

Elfleda

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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I love her. And I envy her, because she is clever enough, defiant enough, to outwit our creators. Or most of them. She is not a true unicorn: many of us have human parts, and she is no exception. The reconstructions are too complicated otherwise. Our brilliant possessors are not quite brilliant enough to integrate nerves directly from the brain.

So Elfleda is, as I am, almost entirely human from the hips up. Below that I am equine: a centaur. She is a unicorn, for her hooves are cloven, her tail is a lion's, and from her brow sprouts a thin straight spiral horn. Her silver forelock hides the pale scar at its base; the silver hair drifts down, growing from her shoulders and spine. Her coat is sleek and pale gray, and great dapples flow across her flanks. The hair on the tip of her tail is quite black. For a long time I thought some surgeon had made a mistake or played her a joke, but eventually I understood why this was done, as from afar I watched her twitching her long black-tipped tail like a cat. My body has no such artistic originality. I hate everything about me as much as I love everything about Elfleda.

She will talk to me from a distance; I think she pities me. When the masters come to our park she watches them, lashes her tail, and gallops away. Sometimes she favors them with a brief glimpse of her silver hide. Her inaccessibility makes her the most sought-after of us all. They follow after her, they call her, but only a few can touch or move her. She is the only one of us who can ever resist their will. Even this freedom was their creation; they are so powerful they can afford to play with the illusion of defiance.

But the rest of us, the other centaurs, the satyrs, nymphs, merfolk, we strut and prance across the meadows or wait in the forest or gently splash the passersby, hoping to be noticed.

We dare not complain. Indeed, we should not; we should be grateful. Our lives have been saved. Every one of us would have died if the masters had not accepted us and taken us in. We owe them our lives, and that is the payment they exact. Sometimes I think the price too high, but though nothing prevents me from leaping off the mountainside or eating poison flowers, I am still alive.

The noon sun is warm in the meadow, so I walk toward the forest through the high grass. A small creature leaps from his sleeping-place and flees, as startled by me as I by him. Galloping, he surges into the air: one of the small pegasoi. His feathered wings seem much too large in proportion to his body. That is the reason only the smallest pegasoi can fly at all. This one is a miniature appaloosa pony, not as tall as my knee. Half the meadow away he touches down and trots off, folding his blue-gray wings against his spotted sides.

The larger pegasoi, the ones my size, are spectacular but earthbound; they seek flight but never find it. I have watched one standing in the wind, neck arched, nostrils flaring, tail high. She spread her wings and raised them, cantered against the wind, galloped, rain, but the wings were not large enough to lift her. Our masters use their beasts as they use those of us part human: for amusement, for beauty. It would not occur to them that a flying horse's heart might break because she could not fly.

The shade of the forest envelops me with a cool scent of pine and humus. The loam beneath my hooves is soft. I can feel its resilience, but not its texture. When first I rose, after the operations, the healing, the pain, I could not walk properly. I stumbled and fell and was threatened with punishment if I scarred my bright bay hide. After that I walked slowly but learned quickly. Human beings did not evolve to articulate six limbs, but we are adaptable. I learned to talk, to trot, to run, and I even learned to move

my arms simultaneously, with not too much gracelessness. I did not scar myself, and now my skin-- my human skin-- is tanned as dark as my red-gold coat. My mane and tail and lower legs are black.

The stream ripples by, loud with snow-water. It splashes down a rock slide into a mountain lake that reflects in its depths another, freer world. There the purple-blue mountains are valleys which could be reached if one could find them. The mountains themselves cannot be crossed. One of the large pegasos, seeking the sky, climbed only halfway to a summit before his hooves slipped on the sheer rock and he fell. He broke his leg. Equine legs are a great trouble to heal, so he was put to death, humanely. As humanely as he had been given this life.

