The Shape of Loneliness

by Riene

Summary

Alone for years, an amphibious creature longs for companionship. His risk results in his capture, imprisonment, and torment at the hands of a research laboratory in 1962 Baltimore. One woman is able to see the intelligent being under the chains, but will she be able to save them both?
The new tank was slightly better than the old. At least this one did not scrape his sides painfully sore where the rough metal edges had rubbed until scales had fallen away leaving raw rubbed flesh beneath. The smaller tank had been misery such as he had never known, tightly enclosed in warm, sluggish water, inadequate oxygen, filling slowly with his own waste at the lack of circulation. He’d been desperate to escape.

He’d lost track of time, trapped there in the narrow tube, and now in this newer, larger tank. He sensed he was underground, perhaps in a cave? But the water did not have an outlet, and he’d learned from painful experience to stay away from the dark and moving object in the far corner. It smelled of foreignness, the same oily unpleasant aroma of the transport tube. It was unforgivingly hard as well, and had trapped his fingers in an agonizing grip when he’d once tried to fathom its purpose.

He was chilled, he was hungry, his muscles cramped from being confined for so long. And worst of all, he was lost; angry and bewildered by the events that had overtaken him. And achingly, achingly lonely.

It had been some time, years perhaps? since he had seen those of his own kind. Driven by desperation and a dim memory, he’d swum the channel upstream to where the Land Dwellers had once greeted his people every spring. The shifting angles of the crepuscular light had told him it was the Time, and he’d begun the journey in hope to meet Others.

But even this too had been wrong. The water of the great river had grown steadily more murky and heated, lacking the oxygen he remembered and the fish which had once darted through the jewel-toned depths.

When instinct told him it was the Place, he had surfaced…and reeled backwards in shock. Gone were the towering trees he remembered, and the grassy plants hanging over the rapids. The stones of the river where the Land Dwellers had greeted his people were gone as well, torn from their roots. Gone were the Others of his kind, and gone too were the small brown Land Dwellers.

He paddled about in dismay, looking for them. He did not dare emerge; something in the very air and water warned him of Wrongness. The air held a faint brown tinge, the water brown too with silt with an oily sheen that made his eyes and gills burn unpleasantly.

It was the proper Time, he knew. The Land Dwellers should be here, offering gifts. They would throw flowers and fruits, and most wonderfully, eggs of land-birds. His people in turn would scoop the enormous heavy red-tailed fish from the water in return, and the Land Dwellers would cry out respectfully, gratefully. Perhaps they would even swim together, later, racing through the waters, and call to each other, neither understanding but feeling the Completeness of things.

But the Land Dwellers had not been there, nor had his people.
Filled with longing, he’d swum away, departing this area. Perhaps in his grief and confusion he had not been careful. By the time he saw the net it was far too late.

And now he was here, trapped in this unpleasant enclosure, far from home, and more alone than ever.

The heavy chain dragged behind him, the metal collar weighing painfully on his neck. He circled the tank once more, but there was no safe place to sleep, and he was so desperately tired.

If there was one thing he had learned since his capture, it was that these pale Land Dwellers were cruel, utterly unlike the smaller brown ones. It was they who had captured him, had pressed the cylindrical tube against him until he screamed in agony and fallen into darkness, only to awake and find the tormenting ring about his neck, rubbing his throat gills and attached to a chain. His chest now bore multiple painful welts where the cylinder had touched. He backed away each time they brought it out, but one of the pale ones seemed to enjoy inflicting the agony. They pulled him forward, jabbing him with sharp objects, holding devices to him doing things he could not comprehend. He loathed their touch and sensed both fear and disgust in them. And they were weak, so weak. Had it not been for his shackles he could have killed them all.

He’d been out of the water far too long, his chest painfully tight and constricting, wheezing in the chill air, desperate to regain the relative safety of the tank. The cylinder buzzed again, prodding him in the chest and he felt his bladder loosen, falling to his knees, howling in pain. The sneering face drew near, reaching out a hand, seizing his gills, drying in the air. A second later he spun, razor-sharp teeth severing two of the fingers that hurt him. Blood, hot and bitter, filled his mouth and he spat the digits across the room. The buzzing cylinder struck him again and again until he knew no more.
The Shape of Loneliness

Chapter 2 Imprisonment

Riene, 2017

Filtered through the water and his lethargic mind came distant, different sounds, reminding him of the sounds the brown Land Dwellers had once made in his most distant now of memories. He examined himself, finding only sluggish bleeding from the newest welts. He placed one hand on them, concentrating, slowing the seeping fluid into a barely noticeable ooze. If only he could stop the pain as well.

The odd sounds continued, and cautiously he rose from the tank until just his head and eyes could peer above the surface. The room was empty, save for one Land Dweller, a pale one he did not recognize. It moved about the room slowly, dragging a stick across the ground.

He drifted toward the upright imprisonment cylinder, now attached to the side of the tank, and peered through the portal, observing it, the effort of swimming reopening his wounds. This one was somewhat different from the others. Longer tendrils on the head, slightly different body shape and coverings. Perhaps a female of the pale and cruel Land Dwellers? He flipped backwards, retreating to the darkness.

The sense of being watched grew. Elisa turned slowly, looking into each shadowy corner, but the lab was empty. Only the faint hum of the circulation motor disturbed the heavy silence.

The long tube, a contraption that somehow reminded her of an iron lung but much larger, had been turned vertical and now was attached to the large holding tank. There had been something alive in it earlier, and now curiosity set in. She walked slowly toward the tank, fearful of the scientists coming in and finding her near their project. Elisa frowned, looking in through the glass portal. A darker fluid drifted in the water. Blood? A flicker stirred in the depths, and then it moved slightly more near, almost crouching in the tank, watching her. She took a step closer, trying to make it out.

It was human-shaped, tall and slender, but oddly colored, greys and greens, sleek and variegated. In the odd light of the tank it seemed to glow faintly. Gills fluttered at the sides of its neck, and its long muscular body seemed covered with scales. A darker substances oozed from small punctures… blood, definitely. It stared back at her, the dark eyes temporarily glowing like a cat’s eyes or a dog’s in the headlights of a car. Fascinated, Elisa stepped closer. The creature reared back, hissing and
flinching away, retreating to the shadows.

There was a rattle at the door and she dashed to the bucket, pretending to continue mopping the wet and bloody floor as two MPs and Zelda entered the room.

The woman rushed to Elisa’s side. “Where are the fingers?” and relieved, Elisa pointed to the slightly damp and now bloody paper bag on the bench.

He swam circles in confusion. Why was he here? Who was the new pale Land Dweller? Someone new to torment him? But she had not even tapped on the glass, had not done anything but look at him in surprise.

He swam another circle, motions mimicking his thoughts.

The next evening Elisa kept watch on the cylinder as she cleaned the lab, but saw no motions within it. Still, the eerie feeling of being watched made the back of her neck prickle. Finally, she gave in again to her curiosity and came to stand by the tank, looking down in to the murky water, thick now with plants. Was it or was it not down there? On the far side of the tank, the water began to ripple.

He floated motionlessly, looking up through the water. She stood like the small brown Land Dwellers had once stood, watching and waiting. Her hands were empty, no stick, no pain cylinder. He came gradually closer, feeling the chains tightening.

A long time ago there had been a dog that lived around the orphanage. It was a shy and hesitant creature, but if you sat still long enough, and made no sudden noises, it would eventually creep up and try to be friends. Elisa had been one of the few to ever touch the dog. Silence, she reflected grimly, was not an issue.

Slowly she sank down on the step by the pool, and turned slightly away, opening her lunch bag. With some days left until her next pay packet, she was down to a very tight and simple meal. Bread, cheese, and a couple hard-boiled eggs were all it contained.

Sighing, she pulled out an egg and tapped it lightly against the tile, beginning to peel it, as behind her the water continued to stir, the chains softly clinking and tightening. He—she was convinced the creature was male—was down there somewhere. Elisa took a bite of the egg.

Wary and watchful, he paddled slowly beneath the surface, but the waves distorted his vision and he was curious. He raised his head from the water, looking at her, as the chains pulled against the metal ring around his neck. There was still some flexibility in them; he thought he would be able to come closer.

She turned watching him, her eyes growing larger. In her hand was a small white oval and he sniffed the chill air, his mouth watering involuntarily. Hunger roared in his shrunken belly. The few fish he received were old, not juicy or fresh. He ate them in desperation, in hunger, but here was a delicious treat.
He gathered his legs, planting them on the slippery step, clawed toes digging into the cracks for balance and stood, rearing above her, eyes locked on the egg.

The creature was tall, its dark scales seeming to sparkle in the overhead light, membranes flicking across golden-ringed eyes, eyes that reminded her of the tiny frogs she’d once caught as a child. His eyes were focused on her egg. Oh heavens, had they not been feeding him? Hurriedly she reached into the lunch bag, finding the other egg, and hesitantly held it out. The creature reared back at her gesture, hissing, the gills on his neck flaring in a threat display, like a cat arching and spitting, and Elisa flinched back, terrified even as she sensed the creature’s fear. He was gone again, submerged in the tank. But his eyes had not left the egg.

He swam angrily, hunger twisting inside. She was out of reach, the delicious thing with her. The chains choked him. But then, dimly through the ripples, she returned…and placed the egg on the tile where he could reach it, moving her hands over it, then sliding away, leaving it behind.

It could be a trap. But she had not behaved as the others had. This pale Land Dweller was quiet, her movements gentle. And she had offered an egg. Slowly, he crept to the edge, aware of her eyes on him just under the surface. He slid a long arm forward, wrapping webbed fingers around his prize, and darted away quickly to the far side of the tank.

In the corridor Zelda called for Elisa. She gathered her cart and tools and departed.

Much later, alone in the tank, he cupped the fragile shells and wistfully tried to reassemble them. Looking down at the scattered pieces, his clawed hands clumsily formed the motions she’d made, as if it might bring them back.

*eggs*

Thank you for reading, and please leave a review.
She looked around the room, feeling a trickle of excitement in her belly. What could she bring the creature in the tank? Eggs, certainly; she’d emptied the remainder of the carton into the boiling water already, and the kitchen was filling with steam. Elisa turned slowly, eyes darting about. A toy? No, that seemed ridiculous immediately. The creature was an adult, she was certain, and intelligent. A toy would be inappropriate, even if she had one. Her eyes fell on one of Giles’ paintings. Art supplies, paper and pencil? No, that would be silly with the water. She turned again.

Not art—music!! Almost giddy with excitement from the sheer rightness of the idea, Elisa swept up the nearest stack of records. Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Andy Williams. Trembling, she flipped through them. What to take? What to choose? She set them down and bent over the small record player. Thank heavens it was a portable. She secured the needle arm into its grip, coiled the cord and latched the round cover, setting it by the door. It wouldn’t be too heavy to carry on the bus.

They pulled him from the water, chains tightening and collar choking, pressing on his sensitive gills. He was dragged to a plinth, shackled. Overhead bright lights appeared, their intensity drying and painful to his sensitive eyes. A series of brighter flashes began.

They turned him over, spread his legs, stretched his arms, twisted his head, all while the miserably bright lights continued to flash and pop.

He struggled against the restraints to no avail, and in desperation tried communicating, chirping, clicking, hissing, moving his hands as the other pale one did, to no gain. Were they too stupid to comprehend communication? They seemed to communicate among themselves well enough. Why could they not see that he was trying desperately to make them understand?

