one who so cleverly asked me about a friend of hers.” If Senara sounded amused, it was cold and honed, wielded like a weapon.

Brioc bit down on the protest. She had not taken the same face; she knew better than to make that mistake.

“I can see through your seeming to your heart, Lioslan,” Senara said with a tiny smile. “You show your soul like a bright banner.”

“Blood.” Brioc could not keep from whispering the words. “The blood of—”

“Of men, of women, of babes.” Senara advanced on her, one hand opening. Each finger lengthened in turn, growing a serrated talon. “And one thing more.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” The words were torn from her. “I promise.”

“A token of my own to sweeten the brew.” Senara flowed into the shape of a tiger and lunged.

Brioc shrieked, and the transformation overtook her without thought. A sparrow in flight, she darted for the window and beat her wings against the shutters until they opened a fraction further. She dropped into the night. The wood shattered into a hundred pieces as the great cat followed.

It twisted in mid-air, becoming an eagle, and Brioc plunged with a clumsy, frantic fluting of her wings. She had only practiced transforming into animals a little bit, enough to know that a fraction of animal instinct came with the change. One had to experience, spend time in that form, to gain the benefits. She had not, but Senara might well have.

Brioc had to escape, and the fastest creature she could think of was a lowland gazelle. She stumbled in the garden courtyard, tripped up even on four limbs by the bushes and creeping vines. The eagle shrieked down her neck, but bit by bit Brioc gained distance.

Then the tiger was back, and Brioc was cut off from the trellised walkway to the street. Hooves clattered and refused to turn, and Brioc collided with Senara in her shape.

Brioc’s mind fled for the smallest form she could think of, a fly. Senara chased her as snapping lizard. Its tongue sailed past, missing her by a fraction so small she could not have discerned it as a human. She might have flown out of reach, out of the

garden, but the sensation of having a hundred eyes dizzied her so much that she toppled.

She rolled end over end, reaching out for the next shape she could think of, a rabbit. Senara pursued her as the lizard, those jaws and talons more than robust enough to rip her to shreds. Yet she had no speed, and Brioc put one pace, two, then three between herself and the noblewoman.

Brioc came to a vast expanse of water, and she realized why Senara was in no hurry. Brioc was trapped by the estate lake. Maybe she should turn and fight? No, this frantic chase had taught her that Senara had all the control and experience Brioc lacked, and she might as well bare her throat.

She dove into the water as a salmon.

The hunt continued, relentless, no pause for breath. They escaped the estate and tumbled into the moon-filled streets. One change after another, and Brioc cried, the tears coming out when her shape allowed it. She felt a cold, dull ache in the wake of so many swift changes. She could become human and shout for the guards, but she would never make it. Even if she did, she wouldn't be the same.

Couldn't be, too small to be anything but a child.

Senara stood before her suddenly, not an inch shorter, a mocking succession of features fleeting across her face. "You can't win," she said. "Stand down before you embarrass yourself."

Brioc colored even though the hound she had become was incapable of blushing. "If there's one thing I'm good at," she said. "It's embarrassing myself."

When Senara lunged for her, Brioc turned into a mouse. She squeezed through a crack in the nearest wall that led to a kitchen. She snatched a memory to shapechange into, a niece she missed keenly, as she inwardly said goodbye. There was no escape here.

"Of course that's what you're good at." Senara's scornful voice followed her as she came to the door, a silhouette of perfection's shadow. "Found my little secret did you?"

"Why blood? It's monstrous." Brioc whispered.

"There is no other way," Senara said. "The change devours substance, just as every time you change a clay sculpture, a little bit more of it comes off on your fingers." She lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "One must replace it somehow."

"Dirt and water," Brioc said faintly. "Or perhaps leaves." She backed up until she bumped into a cold hearth.

Senara spoke as if to a child. "You become what you touch," she said. "Would you live your life like that, as a stone, as a tree? I have no use for that."

Dimly, Brioc sensed rescue in the words. "Yes."

Moonlight clarified around the noblewoman; she glanced at Brioc sharply, surprised. "You would, wouldn't you? Perhaps I'll leave you like that." She advanced. "What would you be, then?"

The mockery slid off Brioc as she tried not to hold her breath. "A stone in Lioslaith," she said in a rush, "perhaps a farm-marker—"

Senara laughed, curt, harsh. She lashed out, one hand pinning Brioc's shoulder to the stone hearth. "Here," she said, "right here. I'll be mistress of this city soon enough."

Brioc could have struggled, but she could not survive another shapeshifted battle. Her mind raced, but more seconds, more days, would be enough even if she lived them mute and motionless. “All right. We have a deal.”

“We have a—” Senara chuckled. “That implies you have a choice.” Her hand moved up to the base of Brioc’s small neck with a possessive jerk; she studied the girl like a prize filly. “Release your thoughts. Surrender into it. If you fight,” she paused, as if unable to believe her captive even could, “you’ll shatter.”

Brioc nodded numbly and closed her eyes, trying to put a leash on her thundering heart. Substance for substance, and the loss of all animate life with it. The thought flicked through her head that she could somehow absorb the next person who crossed the hearth, and she recoiled from it. Even the thought of doing that to someone – anyone – made her feel dirty, far too close to Senara.

The idea came home.

Brioc let herself drift, her mind moving with difficulty away from any one thought, especially the one that consumed her. She leaned in, and she reached out, not to the stone, but to the woman who clutched her.

Senara jerked rigid, a sound of pain forming on her lips. “What—”

Brioc saw it only faintly in the moonlight, the twisting of flesh as their arms melded together, bonded as if by an invisible touch. She felt it as if another series of veins moved through hers, pouring in, pouring out, before their minds met.

Memories battered Brioc, court functions slashed across a darkness of methodical murder and a bewildering variety of adopted guises. Senara as a child, calmly tormenting the servant boys until they had to be punished. The faces morphed, sometimes unfamiliar, sometimes pinned with sickening remnants from her own thoughts. Even had she wanted to resist, she could not have found her way. Sculpted together now, seeing through two pairs of eyes, Brioc braced herself and then let go. She was Lioslan, farmer’s daughter, novice spy; whatever she had to fear, she could never forget that.

The one became the other became both. Senara fought back so furiously she blotted out everything else. And shattered.

Isolated thoughts tore through Brioc’s mind where they did not belong. She smelled memory and jerked as a thousand past moments tried to replay themselves with her body – their body. Brioc gasped, stumbling forward. She landed on one knee and sought, instinctively, the refuge of her own shape.

It was there, as if unaltered from the first time she transformed.

She trembled, trying to piece through the shock to recreate what had happened. She had clothed herself in Senara and absorbed her.

A voice echoed of the inside of her mind, “I’m still here, Lioslan.”

Brioc stiffened, but the first twinges of fear died without support from the rest of her. “Good,” she said faintly. “You can help me.”

“You must be joking.” Senara’s thought was dry.

“No.” It was difficult, putting the thoughts together, but she could see no other way they would take shape. “My country needs to know what you know, and then we

need to repay the people who died.” Quietly, she was stunned by her own audacity, but there was no resistance, not more than a slight stirring in her head.

“You really are a stupid, simple girl, aren’t you?” There was no confidence in Senara’s scorn, or perhaps it was the fact that the voice was only a whisper under others. “This will last you for a while, but what then? You must do what I have to keep yourself alive. You can’t escape it.”

Brioc took a deep breath. She did not know how; she could not see that far. But she also knew that she had everything to lose by giving in.

“No,” she said. “When the time comes, I will find another way.”