The pond's surface moves and breaks, and one of the mer-people glides onto stones dampened by mist. It is the water-folks' favorite place to sun themselves when the icy water chills their memories of being warm-blooded. I think the being is a mermaid, but I cannot be sure from this distance. They are all slender and lithe, with narrow shoulders and long bright hair. The women have hardly any breasts at all, and the men have no proper genitals. They all have only slits, like fishes, half-concealed among the multicolored scales on their abdomens. I have never seen them copulate with each other, so perhaps the opening is only for excretion and for our owners to use when pleasuring themselves. The mer-people are as deformed one way as I am the other. They have no genitals at all, while I have two sets. I am sure some biological engineer received a prize for clever design. My human penis hangs in its accustomed human place, but above the front legs of a bay horse. My stallion parts are much more discreet, tucked away between my hind legs.

The mermaid flicks her tail, the filmy fin sending out rainbow drops of spray. Another of the merfolk casts himself up beside her. But they do not touch; no intimacy exists between them. Perhaps the feeling has been taken from them, or the cold water slows their passion as much as their bodies.

But, oh, they are lovely. When I wade out to drink, I can sometimes see them beneath the water, swimming together in their own inexplicable patterns, hair streaming gold, silver, scarlet, scales rippling blue, orange, black, all with a metallic sheen. Their tailfins are like gauze, like lace, transparent silk, translucently veined. Their gill slits make vermilion lines across their chests and backs and throats.

They never speak.

If I moved from my hiding place of shadows, the mermaid and merman would disappear beneath the silver surface of the ice-blue water, marring it with ripples. Two sets of concentric circles would touch, and interact, and fade away, and I would be alone again. I do not move. I watch the beautiful creatures sunning themselves, occasionally flicking water over their scales with their fins or their long narrow hands.

I envy their contentment with solitude, their independence, as I envy Elfleda. She and they are never touched by the games our masters play with us. Elfleda watches from a high pinnacle where only she can climb. The merfolk participate when they are called and commanded, but their eyes are blank. I think by the next day they have already forgotten.

I never forget. I remember every incident that has occurred since I was brought here. Soon it will all happen again.

One of the merfolk swims away, then the other. The forest has chilled me, and I am hungry. The sun bursts warm on my back as I leave deep shade and cross the meadow to the orchard.

Light through the mottled ceiling of leaves dapples my flanks. The lazy buzz of a black fly does not disturb me. Having a long tail, I must confess, can be convenient.

A nymph and a satyr copulate beneath a plum tree, oblivious to my presence. They are as brazen as the merfolk are shy. The satyr's short furry tail jerks up and down as she mounts the nymph and clasps him with her hairy legs. His green hands grasp her hips and move up to caress her pink human flesh. On either side of her spine's erect crest of brown bristles her back is slightly sunburned. The nymph arches himself into her and she grunts, twining her fingers in his curly green-black hair. His heels press the ground, his toes curl; her cloven goat-hooves dig up bits of sod. The nymph moans and clasps the satyr to him. Our creators have no respect for the traditional gender of their creatures. They please only themselves, never myth or legend.

I wheel and gallop away to escape the frantic plunging and gasps and groans in the orchards. I have

coupled with the satyr myself, gods help me.

The meadow grass parts before me and the air flows through my mane like water. The birds are silent in the heat but the cicadas' shrill afternoon song urges me onward. My hooves pound the earth, crushing flowers, cutting the turf. Sweat sparkles in my eyes. I pull my elbows close to my sides against the pain of breathing. The air enters in burning gouts. Sweat pours down my chest, breaks out on my flanks, drips down my legs, and flies from the points of my fetlocks as I run. I feel my buttocks rub the sweat into white foam.

The meadow ends and I run among rocks. I leap a huge boulder and come down in scree. The valley narrows, rises, and ends in a sheer wall of stone. I stumble, stop, stand spraddle-legged, knee-locked, and try only to breathe.