But his attempts, futile as they were, only brought more suffering. One of the males dragged over a box with spinning circles and a silver stick, placing it near him. Any sound he made only made the Land Dwellers more excited, and so he stubbornly refused to utter another.

From the edge of his vision, the cruel Land Dweller appeared with the torture cylinder, and jabbed it in his chest. Agony laced through his body, his mind going blank and his body seizing violently, muscles aching and ears ringing with the shock of it.

“Sing, damn you,” the Land Dweller spat.

Elisa saved cleaning the T-4 lab for last, hoping to find the staff long gone. Zelda would be busy as well, working down the hall on some other room. It had looked awful from the doorway, and the older woman has pursed her lips irritably, sighed and rolled in her cart. Whatever did these white-lab-coated men do to turn these rooms into such wrecks? She suspected she didn’t really want to know.
The record player was hidden at the bottom of her cart, the records themselves beside it, her lunch tucked on a lower shelf. She wheeled the cart in, looking around in dismay. In the back left, what looked almost like an operating table had been pushed against the wall, bloody wads of paper toweling, gauze, suture threads, and empty packaging littering the floor. She shuddered, pulling on her gloves, hoping desperately that this blood had not come from the water creature, and began to pile the debris in the trash receptacle.

Finally, the last of the scientists, a man named Hoffstetler, stripped off his bloody coat and threw it into a nearby laundry cart, as his assistant finished washing his hands. Without a word the two men pushed past her. She subdued a flash of anger; hating the feeling that they didn’t see her as even a person, but it was better that they were gone. Quickly Elisa finished the table area, sweeping and then mopping the floor, and pushing her cart toward the plinth, where it partially blocked the view from the doors.

The sense of being watched grew. She quickly removed her lunch bag from the cart and knelt on the second step, opening it. Reserving two eggs for herself, Elisa lined the others along the edge of the pool, spacing them apart near enough to the edge that the creature might see them.

Excited, she removed the record player from its hiding place and set the small device on the tiled steps and pulled out the cord. An extension cord lay curled on the floor near the wall socket and she plugged it in. Elisa removed the LP’s from her cart, then sat down to wait.

The water stirred, the creature’s head emerging cautiously. He blinked at her, paddling cautiously nearer, his golden eyes flickering between the eggs and the human on the steps.

Elisa turned, smiling at him, and slowly raised her hands. *Hello,* she signed. He blinked and partially emerged from the water, reaching carefully for an egg. Elisa tapped another of the while ovals and signed *egg* over it. He paddled back, out of reach, and began peeling the egg.

They ate in silence for a moment, each observing the other. The creature reached for a second egg and paused. He cocked his head at her, and brought his hands together, clumsily imitating her motions. *egg*

Elisa smiled broadly. He had the idea! She picked up the top record, a Glenn Miller collection and showed it to him. His intelligent eyes watched her with curiosity. *Record,* she signed, and he blinked. She slid the black disk from its cardboard case and placed it on the turntable. He came closer, watching with interest. Elisa flipped the catch from the needle arm and turned on the device, the faint electrical hum filling the air. The creature ducked back but did not submerge, continuing to watch.

She placed the needle on her favorite track, and *Lover’s Serenade* began playing.

Alarmed, the creature reared back, eyes growing wide, then swam forward, emerging from the water, staring at the device. After a moment, the spiny ridges of his back flattened and along his skin, bioluminescent markings began to glow, soft pinks and yellows, a stunning vibrant contrast to the usual dark grey-green. He came closer, sniffing, eyes wide, and chirped with excitement.

Elisa reached down slowly to the player, and lifted the needle. Again the creature reared back, but immediately came closer again, sniffing and chirping questioningly. She lowered the needle, music once more emerging from the speakers. His bright eyes met hers, his markings glowing brighter. To her delight he emitted a series of trills, chirps, and clicks, and did a backflip into the water, swooping back up to the edge immediately. His clawed hands waved in the air, as if he were trying to catch the very sounds, looking for all the world like the conductor of an orchestra.

Laughing, Elisa pointed down at the disk. *Record,* she signed again. *Record,* he signed back. *Egg,* he signed, and reached for another white oval. She gave him a smile of pure joy, and he smiled back,
mimicking her expression.

She watched him devour the egg and then an idea formed. Elisa tapped the black disk. *Record.* He blinked, watching intently, and repeated the sign. She tapped the egg. *Egg.* And then she tapped herself.  *E-L-I-S-A.*

The golden eyes stared at her, and then his markings softened, lighting up with a warm flush of color. His hands rose from the water.  *E-L-I-S-A.*

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*Thank you for reading, and please review!*
He knew the routine by now. A long period of darkness, where it was usually safe to sleep. The bright time, when the cruel ones came. And then the time for E-L-I-S-A, the only reason he did not utterly despair. There would be eggs, and music, companionship and quiet, an ease of the aching loneliness.

The bright period had been unpleasant again. He had been pulled from the water and shackled to the plinth. Cold hard metal plates had been put under his body, and a towering, heavy machine had been dragged in, positioned over him, and then all of the pale ones left the room. It had hummed repeatedly, then they had turned him over, repeating the same actions. It had made no sense, but then, little these pale land-dwellers did made sense.

The night shift, once a time of darkness and loneliness, save for Zelda, had become a source of delight. Elisa dreamed of the creature in the tank during her hours of sleep, and thought of him during the day, trying not to imagine what new horrors they were tormenting him with. She’d taken to visiting different grocery stores in order to buy eggs. Without a voice, she could not even make up a lie or excuse—I’m a baker. My children like eggs—so she simply smiled and changed stores when the cashier frowned and curiosity became judgmental. She experimented with cooking times, finding he liked them just slightly underdone.

He had liked the music, she was sure, and thus Elisa began to bring more records, hiding them in her personal locker during the day. She played them in turn at night, dancing with her broom or mop while he watched, imagining dancing with him. Could he dance, she pondered? He had never completely emerged from the water, but if his feet were like his hands, they’d be large, long, heavily clawed. He watched her from the tank and from the cylinder as she moved around the room. Did he too dream about being free, about touching her?

The bathwater flowed, filling the old tub, and she ran her fingers through it, mesmerized, dropping her robe on the floor and slipping into the water. Elisa allowed the tub to fill to nearly the rim, and slid down beneath the water, opening her eyes and looking up at the rippling surface. Is this what he saw? How odd the lights looked, and the walls.

She floated upwards, her face rising above the surface into the cooler air, taking a breath. Her legs and arms floated free, drifting slightly, her mind occupied with distant thoughts. Slowly her hands rose, crossing over the body, smoothing the flat surface of her stomach to cup her breasts, then lowering, stroking herself in the hot water. She had never had a lover. Had he ever had a mate? How would they love each other, floating in the water, legs entwining, bodies sliding against one another. One hand made small, circling motions, disturbing the water in regular patterns, as the other idly caressed her skin, envisioning him and another, another whose body was her own.

She arched and shuddered, the waves of pleasure slowly receding into diminishing tingles.
Reluctantly Elisa washed and dressed, making toast, and borrowing eggs from Giles’ refrigerator as he watched quizzically. She’d get an extra carton on the way home later and replace them.

Even the bus ride had become less routine and more of space in which to daydream. She placed the latest records carefully on the seat and traced the raindrops flowing along the window, wondering what this night would bring.

Zelda placed the broom back into the holding clip of the yellow cart and pushed the heavy wheeled unit out into the hallway, looking down the corridor. No Elisa. A month ago she’d been the first one finished, often coming down the hall to help clean the rooms Zelda hadn’t yet managed. Now she spent every moment in the T-4 lab, rushing through her other duties.

The older woman shook her head. She’d seen the thing in the holding tank, had taken Strickland’s warnings to heart. A God-fearing Christian woman, she didn’t need to be told twice about demons. But perhaps Elisa did. The way her eyes went all dreamy soft at quiet times was worrisome. Elisa acted like a woman in love, but as far as she, Zelda, knew, there was no man in her life. The girl was too imaginative for her own good, easily hurt, and Zelda continued fretting, not liking the direction of her thoughts.

He crouched angrily in the farthest part of the tank, aching in body and mind, wanting only for E-L-I-S-A to be there. The hateful ones had tried, over and over to get him to carry a heavy metal object, to swim to the other side of the tank, to press the object against a metal plate, where it stuck.

He had grasped their desire almost immediately, infuriated by repetitive nature of the action, teased by tiny offerings of food, food withheld if he did not perform for them in a certain amount of time. This task was important to them and after the first few times, he refused to cooperate. The black cylinder of pain struck him repeatedly, and eventually he knew no more.

Cleaning over for the evening, Elisa propped the broom and wet mop against the cart and settled the record player by the tank. He was there in an instant, dull grey-green scales warming, flushing salmon and rose as his golden eyes watched her. She set the needle on a Benny Goodman album and laid out a row of eggs for him, nibbling on her sandwich as they ate together.

Compelled by a desire and emotion she couldn’t identify, Elisa held out her hand. He looked at it questioningly, perhaps waiting for her to sign a new word. Slowly, she drew nearer and hesitantly touched his hand. The creature snatched his hand away immediately, fearing pain, but when nothing happened he cautiously returned, holding out his own hand. Elisa touched him again, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes.

He felt oddly warm, for a water creature, his skin softer and less scaly than she thought. The webbing between his fingers was rubbery, the bones long and hard, the scales soft. He seemed as fascinated with her, touching her palm, spreading her fingers questioningly as if looking for her missing webbing. He felt her nails, and then her skin, his puzzled eyes examining the hair on her bare arms. Elisa stroked his own arm, and his colors softened as he blinked and made a soft sound, not unlike a cat’s purr.

Time for more words. Hand, she signed. Arm. Fingers. Claws, nails. Immediately he repeated them, working his fingers as best he could, watching her for approval.
Delighted with his quickness, she smiled, patting his arm, and he responded in kind, carefully patting her. The bath time fantasy returned full force, and she inhaled sharply. The amphibian man turned his head curiously and blinked as she intertwined her small fingers with his, clasping them gently.

In the midst of the day’s failed attempt at training the creature to carry a magnetic device and attach it to a mock submarine hull, Robert Hoffstetler had not fed the brute on Strickland’s orders. “Let him starve,” he’d snapped on his way out of the lab, leaving the assistants to unshackle the creature and put it back in the water. Several of the assistants were terrified of the thing, fearing it would awaken abruptly and attack them. Indeed, the beast did have an impressive set of claws, and word had spread quickly about Strickland’s bandaged hand. Oddly, it had never bitten anyone except the man who wielded the cattle prod.

Sighing, he turned and walked back towards the lab. No matter what the boss said, if the Asset died or became ill you could bet that they’d all hear about it. He entered the storage room and jerked the refrigerator door open. Four dead fish lay on a tray, their glassy eyes staring at him reproachfully. Suppressing a shudder, Hoffstetler lifted the tray and entered the lab.

And stopped, surprised. Music was playing, the Big Band sounds of the previous decade. His shoulders slumped, relieved and irritated. It was merely one of the cleaning crew, working to music as she swept the lab. He was about to walk forward when the Asset appeared in the upright cylinder, looking directly at the cleaning woman. At that moment, the scientist’s world shifted.

The creature lifted one hand, clawed fingers curling in, and struck the glass, rapping on it in a deliberate pattern. To Hoffstetler’s utter shock, the cleaning woman leaned her broom against a table and hurried over to the glass, as the creature raised its hands, waving them and moving its fingers in coherent, organized patterns, answered by the woman. She walked over to the now-silent record player and removed the black disk, while the creature watched her intently. She selected two albums and walked back to the glass, tucking the albums under one arm and making signs to the amphibian creature.

The Asset’s dull colors shifted suddenly, flooding with color, pinks and yellows, as he excitedly pointed to one of the two albums. The woman smiled and slid that disk out of its sleeve, putting it on the turntable and lowering the needle. *Moonglow*, by Benny Goodman began playing. She picked up the broom and began to dance with it, using the humble object as a partner, spinning, dipping, feet tapping. In the front of the cylinder the Asset watched, fascinated, then flipped backward, swimming, surfacing, spinning in time with the music.

The song ended and the Asset swam back to the glass, floating, waiting. Slowly the woman moved toward him and lifted one hand, pressing it gently against the surface. In the tank, the creature lifted a hand and put it against hers, on the other side of the glass, his colors shifting into a soft salmon and rose.

Elisa sighed and smiled wistfully, keeping her hand against the cool surface, wishing she could feel his fingers in hers again. Slowly she leaned her forehead against the glass, aching to touch him, to hold and be held in turn by him. The Asset blinked, the warm colors suffusing his body, and leaned his own forehead against the glass, against hers, with the same gentle expression and posture.

Shaken, Hoffstetler stepped backwards, retreating into the shadows of the storage room and set the
tray aside, something painful twisting in his chest, moved and stunned at what he had witnessed. As he had begun to expect, the Asset was intelligent, could communicate…and now he had no idea how to proceed.

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Oh, how I wish the movie would come out here! I’ll have to wait until the 22nd to see it, sadly. I’m hesitant to continue this story, now that the movie has been released, as I have no idea how closely my guesses are to the actual story line.
Hope you enjoyed this update, and please leave a comment!
Threat

Chapter Notes

Note—the dialogue in the middle part of this chapter between Strickland and the others is taken directly from the movie, and credit there goes to the original writers. The other scenes are mine. This chapter is a little more directly from the script/movie than usual, but it's necessary to continue the story line.

The Shape of Loneliness

Chapter 5 Threat

Riene, 2017

He floated, dazed and miserable, barely conscious. Unendurable events spun time out to the point he could not begin to fathom how much had passed. It had seemed like an eternity.

They had forced him into the close and confining cylinder again, and then something had changed. There was pressure, pounding pressure against his eyes and ears. It became so much more difficult to breathe; the water itself seemed thicker, denser, pressing against every part of his body. He tasted the metallic tang of the water, aware now that he was bleeding from ears and gills, and passed into the darkness.

A few hours later he had awoken, aching, his head, his eyes throbbing dully. The one pale Land Dweller had brought him fish, and he'd taken them, retreating, but could not force himself to eat. He'd hidden the fish under a particularly thick mat of algae for later.

Assuming there was a later. Forced back into the chamber he could only wait for whatever torment the Land Dwellers devised this time. He could sense the same dull pulsing as before. At least there was no pressure, but it was getting so much more difficult to breathe. He stared, confused, as bubbles coalesced and rose from the water. He was dizzy, nauseated, eyesight blurring, and shaking from the slowly mounting pain in his torso. It was as if his very flesh was swelling, itching, and then he knew no more.

Gratefully Elisa hurried toward the T-4 lab, desperate to get as far from Strickland as possible. His breath, hot on her face, his eyes had stared down her shirt collar, and his comments… she shuddered again, sickened. Something in the way he stared made her uncomfortable. More than uncomfortable. He'd been so horribly rude to Zelda. She herself was not a believer, no matter how often the nuns at the orphanage had taken them to mass, to confession. No amount of prayer had ever altered one thing in her life, not as a child, not as an adult. But to use the Bible against Zelda, to speak so horribly about her mother, to make her feel less than…oh, it made her blood boil.

She stopped outside of the lab, parking the cart and smoothed her dress, tucking a strand of hair behind one ear, hoping she didn't smell of the cigarette smoke from back on the laundry loading docks, and slipped inside the huge doors.
The chains had tightened again, pulling him up and out of the pool, higher and tighter. They'd dragged him, forcing him along with the buzzing black stick that caused so much pain, and chained him to the plinth again. Bright lights blazed down, drying his skin. One of the pale Land Dwellers had stuck him repeatedly with a thorn-like bit of metal, and he smelled again the scent of his own blood. Chained and exhausted from the earlier torment, he could only kneel, miserably awaiting whatever new horrors these beings could devise.

Yet he was left there, chained, back twisted and joints aching from the earlier pressure changes, pressed hard against the flat stone. The bright lights blazed down, drying and tightening his skin, hurting his sensitive eyes.

The large metal doors began to open again, and he could not help the whimper that escaped his throat, a whimper that became a cry for help when he saw who is entering the lab.

Elisa pulled the doors open barely a crack, just wide enough to slip through, and easing them shut again behind her, glancing toward the immense pool, but turning instead at the sound of a plaintive whimper, a sound that suddenly rose in volume, a desperate sound of a creature in pain. To her horror, the creature was out of the tank, chained tightly to a concrete block near the operating table. Her horrified glance took in the blazing lights, a camera, the row of chairs, and a variety of gleaming surgical instruments laid out on a tray.

The creature had raised his head, straining against the bonds, gasping and staring at her, his eyes begging, and howled again. As she dashed toward him the cry became a low moan as her fingers brushed gently over his head, then tugging at the neck collar and chains. Elisa dropped the lunch bag, not noticing the egg that rolled out, as she looked frantically about for some way to free him.

Behind her the door lock snapped and began rolling open, multiple voices spilling in. Terrified at being caught, Elisa snatched up her lunch bag and fled, hiding behind one of the banks of machinery, hating herself for abandoning the creature. Mr. Strickland entered, shrugging off his jacket and circling the chained creature on the plinth, smiling to himself. He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and tossed it aside, opening a small box of candy, and popped one in his mouth, then lifted the black cattle prod lying beside it. The creature flinched back and howled again, desperately pulling at the chains, and Elisa felt the tears spill over down her face.

Strickland grinned evilly down at the being cringing before him and raised the cattle prod. "Miss me? I took a candy break. This? Is it this that scares you? You should be used to it by now." Casually he shoved the prod into the creature's side, smirking as it cried out in agony. "There you are again. Making that god-awful sound. Is that you crying? Is that what it is? You hurting? Huh? Or maybe you're angry? Yeah. Maybe you'd like to get another bite at me."

Elisa shuddered behind the bank of equipment, tears streaming down her face, as the staccato sound of electricity filled the cavernous room and the creature cried out again. Pressing herself tightly against the dull green metal, she snuck a glance around the corner. Strickland was circling the plinth, grinning. The creature twisted desperately, trying to keep him in sight, and hissed, his gills, neck and back fins straightening, colors going dark.

Strickland sucked on the candy and lifted the prod, striking the creature again, grinning as it thrashed and cried out. "I can't tell-are you begging? 'Cause to me it's just the worst fucking noise I've ever heard." He stepped backward, one foot brushing an object, and looking down as a brown egg rolled away.

Elisa jerked back, horrified, as he picked up the egg and looked around, brows furrowed and glaring into the corners. She hardly dared breathe as he began walking toward the bank of monitors and computers.
At that moment the rattling sound of the doors being pushed back filled the room and Strickland tossed the egg aside, striding toward entrance, his arm outstretched, an unctuous smile on his lips.

"General Hoyt! Welcome, Sir! Everything's ready. Good to have you here, Sir!"

An older man, assured and determined, walked in and peered down at the creature. "Good God, is that it? Much bigger than I pictured." Behind him a group of white-coated technicians and scientists bustled in, clipboards in hand. One of them knelt by the plinth.

Strickland nodded. "Ain't that something? Ugly as sin. The natives in the Amazon worshiped it."

The general shrugged. "Well, it sure doesn't look like much of a god right now, does it?"

Strickland shook out a couple pills from a small bottle and swallowed them. "They were primitives, sir. Tossed offerings into the water; flowers, fruits, crap like that. Tried to stop the oil drill with bows and arrows. That didn't end too well." He smirked again, ingratiatingly, and handed the general a file folder.

Below them, Dr. Hoffstetler was examining the creature, a frown creasing his face. It lay there, gasping, and he turned it gently, noting the burn marks from the cattle prod. He passed his hands across the creature's flesh and they came away bloodied. He scowled up at Strickland. "What happened? He's bleeding! You cannot keep doing this!"

Strickland shrugged. "It's an animal, Hoffstetler. Just keeping it tame."

Elisa shuddered and risked another look. Even from across the room the slowly growing puddle of bright red blood was visible.

The general flipped through the folder and glanced down at the kneeling scientist. "'Oxygen osmosis- dioxide exchange.' What are we lookin' at here, son?"

Hoffstetler stood, wiping his hands. "This creature, sir-I've never seen anything like it. Ever. It can alternate between two entirely separate breathing mechanisms..."

Strickland rolled his eyes. "Mudskipper can do that."

But the younger man was shaking his head. "You want to put a man in space for days, weeks even, he's going to have to endure conditions the human body just wasn't made for. But this... This means long-term survivability in space. This gives us an edge against the Soviets."

General Hoyt looked more interested. "How long can it breathe outside the water?"

Strickland held up a timer, reclaiming the general's attention. "Really... Thirty minute intervals. It's been out now, about... twenty eight- so we should start to see the effects."

They stood in silence for a minute, watching the creature below them gasping, suffering. Strickland continued. "Reality, is, sir-we don't know jack shit about this thing."

The general grimaced. "Soviets want it. We know that much. Those cockeyed bastards-they send a dog up into space-we get a laugh. But next thing we know-they send a human up - a Ruskie, orbiting our planet, doing God knows what? And then who's laughing? Krushchev. That's who. We let him put a dog in space, he laughs, puts a commie in space, he laughs, puts missiles in Cuba. Have we learned nothing?"

Strickland nodded. "Give'm a dog, they take Cuba."
"You got that right," Hoyt grunted and they laughed.

On the plinth, the creature shuddered again, gasping in pain. Dr. Hoffstetler knelt beside him worriedly. "Sir, I would advise…" They turned to him and he continued. "We need to get him back in the water."

Strickland shook his head, frowning at the kneeling scientist. "Let us go over the mark for once, see where it takes us."

They stood watching as the creature began to convulse. Horrified, Elisa stepped from behind the row of machines, desperate to stop his suffering. The slight movement caught Dr. Hoffstetler's attention and she froze. She saw his eyes dart to the egg, which had rolled away, and back to her. Very slightly, he shook his head, his eyes begging her to remain hidden, and slowly she backed into the shadows once more.

Strickland glanced at the chronometer and turned to the general, dismissively. "Scientists-they are like artists: They fall in love with their playthings." He looked down at the creature, gasping in agony. "How, over here, sir, right here, you see?" He pointed at the creature's midsection. "The creature has a thick jointed cartilage separating the primary and secondary lungs-Am I explaining this correctly, Bob?"

Hoffstetler nodded tightly. "Yes, but we've been able to get…"

"It makes the X-rays inconclusive," he continued smoothly, ignoring the other man's comment.

"In principle, yes, but see, this…"

Strickland turned to the general. "Sir, if we want to get the edge on the Soviets- and I know we can-we have to vivisect this thing. Take it apart. Learn how it works."