Later I realize I still have a plum in one hand and a peach in the other. The juice, where I clasped the fruit, runs between my fingers. I tear the pulp with my teeth and swallow it slowly until all that is left are the seeds. Fruit trees are hybrids; they reproduce only freaks, sports, throwbacks. I fling the seeds among the jumbled rocks, where they will have no chance to grow.

The sweat dries on me as I plod down the mountain. A dull ache creeps up my near hind leg from the center of my hoof: I think I have a stone bruise.

Back in the meadow I lie down in deep cool grass. I am never comfortable sleeping now. When I stand, like a horse, my head droops and I wake with a backache. Lying on my side with my head pillowed on my arm is awkward, and my hand always goes to sleep.

The shadow of the mountain is creeping over me when I wake. It will be dark soon, and the moon will be full. I fling out my forelegs and push myself to my feet.

A flash of white among the trees draws my attention.

"Elfleda!"

She stops and turns toward me, tilting her head gracefully to draw the spiral horn from beneath the branches. She has small breasts and long, strong hands. Human skin blends into animal hide at her navel, but like the rest of the equiforms she has human sex organs between the beast forelegs. Our owners must have bred and chosen Elfleda's animal part carefully, for it is both horse and deer, with a musky taint of goat. She lashes her tail.

"Hello, Achilles. What do you want?"

"I..." But I want nothing from her that she will give. She is not cruel, only detached. She does not feel for me and I have no reason or excuse to expect her to.

"They'll come again soon," she says.

"I hope not."

"They will."

"And you'll watch for them."

"Yes," she says. I do not understand, since she can ignore almost all of them, why she does not disappear into the forest when they come. Instead she watches, and our masters see her and grow jealous of her freedom. What they give, they can take back.

Elfleda flicks her tail again. The black tip touches the point of her horse-shoulder, her withers, her flanks. The wind lifts her short fine hair away from her head, away from her back, haloing her in silver light. I step toward her, and she does not back away. But I am covered with sweat and dust and I smell like hot horse, hot human. I am embarrassed to approach her like this. She watches me, waiting, unafraid. She knows she could outrun me if she had to. They made me large, taller than I was in life-- in real life-- but she is quick and her hooves are sharp; and they did not take away so much of my humanity that I would force myself on her. That would be bitter love indeed.

"I wasn't thought ugly before --" My voice is querulous. I should not speak to her like this, as if I would be content if she took me out of pity.

She frowns, then her brow clears and she steps toward me. "If you were, Achilles, you know it wouldn't make any difference to me." She reaches out: I can feel the heat of her hand near my face. She has never touched me before.

I draw back and turn away. "You still don't find me attractive."

"That isn't fair."

And even now I do not look at her, thought I know she is right. "You've accepted their rules. Nothing holds us to them."

"Do you think not?"

"What keeps you from loving me?"

"We love, or we do not love."

"We let them control us."

"We cannot stop them," she says, and again I know she is right. Between the times of their coming I want to believe we could all resist them, if we tried, and I blame our obedience on our weaknesses and our guilt, our willingness to be controlled and thereby absolved of all responsibility. But when the compulsions come to me--

Elfleda touches my arm and I start violently. She jumps back, as surprised as I, her other hand still raised, pointing toward the sky where she sought to draw my attention.

"Look."

Darkness has fallen. I look at the stars and see a brilliant multicolored light approaching. Above us, our masters ride in a great dirigible that floats majestically over the crest of the mountains. Its engines are nearly silent. Lights festoon its cabin and illuminate the tree-tops below. It passes directly over us and we hear music and faint laughter. I look down at Elfleda. The lights paint her, red, violet, blue, green. Her expression is wistful, hopeful. She does not look at me.

A sharp cry of delight or distress draws my attention back to the dirigible. When I look down again, Elfleda is gone.

But what does it matter? What does she matter? Others desire me, if she does not. If I felt tired and spent a moment ago, I am excited and powerful now. Half the forest lies between me and the meadow, and if I do not hurry I will be late. But the distance is nothing. Evergreen branches brush me with their fragrance as I run. The ache in my hoof is no more than an insect bite.