Hoffstetler blanched. "No! No, that would defeat the purpose!" With a final shudder the creature passed out and Hoffstetler turned to the general, pleading. "Sir? He's passed out. Please."

The general raised his eyebrows at Strickland, who glanced at the stopwatch and shrugged. Relieved, Hoffstetler motioned the waiting techs forward and bent to release the creature from its collar and manacles. "Put him in the tank—the tank! Let him pressurize." He turned back to the watching men. "General Hoyt, sir: You cannot under any circumstance kill this creature. You cannot."

It was a mistake, and he knew it the moment the words left his lips. The general spun back, tapping one shoulder. "Count these with me, son- there's five of them: That means I can do whatever the hell I want. You wanna plead your case? I'll listen. But, end of the day, it is my damn decision."

Shooting him an amused glance, Strickland fell into step with the general as they left the room. Hoffstetler hurried after them.

A moment later Elisa slipped out from behind the row of machines and after one agonized look at the tank, followed them.

In the corridor, Zelda grabbed her arm. "What were you doing in there? What were you doing?" She pulled her away from the door, propelling her into a side corridor and down to the locker room.

Elisa jerked her arm away and began to frantically sign. "They're going to kill him. Help me get him out!"
Zelda gasped. "Are you crazy? Are you out of your damn mind? I will not lose my job. God knows the last time Brewster brought home a dollar..."

Desperate, Elisa looked helplessly around the narrow space and raised her hands again. "They won't know you're involved!"

"If you're involved-I'll get blamed! I'll get sacked! Yes- I will be!" she hissed. "Just to be on the safe side. I'm black! They don't need any other reason!"

Elisa stood angrily and grabbed a bucket and a pail, moving away.

"So listen to me: I am not covering for you, you hear! You shouldn't be in there when you shouldn't be in there! And that is that." Zelda folded her arms, glaring.

Leaving the cleaning gear by the door and feigning a calmness she did not feel, Elisa entered the command center. She emptied a bin of trash into the cleaning cart and looked around. Above her in the closed office, the three men stood arguing. Elisa grasped a dust cloth and mounted the steps, high enough to see their faces, hoping the men would turn enough that she might be able to read their lips. She could catch enough to tell that they were still discussing the fate of the creature, Strickland arguing it was dangerous, that they were risking Russian infiltration, Hoffstetler begging for more time. The general made some gesture, speaking, and Strickland smiled. The men began moving toward the door and Elisa ducked, concentrating on becoming invisible, wiping the sticky metal banister. As the men descended the stairs, she bent lower, hiding her face and picking up trash.

The general stomped down the stairs. "Crack the damn thing open. Learn what you can and close shop here. Give yourself a good pat in the back, Strickland. You've done it."

Strickland smirked. "Thank you, sir." They passed by, moving into the corridor, and she looked up. Above her, Dr. Hoffstetler stood alone in the glass office, a despairing look on his face.

She stumbled out of the lab, clinging to the cart, head lowered to hide the tears. *Vivisection.* She knew *dissection* from high school science classes so long ago; the term had to be related. How could they do that? He was alive, intelligent, like them! Elisa parked the cleaning cart in its usual spot and rushed into the locker room, hiding her face behind the open door, changing shoes and gathering her sweater, her purse. Fortunately Zelda had already departed; she didn't think she could face the older woman's endless questions tonight.

The bus ride home was interminable. She leaned against the window, vision blurry from unshed tears. What to do? What could she do? There had to be some way to stop this, to rescue him. There was no way to do it alone. But how?

In the now darkened T-4 lab, the creature floated limply, blood flowing from his side, his eyes shut, unconscious.

The movie opens here this weekend, finally! I was able to see it last week when we drove four hours out of state for Christmas shopping and an early treat for me. Have you seen it yet? I loved it!

Thanks for reading, and please review!
A/N-Thank you all for your lovely comments! I am so glad to find others who love this story.

Elisa lay on the bed, the clock's relentless ticking her only companion.

There had been bad days in her life. Days of torment in the orphanage, where other children knew she could not cry out from their pinches or prodding, could not or would not tell the nuns about the endless teasing. The week in which she'd turned 18, and, done with high school, had been turned out into the world, alone and friendless. The unwanted touches on the bus. The time she fell ill with no one to care for her and she truly wondered if it was worth the struggle to fight for breath, knowing no one would care or even notice if she lived or died.

But somehow this was worse. She moved restlessly, seeking a cooler spot, pressing her throbbing temple against the wrinkled pillowcase. She'd fought with Giles, earlier, Giles, her only friend, who was so wrapped up in his own desperation and unhappiness that he was not able to hear her. She had no idea what had happened; he refused to discuss it, but he'd looked suddenly older, tired and closed off. She could not help him, she could not help the creature. God only knew what was happening at the lab. She couldn't bear to think of it.

Finally Elisa dragged herself upright and stumbled to the bathroom, pressing a cold wet cloth against her swollen eyes. She bathed quickly, not feeling like taking the time for any personal indulgence, and dressed, the dreary colors, green and grey and black, reflecting her mood. She managed to choke down a piece of toast and cup of coffee, staring bleakly out the window at the rain.

Three hours until work. Anything to fill the time, to numb her heart, to quiet the voices raging in her head. She ran the vacuum cleaner, washed the dishes, folded towels. She'd saved the bathroom for last; it was her least favorite room to clean, so much like the complex. Sink, mirror…easy enough to wipe down. Toilet…a quick scrub, the smell of bleach slowly filling the air. Finally she knelt on the side of the tub, a scrubbing brush and cleanser scouring the old porcelain.

The tub was nearly done when her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door, echoing through the silent apartment. Rising, she wiped her hands on her apron and opened the door, frowning.

To her surprise, Giles stood there, wet, uncomfortable, with an expression she'd not seen in a long time. She motioned him in, but he remained in the hallway, looking at his feet, then at her.

"I have…no one else...you are the only person that I can talk to," he said quietly.
Tears welled in her eyes and Elisa nodded. *Me too,* she signed.

He took a deep breath. "Whatever this thing is...you need it. So...just tell me what to do."

He nodded slightly at her, resigned but determined, and Elisa stepped forward, hugging him tightly.

Planning had taken the better part of the next two days. Elisa had purloined a sheet and Giles had spent a chilly evening in the back alley, repainting his old van, copying the cleaning service logo and name on the doors. Using his best skills, he'd forged an ID card as well, copying from hers and joking that he ought to go into business for the black market. Elisa had rolled her eyes, smiling, and mock-hit him.

As for herself, Elisa had spent a few minutes one evening exploring a service corridor that conveniently led to the loading docks, and noting the location of every security camera. All seemed to use the same hinged, ball-joined mounting. With a broom she could quickly move them.

Their plan had come together easily enough. There were deep laundry bins in the T-4 lab, deep enough to hide the Asset. If she wet them sufficiently, he should be able to keep from becoming distressed. The service corridor would take her straight to the docks, where Giles would meet them. With the camera pointed upward they'd be able to quickly load him into the vehicle and drive away. They'd have half an hour to get him to water.

And therein lay the first obstacle. Giles suggested freeing the Asset directly, driving him to the shores. Hopefully they'd be able to explain to him he would need to get away as rapidly as possible, avoiding boats, that he'd be able to return to the warmer waters of the south. The problem was that the nearest access to deep enough, secluded enough water was a good hour away with the traffic. They'd just have to hide him somewhere until the nearby canal gates opened.

The second obstacle was Strickland. The man seemed to be everywhere at once, watching her, his eyes heavy on her body, her face. Elisa found herself questioning if he somehow suspected the thoughts in her mind, but as it turned out, he had other ideas.

She'd been called upstairs to his office the night of the planned rescue, glancing frantically at her watch and praying that whatever it was would not take long. As she entered, he indicated a puddle, water and broken glass mixed together. Elisa grabbed a rag and the dustbin and knelt, quickly sweeping the pieces into the tray.

Strickland walked around the desk, leaning against it where he could get a good look down her collar, sucking on the candy he always carried around, and then suddenly crouched beside her.

"You know," he said quietly, smiling in a way that made the hairs on her neck stand up. "I can't figure it out, myself. You're not much to look at, but—go figure—I keep thinking about you." She suppressed a shudder and began blotting at the puddle, as he continued. "And I've seen you, looking at me. You've been looking at me." He offered her a piece of the candy and Elisa shook her head, inching away.

"When you say you're mute... are you entirely silent? Or do you squawk a little? Some mutes squawk. Not pretty, but..."

As quickly as possible, Elisa gathered her cleaning gear, rising to her feet, just as Strickland reached out. "You should know this: I don't mind the scars. Don't mind that you can't speak, either." He stroked his fingers down the side of her throat, touching her scars, then withdrawing his hand, picking his teeth. "When you come right down to it-I like it. A lot. Kind of gets me going... Thought
you should know these things."

Elisa flinched and shook her head, walking away. Strickland's eyes followed her slim figure, grinning to himself. "Hey! Bet I can make you squawk a little," he called after her.

Downstairs and around the corner, Elisa raised the wet rag, scrubbing at her neck. The dirty rag was far preferable to Strickland's moist pawing. She shuddered again, fighting back the bile in her throat and made the foulest sign she knew toward his office.

A few minutes later she was in the locker room, switching out her shoes and collecting her purse.

In the end, it was accomplished quickly, though not exactly according to plan. She pushed the camera up and had dashed to the lab, hoping the heavy laundry cart had been left in position. She knelt on the side of the steps, taping the tiles impatiently with her fingernails, and slowly, the creature had surfaced, his huge eyes blinking at her in confusion and pain, but came to her willingly enough. Elisa touched him gently, than began tugging at the collar, the one thing she'd forgotten in the midst of their plans.

Behind her the doors dragged open, and she'd spun on the step, putting her body protectively between whomever it was and the creature, who hissed and spat. And yet…he'd helped them, handing her the keys, bundling items into his pockets, helping to free the creature and load him into the cart.

Elisa was still reeling over the realization that Dr. Hofstetler, the scientist in charge of the tests at the research institute, was not who he'd pretended to be. A Russian agent…she had been working with a Russian agent…she had been working with a Russian agent. And yet, he'd helped them, given them the containers of algae, of salt, the instruments to measure salinity. Zelda had been harder to persuade, but in the end, they'd all escaped, though not without a few additional bullet holes in Giles' van.

And now, the creature rested, sleeping, recovering in her bathtub. The room smelled of the ocean, seaweed and salt, and the odd, almost earthy scent of the creature. How she'd bathe tomorrow she didn't know, and stifled a semi-hysterical giggle. Maybe she'd beg to use Giles' shower. He'd understand. His eyes, when he beheld the sheer height and utter alienness of the creature….he'd simply stared in shock, then dazedly had murmured something about how beautiful.

They'd been lucky that no one was around in the alley. The traffic had been fierce, and the creature in and out of consciousness by that time. It had taken all of their strength to get him up the stairwell, down the corridor, and into her bathroom. She'd been so terrified when he hadn't moved, belatedly remembering the algae and needed salt. But he'd gasped, gills fluttering, and then those golden eyes had opened, staring around in confusion. His hands had gone to his neck, feeling for the collar and chains, and he'd stared at them, and sunk back into the water. She could have cried with relief.

His eyes snapped open and he surfaced cautiously, confused. This was not the tank. Memory came rushing back…ELISA, the pale Land Dweller, the cart. A sense of speed, loud clangs, ELISA crying as she crouched over him.

Slowly he rose, balancing in the slippery small tub. His hands moved to his neck again, confirming the absence of the heavy metal collar. He stood then, to his full height, stretching for the first time in weeks, gills flaring, dorsal spines rising, powerful arms reaching high, then stepped out cautiously.

The mat beneath his feet was soft, and he sank claws into it experimentally, then began to investigate
the room. The window looked out across the city, and fascinated by the clouds, the lights, and buildings, he stared for some minutes. The soft colorful hangings on the wall held the faint impression of ELISA as he sniffed at them, and he tilted his head curiously at his reflection.

But what he sought was not in this room. The door was partially open and he padded out, leaving wet footprints behind, sniffing the air. He could smell food, and her. Around a corner and then…

She stared at him, surprised again at how tall and powerful he was, standing in her living room, looking oddly uncertain. Elisa walked up and gently touched his arm, smiling tremulously. *Hello.*

He blinked at her, hands moving up to carefully repeat the sign. *Hello.* She reached for his hand and tugged him forward, into the small kitchen.

His eyes lit up, his colors flashing warm shades as he noticed the carton of eggs on the table. Long fingers plucked one from the carton and he swallowed it whole, spitting the shells out a moment later. She shook her head, amused and exasperated. *No. Shells in trash,* she signed, pointing, and swatted his hand away from the carton.

The creature made a sad noise and squatted, watching intently as Elisa removed six eggs from the carton and carefully placed them in the boiling water, then rose, leaning over the steam, chirping with excitement as she shook her head. *No. Hot.*

As the eggs cooked, Elisa poured herself a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter, observing him explore the room, sniffing curiously and watching for her reactions. The creature dwarfed her tiny kitchen. He dipped a finger in her coffee, licking it and making a grimace, then began opening cupboards. Spices interested him until he sneezed, making a face. A can of vegetables fell to the floor and he watched it roll away, then hissed and glared at the toaster as two slices of bread popped up. Elisa smiled, patting his arm, and pressed down the handle, then pulled it up, showing him the process, and he chirped at it again, dismissively.

The butter on the table met with his approval, as did the slices of bacon. A moment later the egg timer chimed, startling him. He chirped excitedly as she drained the eggs and ran them under cool water, then put them in a bowl and set them on the table. His golden eyes looked from the eggs to the woman and she nodded. *Eggs. For you.*

He sat awkwardly in the chair she pulled out for him, doing his best to copy her posture and movements. Elisa ate her toast and egg, watching him, a feeling of utter joy rising up in her chest, suffusing her heart with such a flood of emotion she thought she might simply expire from happiness. Against all odds, they had saved him.

*Eggs. ELISA.* he signed, and blinked slowly at her, colors softening, glowing saffron, salmon, pink. For the moment, all was well.
Roommates

Chapter Notes

A/N-Thank you all so much for your wonderful comments and PMs. You've no idea how much I appreciate them! I hope you enjoy this chapter as well. Be advised...the rating will most likely go up with the next chapter.

The Shape of Loneliness

Chapter 7 Roommates

Riene, 2017, 2018

Living with a two-meter tall partially amphibious roommate definitely meant changes.

For one thing, money was going to be a lot more tight, with added groceries. A two-meter high man ate a lot of eggs, fish, and raw meat. She and Zelda had done their usual Saturday shopping together, and Zelda's warm brown eyes had scrutinized her purchases aghast, then suddenly she chortled. "That man of yours must eat a lot," she'd teased, and Elisa had ducked her head, grinning.

Another issue was bathing. She'd taken to using Giles' shower, to his embarrassment, but there was not a way she could think of to keep soap from contaminating the creature's water.

And then there was simply him, the creature. He was fascinated by her world, his bright golden eyes taking in everything, exploring, testing, tasting, and occasionally breaking. She would never forget the look of wonder and excitement on his face when he'd found her record collection and realized that there were far more than just the few albums she'd snuck into OCCAM. He'd stared, amazed, then lit up in a rainbow of colors, excitedly squawking and signing music to her, hovering with anticipation as Elisa had laughed and set up the record player. He wanted badly to do it himself, but she was afraid his claws would damage the fragile disks.

The creature's vocabulary of signs and concepts was growing almost exponentially. He'd learned Giles' name quickly and understood far more than he could communicate. He seemed to comprehend a great many of their facial expressions. Elisa would have given much to know what he was thinking, but his feelings at least were obvious, his iridescent colors shifting with his mood, his hunger or fatigue, his curiosity or patience.

Last night, though, something had shifted in her perception, and perhaps of his. Elisa had placed a record on the turntable, the one she'd brought to the lab, and as she crossed the room, allowed herself a few dance steps, turning, dipping, swaying. The creature had emerged from his tub at the sound of the music, and stood there, intently watching her movements. On a whim she'd pulled him further into the room. Dance with me? and stood before him, placing one huge clawed hand on her waist,
Took together they awkwardly shuffled around the living room floor, the creature trying very hard not to step on her feet, but unsure what to do. His hand was so large he could nearly wrap it around her waist, yet he was careful not to scratch her. Finally Elisa gave up on teaching him to waltz and greatly daring, simply stepped closer, sliding her arms around his waist, stroking his back, and held him, moving softly to the music. After a moment she stepped back, releasing him, and looked up into his eyes. There was an expression she could not identify, then his arms closed over her back and shoulders as he carefully pulled her into his embrace. She blinked back tears, caressing his back, running her hands down the sides of his dorsal spines, and slowly, from the depths of his chest, came a rumbling, sound, not unlike a cat's purr. His eyes were half closed in pleasure, his skin suffused with the soft salmon pinks she was beginning to associate with happiness. The creature blinked down at her and slowly bent his head, touching their foreheads together, content.

Elisa lay on the old couch, a knitted afghan pulled up around her shoulders, staring into the darkness. She really ought to go to bed, but she was warm, and the floor was so chilly.

Her thoughts were racing, thinking back to the previous night. Something in his posture had changed, and the way he had held her, tightly, gently touching her hair, raising the strands in his claws and sniffing it. Her hands ghosted along his back, down to his hips, and back, and suddenly she was stepping back, a flush of color on her cheeks, vaguely horrified at the direction her thoughts were taking.

The creature had released her, but chirped worriedly, and to reassure him she'd briefly cupped his cheek, stroking the angled bone, until he'd leaned his head into her hand, his eyes blinking slowly.

She had no experience with men. Ignored for the most part in high school, and unable to attend college, she'd worked the kind of jobs where she remained invisible. Men had simply not noticed the quiet woman typing, or cleaning, or sorting and packing objects. Her own touch was all she'd ever known. Oh god, what was she thinking. He was not even human. But he was gentle, and surely, as a wild creature, had had some experience. Elisa brought her hands up to cover her face. Did he have a mate somewhere, wondering what had happened to him?

Restlessly she threw off the covers and walked to the window, staring out across the darkened city. A minute later she felt the vibration of steady footfalls behind her and then he was there, standing behind her, one hesitant hand on her shoulder, chirping worriedly.

Okay? he signed, and she nodded, leaning back against him. His powerful arms came around her then, pulling her against his chest protectively and she turned, leaning her head against his shoulder, listening to the quiet odd rhythm of his heart. After a moment he rested his cheek against the top of her head, purring softly. He was beginning to initiate physical contact much more often. Was he interested in her as well, or simply affectionate?

Elisa shut her eyes. She was a fool to even think of such things. Only yesterday, returning from the grocery store, she'd stopped by the docks and looked down into the murky water, swirling with trash and covered in an oily sheen. It didn't look healthy, but what other choice was there? The sign had indicated that the gates would be open when the water level rose to a certain level, and the weather reports indicated rain soon. She'd noted that on the calendar. Soon... frighteningly far away, so much could happen between now and then, and yet far too soon.

Unaware she was crying, Elisa pressed her face into his warm skin, arms tightening around his torso. The scales were softer on his chest and stomach, more near to what she remembered of the skin on reptiles and frogs. He pulled back, chirping worriedly, his colors shifting into blues and violets, a
patterning she'd not seen before. He stared down at her, his golden eyes puzzled and unhappy, then very gently raised a hand and stroked her face, brushing away a tear. The creature lifted his hand, his tongue flicking out and tasting the drop, then his eyes widened and he moaned, a desperate sound. Large hands cupped her face, thumbs brushing away the tears, and he lowered his forehead to hers, pressing gently, sounding distressed.

To her utter shock the creature then lifted her easily, holding her against him, then carried her to the couch, curling protectively around her, keening softly, his huge golden eyes scanning her face. Elisa squeezed his hand. *I'm okay.* and he blinked at her, unsure.

In her life, there had been few times she had been shown affection. The nuns were so busy at the orphanage, and physicality was discouraged, as it was in school. Zelda had occasionally hugged her, and Giles, but this was different. The creature's embrace was deliberate, meaningful…and dare she think it…loving? Starved for touch she relaxed into it, wiping the tears, and returned the embrace, relishing the contact.

Elisa ran her fingers down his arm, his back, stroking and soothing him until he relaxed, purring gently, as he too touched her, stroking her back and hair.

They curled around each other on the old couch, cuddled together for several minutes, until he began to wheeze slightly, and she realized it was time for him to return to the water. The creature clearly didn't want to leave her, but his gills were fluttering and she rose, gently pushing him toward the bathroom, signing *Go.*

He pulled her with him, sinking down into the tub, and she knelt beside it. *I'm okay.* Reluctantly he released her hand, watching her worriedly. Elisa trailed her fingers in the water, swirling the clinging algae, wondering what he would do if she got in the water with him. She didn't even have a bathing suit; how silly was that.

But then, he didn't either.

A deep blush came up her cheeks and he emerged with a squawk, reaching up one wet hand to touch her face, puzzled at the color change. She patted him gently, dreading leaving him alone the next day, when she had to return to work.

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He'd awoken, chilled and hungry.

*Giles* sat near the tub, asleep. He watched for a moment, those rose from the water, padding silently out of the room. Remembering where the eggs had been, he'd gone to investigate. She always had eggs...and he could smell food...but to his surprise and growing discomfort, he could find nothing to consume. He'd cautiously explored further, to the rooms nearby. Though he could catch *Elisa's* scent, these rooms had smelled more like the other pale kind Land Dweller, the one asleep near the small pool, and so he assumed it was his nest.

He'd seen his reflection in still water often enough to recognize himself immediately in the drawings. Fascinated, he'd touched one, smearing the wet paint slightly. Grimacing, he'd licked the stain from his fingers.

Movement caught his eyes and he'd investigated. Movement without sound or scent? He'd tapped the hard surface with a claw, then dismissed the wooden box as another of the mysteries of these strange people.

But there was food somewhere, the scent of prey strong in his nostrils. A moment later the foolish
prey showed itself, hissing, but he was faster.

And then everything had gone wrong.

There had been shouting from the other, from GILES. Frightened and reminded of the cruel Land Dwellers, he'd bolted, desperate to get away.

For a long time he'd crouched in the cold air outside, hiding behind a large metal box. He sniffed the air desperately but could not smell water. The air overlaid with the scents of this strange world was confusing, acrid. He could not smell her. He raised his hands, sniffing his claws, trying to lick them clean. Mingled with the blood from the prey was another scent, the blood of GILES. He moaned softly.

Perhaps he could return to the small pool and hide there? In this strange confusing, and violent world, she was the only thing he could trust.