All of us gather in the meadow, beast and beast-human alike. The little pegasoi cavort and scamper among us and over us, while the flightless ones display their plumage. A gryphon sitting on its haunches on a boulder roars and screeches, and the unearthly light of the aircraft shimmers around us all. The dirigible descends slowly, so immense it blots out the stars. I catch one tether-rope and the centaur Hekate takes another. Hekate pulls harder than I, the muscles in her haunches bulging like fists. The dirigible tilts down on her side and she laughs. We drag the craft to earth against its lifting force, glorying in our strength, and bind the ropes to trees. Our masters step down upon the ground.

They are ordinary humans, as ordinary as we were before they changed us. They look so strange, walking normally on two legs, hoofless, clawless, hairless. They are small, weak, omnipotent. They smile on us and we wait, hoping to be chosen. They are all as beautiful as flowers. The gryphon bounds down and rubs felinely against their legs.

A silhouetted figure stands in the hatchway of the aircraft, hanging back. He steps down and hesitates with the light flowing across him. His face is coarse, his expression uncertain. He is both curious and frightened.

"Hekate!"

The ugly boy vanishes from my mind. One of our masters is calling dark Hekate, and she obeys, her black hair streaming in the wind of her speed. Her great hooves plough the ground as she stops before the slender young woman. Her horse-part is heavy through the shoulders and haunches, powerful and immense, ebony highlighted through the spectrum by the dirigible's illumination. In her other life she must have been a formidable and stunning woman, for she is a compelling myth. The young human leaps upon her back and drums her bare heels against her sides, laughing. Hekate wheels and bolts across the meadow, her tail held high like a plume. The vibration of her hoofbeats echoes around us.

Two satyrs bound along beside her, as fleet and randy as goats. Their musk mingles in the air with the pungent sweat of Hekate.

A light pressure on my back: "Run, Achilles, follow them." A nymph clasps me with his long pale arms, his fingers across my belly. I can feel his slender legs around my ribs, but he is weightless. "Run, or

they'll leave us behind."

I obey as if he were a master. I follow Hekate's path easily through the trampled grass and silver darkness. I leap an obstruction and realize later it was nothing but the human's flimsy robe. I gallop through a shallow extrusion of the lake, flinging spray in all directions, passing naked humans who wade toward the rocks of the languorous merfolk.

Hekate and the human stand gilded by moonlight. They embrace, the human standing on Hekate's broad back, leaning over her shoulder, bending around to hold and kiss her. They glance toward me. The human woman laughs.

"What shall we do with them?"

"Exhaust them." Hekate's laugh is low and full. "Exhaust them, and go back to what we were doing."

Copulating in the grass, the two satyrs ignore us all. The nymph slips from my back as I prance toward Hekate. The human turns and sits astride her, facing backwards. She holds out her arms to me; I rear, I mount Hekate as a stallion and embrace the human as a man. She slides her heels over my forelegs and pulls herself onto me. As she draws me down to kiss her I see Hekate bend likewise, as she shifts her haunches beneath me, to caress the gold-green nymph. He is light and thin, but tall enough for her. His fingers clench, nails digging into Hekate's shoulder blades. The human moans and slips her hand down my stomach. I thrust in a single rhythm, and Hekate groans as pleasure washes her in double waves.

Many combinations occur between us. My memory is like diamond-bearing stone, opaque, with sparks of crystal clarity. The human finishes with me, kisses me one last gentle time, and slips from Hekate's withers. When the human draws the nymph away, Hekate leans back against me. Beings move and laugh and touch all around us, forming some immense incomprehensible dance. One of the other centaurs gallops by and throws us a leather flask. I hold it for Hekate, and drink from it myself. The warm wine cools me, and I let it dribble down my chin, drip on my chest and into Hekate's long mane. The taste is strong and sour and the intoxication hits us quickly. Revitalized, I rear back and return to the ground, and Hekate and I canter through the meadow, playing like foals, rearing and striking at a night-pony who sails between us, black batwings sharp as knives. Under a tree we face each other and couple again, while nearby a fully human pair watches and laughs.