He crept from behind the stinking metal box and darted up the steps, only to find the doorway closed to him. Another entrance? Yes, below, a dark slit, an opening. Perhaps that could take him back? In an instant he was through.

The scent of food was stronger here, and he crept forward cautiously. Past the darkened opening was a large empty room and he froze, staring at the screen. Figures moved, spoke. Mesmerized, he watched, then crouched, flinching away as the figures were struck and cried out in pain. He covered his ears, shutting his eyes, memories of the lab flooding his mind. His chest was tight; it was becoming harder to breathe.

And then she was there. ELISA. He rose, whimpering slightly, unsure what to expect. But her touch was gentle, and she guided him home.

Thank you for reading, and please review. :}

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A/N-Thank you all for your lovely reviews. I appreciate them so much. Sadly, we are getting closer to the end...

This rating on the story goes up with this chapter, and if you've seen the movie you know why. Please don't proceed if that sort of thing offends.

Otherwise...please read and enjoy. :)

The Shape of Loneliness

Chapter 8 Lovers

Riene, 2017, 2018

After the one unfortunate incident with the cats, the creature had learned to leave them alone. Giles' artwork was ever of interest, and the television fascinating. He'd frowned at it, looking behind it wondering where the moving figures had disappeared to, then seemed to accept it. Anything with animals interested him, horses, birds, and wildlife especially. He'd been enthralled by the cinema below, and she wished she could figure out a way to sneak him in.

But what a terrifying afternoon that had been. He'd awoken, hungry, and apparently had investigated her kitchen, looking for food. She'd come home to a mess, and her favorite green shoes bore teeth marks. She'd found the creature cowering in the theater below, relieved to the point of tears that he was unharmed and unseen. They'd gone up the back stairs quickly, and she'd settled him in the tub, bringing him the fish she'd purchased on the way home, and plopping more eggs in to boil. She'd have to figure out some way to arrange food for him while she was gone.

The creature had followed her across the hall later, reluctantly, and watched as she cleaned and bandaged Giles' arm. He seemed to grasp that the two remaining cats were off-limits. It had been hard to explain, and she'd been horrified, in tears as Giles had wrapped poor Pandora up in an old sheet and put the sad bundle into a box for burial later. He'd attempted to make friends with the remaining cats, but Giles had scolded him, and to her surprise the creature had accepted this meekly, even sadly, and had nearly crawled over to Giles, taking her friend's hand and placing it on his head, where Strickland had often struck him.

But Giles, bless him, had simply gently patted the creature and spoken softly to him. The creature had stared up into his eyes for a long minute, then blinked slowly and carefully laid his own hand on Giles' bald head, and on the arm where he'd clawed the man's flesh in his fear. It had been an oddly moving, deliberate gesture.
He rested now in the tub, his breathing slowly going back to normal. She'd added more algae and salt, wishing again she'd paid more attention in school science classes. He blinked slowly at her, quiet and calm after the unsettling events of the day. She could easily have lost him.

Elisa knelt by the tub and gently touched his face, slightly teary at the thought, her thumb gently stroking his cheek. The creature leaned into her touch, his iridescent markings lighting up with soft pinks, blinking at her, his rumbling purr rising. Slowly her hand moved down, stroking his chest, across the hard tight muscles, fingers exploring how the scales transitioned from rigid to softer, caressingly. Beneath her touch he shifted slightly, one long arm reaching up to touch her neck carefully, one finger sliding down to her collar, pulling at it gently, opening the top of her blouse. She stared at his mouth, his lips so human. Warm water trickled from his touch, slipping down her skin between her breasts and Elisa shuddered, overwhelmed by the sudden flood of longing and his eyes, intent on hers. She stumbled backwards away from his touch, and out the door, shutting it between them, between her and… She leaned against it, shaking, and sighed.

In the silent kitchen Elisa splashed cold water on her face, leaning on her arms, dark hair falling around her face. For once she'd forgo brushing her teeth. Everything was put away, the heavy curtains pulled against the creeping rays of the dawn. She changed into her nightgown and sat on the old sofa, brushing her hair smooth and sliding the strap of the eye mask over her head. Slowly she wound the clock and set it on the end table with a trembling hand. The closed door of the bathroom mocked her.

She was a creature of feeling only, burning.

Was it so wrong?

Slowly she stood, leaving the mask behind, and crossed the room.

He looked up as she entered, turning his head questioningly, then he stood, his beautiful golden eyes staring intently at her, and for a moment she forgot to breathe. Breadth of shoulder, animal grace, no more or less than what he was, open and waiting for her, accepting her. The robe fell from her shoulders, the nightgown pooled around her feet. As she walked toward him the creature's markings began to warm, soft pinks into warm salmon, a flush of color suffusing his entire torso. He made no move, waiting, but she saw his chest rise and fall as she stepped into the warm water.

Suddenly shy and uncertain, Elisa leaned forward and slid her arms around his waist, needing comfort and reassurance. He breathed in sharply and pulled her closer, leaning his cheek against the top of her head, purring quietly. For a long minute they stood so, pressed together, then Elisa blushed and began to run her fingers down the sides of his dorsal spines and the curve of his hips and flanks. The creature's purring began to take on a deeper, throatier quality as she touched him, and slowly he began to caress her own back and hips, watching her responses intently.

Elisa shuddered, hypersensitive and aflame. His brilliant eyes blinked slowly and he lifted one hand to carefully run his fingers through her hair. Could he kiss? Would he even understand? She tilted her head up and standing on tiptoes, brushed her lips against his. Surprised, he pulled back, then reached for her, clumsily imitating the action. He tasted of seawater and cinnamon. She kissed him again, and this time his tongue darted out, tasting her.

His large hands cradled her face, then moved down, exploring her body. He seemed fascinated with her bare flesh, the soft fullness of her breasts, the dark curls lower. Of course, he'd never seen her unclothed. He brushed his thumbs over her nipples and she gasped. He chirped once, worriedly, quickly signing *okay?* and she took his hands, placing them back on her breasts and signing *yes*.
Heat pooled in her belly, her skin tingling from the delicate roughness of his fingertip pads. The creature lowered his head, sniffing and licking her neck, then suddenly lifted her, raising her from the water. Frightened, Elisa flung her arms around his neck, trying not to touch his gills, and instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist, clinging to him. He growled gently, licking her throat, her breasts, kissing the valley between them. Elisa moaned, the sensations overwhelming. Encouraged, he cupped her bottom, pulling her against him.

There was a new, unfamiliar hardness pressing against her inner thigh. Elisa gasped, her eyes widening, and felt him push against her. His breathing had changed, heavier, his chest and shoulders flushed a dark salmon pink. He was so much taller than she; how to accomplish this? Elisa slid one leg down his flank and let her fingers trail lower. He surged against her hand, eagerly, and she guided him.

The creature held her tightly to him, sliding easily up inside, then swelling, stiffening, both inside and out, locking them together. He moved within her and Elisa moaned soundlessly, the pleasure sudden and intense. His brilliant golden eyes were focused on her face, and she smiled tremulously. Reassured, he tucked his head tightly against her, surging, thrusting, holding her to his body. Elisa let her head fall against his arm, her back arching, hips moving to press closer, lost in the incredible sensations.

They reached a rhythm, her gasps and his rough growls, the jolts of pleasure growing more intense, building and tightening, then exploding into a white pure shock of rippling sensation so intense she couldn't think, then he was pressing tighter and with a groan deep in his chest he surged against her, throbbing deeply in his own release.

Afterwards she lay limply on his chest, their legs tangled and floating in the water, breathing slowly returning to normal. She raised her head, staring up into his mesmerizing golden eyes. He blinked drowsily, the warm salmon colors still suffusing his skin, and tightened his arms around her possessively, purring. Elisa caressed his face and smiled, kissing him. The creature curled around her and she laid her head on his shoulder, and slept.

She woke an hour later, the water chill against her bare skin. As she stirred, he blinked and chirped uncertainly, and impulsively, she leaned down and kissed him. The creature…her lover, now…responded enthusiastically, and she felt his arousal. He was clearly eager to make love again, and even though she was feeling stretched and sore, Elisa stroked his cheek, signing yes.

She boarded the bus with an unaccustomed lightness, smiling to herself, absurdly happy. The new red shoes were butter-soft, a ridiculous personal indulgence, but self-control had not been Elisa's forte lately. The heavy mist had turned into a light rain by the second stop, and she watched the droplets dance and swirl along the window.

It had been quite an eventful day at work. She'd been unable to keep from smiling and Zelda, alternately appalled and curious, had pried the truth out of her. There had been no judgment in her friend's eyes—she could not have borne that—only understanding and perhaps a touch of envy. They had not had long to discuss it before both were called in to an interview with Mr. Strickland, clearly angry and tired. He raked his hand through his hair in frustration and threw himself down in the office chair, demanding to know if they'd seen anything untoward in the labs. Zelda had opened her warm brown eyes wide and limpidly, playing dumb, keeping her face blank as Strickland began to get insulting, and Elisa's irritation grew. The man was horrible, rude and demeaning to her friend. She knew damn well that Zelda understood the word 'trivial.' Her friend had dozens of books in her home and read everything, magazines, newspapers, novels. Why, she'd been through nearly every book in the little local lending library of her hometown! Elisa could feel her fury rising. How dare he
treat Zelda this way. How dare he call them the shit cleaners.

She raised her hand and told him off.

It had felt good.

But Zelda, bless her, had had the presence of mind to prevaricate and drag her out before they both lost their jobs. And where would she have been then, with two mouths to feed now?

He followed *GILES* around curiously, crouched beside him and watching as the man sketched and drew, painted, outlined, and mixed colors. He'd tasted the brush once, to see if something edible lay under the hair, and spat it out with a comical *svppppt!* and wrinkled nose. The mineral-based oils and watercolors were harsh on his sensitive nostrils, and he backed away from them.

But *GILES'* artistry was fascinating. He would sit and watch the shapes form under the man's talented fingers, squawking the occasional inquiry or chirping approval. Giles found himself talking to the creature, a low-key running commentary on the status of the advertising world, the choice of colors, the expense of quality pigments. He'd hold up the work in progress asking the creature's opinion, and he would tilt his head and made encouraging noises, occasionally signing *good* or *okay*. The drawing of himself seemed to fascinate him the most, and he would chirp excitedly when Giles worked on it.

Elisa made lunch for them both each day, knowing Giles forgot to eat half of the time, but that he would remember to feed the cats and the creature. She'd tossed the hideous lime green slices of pie when her friend wasn't looking, exchanging them for eggs and raw fish, but he never spoke of it. The creature had quickly figured out the handle mechanism of Giles' refrigerator and happily helped himself to snacks all day long. He seemed to understand the necessity for stealth, and would listen intently at the door before slipping across the hallway back to Elisa's bathtub. The cats he left alone.

She emptied the old water from the tub, sweeping up the yellowing algae, and rinsing the tub thoroughly. The creature stood behind her, watching and waiting. He'd greeted her at the door, his colors lighting up into warm yellows and pinks, happily chirping. She had embraced him, despite the trail of dark footprints on the floor, and he'd looked worriedly at the large soaked spots on her dress, signing *wet*. Elisa had laughed and kissed him. It hadn't mattered. Not when for the first time in her life, someone was there waiting, happy to see her, to hold her, to love her.

As the water filled in the tub she wished again that there was some way she could take him to swim. Even if he could be smuggled into a pool, surely the chemicals, the bleach and chlorine, would not be good for him? If only.