The energy of intoxication lasts a few minutes, and quite suddenly drains away as Hekate chases me through the trees. I stumble and slow; she passes me, calls to me, but when I do not follow she snorts and gallops away. I sink down in the soft cushion of pine needles, enveloped by a pleasant lethargy. While I doze, the gold-green nymph returns to me and curls up against my side, trustful among my hooves.

I dream about Elfleda, but the dream dissolves as I am about to touch her, as she reaches for me. I half-wake and see her, real, before me, half-hidden by a growth of ferns. She does not know I am here.

The ugly human boy is standing before her, head down, hair falling across his face as if to hide it. Elfleda says something to him that I cannot hear, and he looks up and smiles. All his movements and expressions are hesitant. Elfleda takes his hand. He reaches up, touches her breast, her throat, her forehead, her spiral horn. She touches its point to his shoulder and lifts her head again. Together they walk away into the forest. I shiver, close my eyes, and try to sleep again, making myself believe I never really woke.

While it is still dark Hekate returns and lies beside me, back to back so we can lean on each other and have a little more comfort. I expected her to stay with the human.

"Couldn't you find her?"

"I found her," Hekate says. I wait; finally she continues. "She sent me away. I suppose she had something better to do." Her low voice is well-suited for anger, but not for disappointment. She mutters a few more words as we fit ourselves against each other for sleep. In the meadow, only the humans and perhaps a few satyrs will be stirring. I cannot understand what drew the human from Hekate; I would be offended, too, if one of the humans left me for one of the hairy creatures. Nevertheless we obey our masters as long as we are able, whether the orders are to serve or leave them.

Obedience and the night are over for me; I am spent.

The nymph snores and Hekate shifts and sighs in her sleep. I hear laughter, giggling, the command to

hush, but the sounds pass over me like a breeze. It must be the humans, searching in a pack for something to entertain them, and I am beyond entertaining.

We have few storms here, but when they come they are violent and long. We know now when to seek shelter, for the gentle wind that precedes them through the mountain peaks has a certain coolness, a certain flavor. My hair rises, all down my spine, for the storm-wind and the breeze of words are all too similar.

I move my legs carefully so I will not hurt the snoring nymph, then lurch to my feet. Hekate stirs but does not wake. I am already stiff and sore, and my hoof aches fiercely. But I remember the direction Elfleda and the ugly boy walked, and I remember the way the humans crept after her.

I follow the bruised leaves of their passing, too frightened to call out. Elfleda could be beyond the sound of my warning, and the humans could come back and silence me. I climb as fast as I am able. The ache spreads into my haunches and along the vertebrae strained by my unnatural construction.

The trees end suddenly. Moonlight throws my long shadow against pale granite. The mountain peak is still far above, separated from me by ridges, flat sheets of rock, sheer walls.

I climb the first ridge, my hooves scraping the bare stone. When I reach the top I can see Elfleda and the boy, gilt in the midst of shadows. His hands are twined in her mane and her arms are around his naked body. He moves against her.

They are safe, and alone. I am spying on them, up here silhouetted against the sky, and I am ashamed. I will go back to Hekate's solid warm side--

The moon reflects from ornament or weapon.

"Elfleda!"

As she throws up her head at my warning the humans rush her. The boy jumps away, surprised and embarrassed. The other humans are all around, yelling in triumph, holding nets and ropes to take back the defiance they gave her. The ugly boy looks from one face to another, confused, humiliated: at least he did not know what use they planned for his initiation. He sees the ropes, and strikes one angrily away. Elfleda rears and another misses her. She charges the humans, head down, and they scatter away from her sharp horn. She is trapped by the mountain and the waiting nets.

I gallop down the side of the ridge. A noose settles over Elfleda's head, around her throat, and slides tight. She turns, flinching, grasps the rope and sets herself back on her haunches, pulling the human off balance. She tears the rope away and flings it to the ground, but another settles around her shoulders. One strikes her hind legs like a snake. Startled, she springs away, and the tension of the rope halts her in mid-arc and pulls her down. She lies stunned, a scarlet burn on her throat, blood trickling from one leg where the rope has cut it.

Laughing, the humans close a circle around her as I near, my hoofbeats echoing on the stone. To our masters, this is adventure. Between them I see Elfleda raise her head. She tosses it, as a human approaches her, and her horn opens a deep wound. I reach the crowd and scatter our frail creators with my shoulders. I charge the human who holds the trip-rope; I pick her up and throw her down on the stones.

Our masters have stopped laughing.

Elfleda kicks off the loosened rope and pulls away the other, struggling to her feet. She menaces the humans with her horn and I with my fists, my hooves. They stand back, milling around us. We are all at bay.

"Achilleus!"

She bounds forward and I follow. The humans are raising nets, crying to each other to hurry. One snare drapes low, rippling and tangled. As it rises Elfleda leaps it. I gather speed, collect myself, and jump. The strands graze my forelegs-- they must entrap my hind legs-- but I kick back and up, the round cords scrape me, and I am free!

I plunge after Elfleda's pale form. Our retreat to the park, where we could hide and hope the masters might forget their anger, is cut off. Elfleda flees toward the mountain and the impassable ridges.

She starts to climb, hesitating when she no longer hears me behind her. "Achilleus, come on!"

"But where will we go?"

"Anywhere but back-- if we want to live. Hurry!"

She reaches toward me in encouragement: she is too high above to actually reach me.

"There's nothing out there for us."

She looks beyond me. I turn. The masters are very near, now, confident of their prey.

"Hurry!" Elfleda says again, and I put one hoof on the steep rock. This is desperation. I begin to climb. I scabble on the stone, straining upward. My hooves are made for meadows and prairies. I can hear the masters just behind me. Trying to go faster, I slip and fall to my knees, crying out at the wave of pain, reaching with my hands to keep from falling. Granite soaks up my blood.

Elfleda is almost close enough to touch me. Did she descend to help me climb?

"I can't-- "

"Try," she says. "Just try..."

Shining in the failing moonlight, a rope slips over her head as she grasps my hand.

Another noose falls around my throat and jerks me backwards. I fumble at it, struggling to free myself and climb. The rope jerks me again, much harder, pulling me down, cutting off my breath. My bruised hoof slams against a rock spur. The pain completes my disorientation. I stumble again, falling and sliding on the stone. I am lost.

When next I am aware of anything I feel warm droplets falling on my shoulder. I open my eyes, and see the masters leading Elfleda back down the mountain. She is at the center of a web of ropes, around her throat, her arms, her waist, binding her hands, but she holds her head erect. One of the humans reaches out and pulls her black-tipped tail. She lashes out with a sharp hind hoof and half-turns toward him, but the other humans drag her around.

I lunge up. The ugly human boy reaches out to stop me, too late. I scream and fall back, shuddering, panting, suddenly cold and wet with sweat. When I lie still the pain is only a great throbbing.

"I'm sorry," the boy whispers. "I didn't know..."

I push myself slowly up on one elbow, straining to see yet not move my hindquarters. Blood is black in the moonlight, but dawn will soon turn the patch beneath me scarlet. Bones protrude from my shattered leg.

Elfleda and the humans disappear among the trees as I sink back to the ground. I can only see the paling sky and the single human. "Help me... please help me..." But he is wiping the tears from his cheeks, pushing the hair from his forehead. It must be the kind moonlight and dawn that make him appear less coarse, less uncertain. There is no magic here.

"Elfleda," I whisper, and the boy gazes blankly down, as if he never knew her name.

Behind me I can hear the footsteps of two more humans, as they approach me one last time.

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