She pushed the plug down tightly and turned on both taps, testing the temperature of the water. He touched it as well, signing *okay*. If only the tub was larger, deeper. She set the algae box aside, not wanting to damage the fragile plants, and lifted the salt container, pouring it in. The creature playfully ran his fingers through the white grains, scattering them in an arc, and she smiled.

Maybe there was a way. Impulsively, she turned on the sink taps and plugged the drainage. He turned his head curiously, squawking in concern as the water began to overflow. Quickly Elisa disrobed and tossed her shoes and dress, sweater and underthings out into the hall and shut the door. The creature was vibrating with excitement now, watching as she shoved towels under the doors as tightly as possible. It would be a mess to mop up later, but for now…

The water rose higher and higher, with the creature chirping excitedly, his colors glowing brightly
under the water. It reached a point high on the wall near the window and stabilized. Laughing
delightedly, Elisa bobbed in the water, swimming up to gasp a breath, then pushing herself
downward, eyes closed, holding her breath. His large hands wrapped securely around her hips,
pulling her down beside him, and they spun around together, an underwater dance of happiness. His
hands caressed her, the warm colors of his iridescent markings seeming to light up the flooded room.

Suddenly there was a distant pounding and the water began to rush out. The creature caught her
safely as the torrent swirled around them and she threw back her head, laughing at the mess, the look
of utter shock on Giles' face, the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. Naked, Elisa clung to him, his
purring filling the room, and Giles, soaked, his pajamas clinging wetly to his body, grinned at her
suddenly in comprehension and shut the door.

Thank you for reading, and please review!
The Shape of Loneliness

Chapter 9 Loss

Riene, 2017, 2018

While he lived, he would never forget the scene he had been inadvertent witness to, and though he would try, and fail, many times to capture them in paint, in pencil, in charcoal, Giles would never succeed. The matador-like stance was simple enough, the powerful musculature, the tender hold on the woman, yet he would never be able to recreate the creature's radiant, iridescent colors.

And Elisa, his friend, her sleek dark hair tangled against one bare, ivory shoulder…that was easy as well, but the shy smile, the sheer joy and peace in her grey-green eyes… It was as if her entire life had been held in abeyance for this one moment, this bonding.

Minutes later Elisa had come next door, dressed, ducking her head over cherry red cheeks, uncertain, but Giles had swooped her up and kissed her. "I am so happy for you," he said sincerely, and she'd smiled, tears in both eyes. He picked up a towel and continued blotting his head, then held it out to her, gesturing.

"I'm toweling my hair, Elisa. My hair. And…and…look at the arm—healed as if nothing had happened. You said he was a god…I don't know. He ate a cat! You know what his means? We have to keep him around, just a little bit longer. You don't want to lose him, do you? We cannot just…just let him go…like that. We've got to keep him."

And she'd nodded, knowing all the while it was impossible.

He awoke, a dull heaviness in his chest and sat up, wheezing slightly. The clear opening above him was dark, and his sensitive ears picked up the patter of raindrops.

Slowly he rose from the tub and stepped gingerly onto the new soft pad. The apartment too was dark, ELISA was not here. He could hear sounds from the room next door, but he did not want GILES.
He sniffed once, disinterestedly, in the refrigerator, and finally walked to the window, muscles stiff from lack of exercise. Rain poured down, trickling against the window, falling as rivulets against the glass, in sheets farther away. It was not his rain, not the soft rain of the spring, nor the hard rains of the summer storms that filled the rivers into a rushing torrent.

The door shut, the small footsteps coming nearer. There was a rustle and thump as she sat the bags upon the table. He could smell food. Then she was behind him, touching his shoulder gently, but he could not even turn, a wave of misery and longing rising up, tightening his chest. Slowly he raised one hand to touch the window.

Elisa pulled her hand back, startled and horrified, staring at the iridescent scales clinging to her fingers.

She walked along the industrial dock, looking down into the murky waters of the canal. The water was rising, the rains had washed down debris and oil, silt and sand, from the city.

There was no other option. The tub was a cage. No matter how she loved him, how the ache threatened to tear a gaping wound in her chest, there was no option. She would not be responsible for his unhappiness. For his death.

She had to let him go.

She'd settled him back in the water later, after a quick meal of chicken and eggs. They'd made love again, in the tub, with her knees wedged against the sides, straddling him. He'd seemed to breathe easier in the water, and though he flushed salmon with desire and willingly participated, his hands stroking her breasts, her inner thighs, holding her hips tightly as they moved together, he had been gasping at the end.

She'd hated leaving him, but he dozed afterwards, and Elisa rapidly cleaned the kitchen. Sometime during her shower in Giles' apartment it had begun to rain again, and she'd scurried about the apartment placing pots and buckets under the old roof's leaks. So much rain. Satisfied with her precautions she stared out the window, and with a heavy sigh, pulled off the day's calendar tab.

Rain. Docks.

There was a slight scuffling sound behind her and Elisa turned. The creature had woken from his nap and come out to join her, as was his wont. He stood now under one of the heaviest leaks, shoulders slumped, his markings dulled, grey, wheezing slightly, the membranes of his eyes half closed. She gently patted him and turned to the stove to hide the tears.

The storm intensified, the lights flickering occasionally.

He came to the table, sitting in the chair across from her, and she placed the shallow bowl of eggs in front him, stroking his head and shoulder. Elisa sat heavily across from him, watching as the creature slowly raised an egg, eating half-heartedly. He was visibly thinner, his feathery gills greyish, his eyes dull. Elisa thought her heart would burst, the serrated agony tearing up into her throat.

*I love you,* she signed. His hands twitched, and he looked at her, exhaustion and misery in his eyes. *I love you.* Her lips formed the words, forcing air out, a ragged, choked-off sound. From next door, one of Giles' eternal musicals from a by-gone era could be heard, one she knew.

In her mind's imagination, her voice was soft, melodious, singing those same words to him. *You'll never know just how much I've loved you...you'll never know just how much I care.* She laid the spoon beside her plate, focusing, pretending *And if I tried, I still couldn't hide my love for you...*
ought to know, for haven't I told you so... A million or more times.

The music next door continued. What would it be like, to dance, to sing? A ballroom floor, a band in the dim background, herself, in a long silvery floating dress, with sequins and sparkles... You went away and my heart went with you I speak your name in my every prayer...

Perhaps he would dance with her too? Kneeling first, holding out one long-fingered hand, then rising, reaching, pulling her into his arms, gently holding her, swaying, spinning, dipping, in harmony, gazing into each other's eyes.

If there is some other way to prove that I love you, I swear I don't know how... You'll never know if you don't know now...

The song ended, the voices subdued into an unintelligible murmur. Blinking back tears, she stared across the table at him, hunched and unhappy, struggling to breathe.

There was no choice.

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Elisa dragged herself through the night shift, eyes on the floor, focused only on simply getting through the hours. She'd sat numbly at the bus stop and not eaten dinner, dreading what she'd find upon return home. Giles had offered to stay with the creature, but he'd been lying lethargically in the tub when she left, his eyes shut, only fluttering them open long enough to blink exhaustedly at her when she'd departed. She'd wanted so badly to stay with him. And now, now that it was time to go home, the tears that had been burning her eyes all day finally spilled over.

Footsteps, coming nearer. Zelda, she thought, and quickly leaned forward hiding her face behind the open locker door. The older woman sat down with a muttered "oof" and began to change shoes and put on her coat. Going home. The tears overflowed.

Zelda stopped, peering around the corner. Elisa hadn't moved, and was clearly crying. "Oh, honey. Elisa. What is it, honey?" She held out her arms and sobbing silently, Elisa fell into the warm embrace, signing. "Is it...OK, honey, I'm coming home with you." She reached past into the open locker and removed her friend's red coat and shoes.

Elisa was silent on the route home, leaning her aching head against the cold glass window of the bus, keeping her red and swollen eyes closed. The diesel fumes were awful, burning, the city dull and grey in the rain. They mounted the steps to the upper floor flats and Giles greeted them at the door, shaking his head.

The creature lay unmoving in the water, his eyes closed, his breathing strained. Zelda, who had only seen him once before out of the tank was stunned by the changes and knelt by the tub.

"Oh no, honey, no. He doesn't look too good." She looked up, pity in her eyes. "This is bad. I'm going to call Dr. Hoffstetler." She rose and blotted her fingers on the towel and left.

Elisa fell to her knees, stroking his shoulder, swishing the loosening scales away in the water. It felt chilled; had he not even had the strength to adjust it? She ran warm water over the creature but he didn't respond. In the corridor she could dimly hear Giles and Zelda talking, but could not make out their words over the pouring rain.

Then Giles was there, gently laying a hand on her shoulder. "Elisa, Zelda said there was no answer. But we have an idea. Let's try to get him up and take him out in the rain. Maybe there's something in this city water that's not good for a creature like him."
She dragged the heels of her palms across her eyes and nodded, standing. She felt so old.

Supporting the creature between them, Zelda and Giles helped him out onto the alley balcony. Elisa stood in front of him, holding his hands. "Come on, old man, you can make it," Giles murmured soothingly. "Just a few more steps. Fresh air and rain." Wearily the creature staggered forward, leaning against the railing. The cold night rain poured down over his head and shoulders, cascading down his chest and back. Shivering, Giles and Zelda ducked under the scant shelter of the roof, waiting. Elisa stood there, her tears mixing with the rain, and slowly, his head raised and his gills fluttered, gasping. She threw her arms around him, and Giles looked away from her silent grief.

Back in the apartment, Zelda rubbed Elisa's hair gently with a towel, speaking softly. "When I was a little girl, I found a turtle sitting out in the middle of the road. Crossing it slowly. Car could run it over any minute." She wrapped the towel around Elisa's thin shoulders, patting her wet blouse gently, and continued. "So, I picked it up, took it to a pond way back behind my house... and I laid it down under a big camphor tree, and I thought... "Mmmh-It's gonna be so happy here." And I left it there. But that night I figured out I had no idea where it was going... Far as I know it was bringing food to its nest or looking to procreate or escaping an owl. And maybe the worst place to keep it—maybe the place it was running from was that pond under that camphor tree. I didn't care. I just did what I wanted with it... "

Elisa threw a glance toward the bathroom door, anguished, and Giles sat down beside her, hugging her. "You love him, honey. We know what to do. Let him go." The tears overflowed again and she nodded.

He left her at the door, and Zelda hugged her once more. Elisa quietly shut the door and exhausted and chilled, walked back toward the kitchen, longing for a cup of something hot. In the kitchen, the creature stood near the windows again, under another steady stream of water from the leaking ceiling. He blinked at her and raised his hands. Tired.

She nodded, and through blurry eyes began to walk with him back to the bathroom, then stopped and turned toward the bed. Confused, he looked down then back at her. Wet. But she pulled him over, and gently urged him to lie down. Awkwardly, he did, turning slightly do as to not put pressure on the dorsal spines, and Elisa lay beside him, her head on his chest. He pulled her into his arms, stroking her back, as she listened to his heart. The odd rhythm was soothing, and slowly her body relaxed, curling against him. Her tired mind heard the sound of the ocean, the rush of blood like waves upon the sand. The creature tilted his head against her hair, his purr unsteady, trembling, but present. She stroked his chest, and for a moment, saw her fingers arrayed with webbing, and smiled.

He woke to the sound of rain.

The room was quiet, and his senses told him that she was near, her light footsteps in the next room. He rose from the tub and stood dripping a moment on the soft pad, then went in search. She was standing in the kitchen, drinking that bitter black water, looking out the window, and turned at his approach.

Okay? She asked, and he made the sign back.

Okay. Want ELISA.

The salty droplets began to trickle from her eyes again and he brushed them away, as gently as possible. No tears. You, Me, together.

Together, she answered.
He pulled her slight body against him, wrapping arms around her. ELISA leaned her head against his chest and he rested his cheek on her hair.

He did not understand her sorrow, only that he was somehow the cause of it. Perhaps the water would make her happy. He lifted her easily and carried her back to the tub, pulling off her shoes, and setting her down. His fingers were not adept with buttons and zippers, but she understood his hiss of frustration and removed the garments, draping them on the rack. He lifted her again and settled them both in the tub, her back to his chest, and wrapped arms around her, purring softly.

They nestled together, their heads bent and touching, content in each other's embrace. The creature caressed her arms, her legs soothingly, and ran his fingers through her hair, nipping playfully at her skin with his lips, licking her ear, her neck with his tongue, until she smiled. Pleased, he growled softly, his hands rising to cup her breasts, fingers circling her rapidly hardening nipples, then swooped lower, pushing her legs apart, exploring the region between her thighs. Elisa arched against him, then held his hand, showing him how to move his fingers in small circling patterns. He growled again, pleased, stroking her until she turned in his arms, wanting more.

Elisa left him dozing in the tub, sated and breathing somewhat easier. There were still a couple hours before she had to meet Zelda. Perhaps she could arrange to see Dr. Hofstetter—Dmitri—and pass him a note? She pulled out a chair and bit the end of a pencil, thoughtfully.

The phone began to ring in the hallway. After a moment, Giles' door opened and his heavier footsteps moved down the hall. A moment later he was pounding on her door. "Elisa! Hurry! It's Zelda, she needs to talk to you now!"

Frowning, she dashed out and reached for the receiver. Whatever could be wrong?

Zelda's voice was rapid, desperate. "Elisa, honey, you gotta listen to me, make a sound in the phone if you can hear." She tapped the phone twice. "Good. He's coming for you. You got to go now and take that thing with you. Give the phone back to Giles."

Elisa blanched and dropped the receiver. There was no need to ask who "he" was. It could only be Strickland. Dimly behind her Giles was calling out questions. She flew into the bathroom, and the creature rose immediately, sensing the fear pouring off her in waves. Frantically Elisa helped him out, pulling him toward the door. Giles was there, and together they helped the creature down the slippery metal stairs and into the back of the van. Elisa crawled in first and the creature followed, whimpering slightly, and she pulled him close. A moment later the van was careening away from the alley.

Giles headed toward the industrial area, only a few blocks away, toward the docks Elisa had mentioned. There was no time to try for the shore. Elisa ducked, shaking, tears of terror and impending loss streaming down her face. The creature moaned softly, touching her face, and she bent over him, clinging, pressing their foreheads together.

Abruptly the van skidded to a stop on the wet pavement. Giles grabbed the flashlight he always left in the glove box and came around to the back, ignoring the pouring rain.

Elisa looked up, her face white and pinched. "Come on," he said roughly. "We have to go. Come on."

They staggered out and Elisa led the creature to the edge of the docks. The cold pouring rain seemed to revive him somewhat, and he hesitated, staring first at the murky, swirling waters.
Go, Elisa signed, and he frowned, turning to Giles, who nodded.

The creature tilted his head, hesitating, and Giles removed his hat, taking the creature's hand and placing it on his head, atop his slowly regrowing hair. The creature reached for Giles' hand and placed it on his own head, regarding him steadily for a moment. Blinking back tears, Giles forced a smile, then turned and walked away, giving them privacy.

Go, Elisa signed again, and the creature moaned, a whimper of confusion and pain, moving toward her, reaching out, but Elisa stepped back, signing quickly. No. Go. Alone. Without me.

He stood there in the rain, the water running over his shoulders, down his face in rivulets like tears, mirrored by the tears on her own face. You. Me. Together.

She shook her head, crying. He didn't understand. He couldn't. And she was so terribly afraid he would not leave in time. She stepped toward him, making pushing motions with her hands, and he looked down at the cold dark water, then at her, still hesitating. Biting her lips until she could taste blood, Elisa turned and began to walk away. Behind her he cried out, a sound of pain, torn between freedom and loss.

Headlights reflected on the wet pavement, and a long green car screeched to a stop. Strickland leapt out, running toward then. Giles moved as if to block the man, but Strickland swung with strength of rage and Giles fell, striking his head. Frantically, Elisa spun, trying to scream a warning, but only an agonizing hiss of air emerged, lost in the downpour.

Behind her Strickland raised the gun, firing twice, striking the creature in the chest. Better it was dead than escaped, or in the hands of the Russians.

The sound was sharp, but as if from very far away, the echoes bouncing dimly off the concrete industrial walls of the dock. She screamed again, a soundless gasp of agony as he fell, blood spraying from his chest. She lunged toward him and spun as the gun fired a third time. There were sirens in the distance. She looked down at the red coat, ruined now with a hole in the fabric. She pulled it aside, staring at the blood soaking her wet blouse and staggered, turning.

She fell beside the creature, reaching for him, her hand falling to lie on his, their fingers entwined, and the world went dark.

On the dock, Giles staggered to his feet and lifted a broken piece of pipe. He swung it, hearing the sickening sound of the metal impacting bone and flesh. Strickland fell forward into the pavement, unmoving, and Giles raced past him, kneeling beside his friends, tears pouring down his face, and lifted Elisa gently in his arms. Her head fell back, and he cradled her to his chest, crying openly, looking up to meet Zelda's horrified face. He shook his head.

Behind them, Strickland rose and threw aside the empty clip, reloading.

Sorry about the upload issues earlier. I've no idea what went wrong.

Thank you for reading, and please review.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

A/N-Sadly, we've reached the end of the movie retelling. I've truly enjoyed writing this and hope you've enjoyed reading it. We reached 51 comments here, which makes me ridiculously happy-though I wouldn't object to more, of course! I do have an idea for a separate short story or two, and will eventually get back to this world.

Update-The short sequel to this story is called Firmament, and is posted here on Ao3 as well. :)

Thanks so much for reading, for reviewing, for your wonderful PMs and notes! I hope to see more fan fiction from this book and movie soon! Drop me a note if you publish something-I'll happily come read it!

The Shape of Loneliness

Chapter 10 Epilogue

Riene, 2017, 2018

The acrid smell of blood was strong in his nostrils, his and another's. He forced open his eyes. ELISA lay beside him, her fingers cool on his own, the scent of her blood overwhelming. He moaned softly. Shuddering, he rose to his feet, dispassionately studying the wounds on his chest, sluggishly bleeding. With one swipe of his hand they healed, two metallic pings striking the hard concrete dock, his iridescent markings glowing brightly.

He turned, staring contemptuously at the man. He reeked of fever and infection, and now of fear. Drawing himself up to his full height, he stalked the man, raising a hand, swatting the gun away. Light from the street lamp spilled through his nearly transparent gills, making a nimbus around his head. His bioluminescent markings glowed blue-white in the rain.

Strickland staggered back. "Fuck….you are a god."

Glowing, impassive, he flicked his hand and the cruel Land Dweller fell, his throat severed by razor-sharp claws.

He turned to GILES. The man held ELISA, tears pouring down his cheeks. Gently, so gently, the man lowered ELISA to the ground, relinquishing her. Sirens grew louder, and cars began to pull up in the distance. He knelt and tenderly raised ELISA’s limp body from the cold ground, cradling her close. Her eyelids fluttered but did not open. With her last strength, ELISA touched his face, and her hand fell away. Holding her in one arm, he caressed her cheek.
He stared hard at **GILES**, memorizing the Land Dweller's features, aware of the growing crowd behind him, of the tears streaming down the man's face, and of **ZELDA** crying. With **ELISA** in his arms he had no way to thank them or tell them.

He cradled her close, the metallic scent of her blood sharp. Her body was growing heavier, limp, and he knew there was not much time. With one last look, he turned and leapt from their world.

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Slowly Giles walked to the edge of the pier, staring into the dark and swirling water. Beside him, Zelda clutched his arm, sobbing. The wind pulled at her hair, the rain mixing with her tears.

"They're together, aren't they?"

"Yes. I believe they are."

---

She was falling, one shoe lost, the clothing pulling her downward. He circled around her once, a rapid swirl, relishing the feel of swimming once more, than caught her up in his arms, stripping the heavy coat and discarding it. She would have no need of it. His claw sliced through the flimsy material of her dress, revealing the ugly gaping holes in her soft skin. She must breathe first; he turned her head gently then held both palms over the lines on her throat, focusing, concentrating, the water about them lighting up with an intense golden light so bright it was nearly white, then he released her, passing his hand over the ugly, bleeding hole.

She had saved him; now he would save her.

He held her through the initial terror as her eyes flew open and she struggled, not understanding that she could breathe underwater, that she was now like him. His eyes locked on hers and he pressed his mouth to hers. She opened to him, and he forced the bubble of water into her mouth, pushing it into her lungs, and she fought him before suddenly shuddering, flinging her head up, and staring at him with huge eyes. He cocked his head, waiting for her judgment, and she flung her arms around his neck.

The red coat would turn up later, "proof" that Elisa Esposito was dead, drowned in the storm surge of the canal, likely washed out to sea. Zelda didn't believe it, nor did Giles. They had both seem the flash of light from the water, a color Giles remembered from the creature's healing of himself, and from when he had knelt and touched Giles' head and arm. "He's saved her," Zelda said, awestruck, and Giles could only nod, too wrought by the rapid sequence of events to speak.

Though he came to the docks, and to the shore they'd discussed, hoping, watching, he never saw either again. Deep in his heart he prayed they were both somewhere together, loving, and safe.

Zelda visited often, and the two would meet for coffee sometimes. Brewster had moved back in with his mother, and no loss, she said. His own mother had gotten fed up with his laziness and given him the 'what-for' after a few days. She hadn't raised her boys, she said, to be taken care of by a woman. He was living now with a friend and looking for a job. She thought she might take him back if he could keep one.

Zelda took a different cleaning job in a hospital, and swore that she thought she'd seen Dr. Hofstetler—Dmitri—in the secured wing but could not be certain. Not long after that winter, Giles accepted a job with Amazing Comics as an illustrator. If the creatures he drew occasionally had golden eyes, well, it was his private style.

As for them, neither was ever alone again. They slept in each other's arms, safe and content, in a
world without violence, without need of voice. As the years passed, her body changed, growing more and more like his, and he taught her the ways of the water, of the currents, and the waves. Their memories of the world above grew dim in time, until there was only themselves and their love.

Giles stacked the drawings and neatly typewritten pages together, preparing to place them into a heavy manila envelope and tie the cotton strings around it securely. Perhaps someday the world would be ready for their story. He stared at the final sheet with blurry eyes, closed the flap and set the packet aside.

*If I told you about it-What would I say? That they lived happily ever after? I believe they did... That they were in love- that they remained in love? I'm sure that is true... But when I think of her, of Elisa, all that comes to mind is a poem. made of just a few truthful words... Whispered by someone in love, hundreds of years ago...*

"Unable to perceive the shape of You, I find You all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with Your love, It humbles my heart, For You are everywhere."

Again, thank you so much for reading, and please review.

~R

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!