She - Out of Exile

A scene where Avonlea returns from exile to face the charges against her.

pages ∙ words

A lone figure emerged from the lush depths of the towering silk grass. Naked and washed by the dew damp tendrils, she prowled towards a massive and meandering structure of sculpted stone and vaulting columns. A sense of homecoming and love-of-place filled her as she approached the ancient establishment. It was the one place above all others to which she had belonged in her young life. A place of learning and discipline. A place in which she had shed her name and her identity, her voice and her individuality—her humanity—for a desperate failure in her learning and in her discipline. A place from which she had been chased into the wild as any unwanted animal is run out of the sphere of civilization.

For all the pain of her exile, not just from her world, but from herself, it had been the greatest thing that had ever happened to her. She could remember a day when she ran for her life bent with shame and agony at the stripping away of herself, mewing and crying in a voice cut off from the source of words within her. The darkest weeks of her life were those in which she had fought to hold on to some scrap of identity, of self reflection. Inevitably, after countless days incapable of trapping her thoughts with words, she finally lost the idea of herself. She finally found herself. In finding herself, the simple animal elegance of *her,* a self without name or honor or obligation, she found understanding. She had finally learned what would have spared her name the taint of wrongful blood.

A cat-smile pursed her lips as she glided on soundless feet toward the open embrace of that great estate of mind, the monument of spirit, and temple of the body of her estranged people. Her confident stride carried her through the early morning throngs of people. Golden light rained over her distinctive blood-red mane. Many stopped in outrage at a first glimpse of this person strutting among them in the nude.

The startled looks made perfect sense to her. Once, she had been one of them, and as one of them subject to the pride of name, the privilege of person. For such a one, casual public nudity was a tasteless and offensive display. A name was hard to come by, even for the descendants of great houses, out of a thousand children, perhaps a dozen might distinguish themselves with a name and leave behind their lives as animals either domestic or wild. What had happened to her was punishment and absolution, but for a person to deliberately, publicly strip themselves was obscene. As a former person, recognizable as once a friend, or a relative, or a prospective mate, her appearance back among them would trigger that instant sense of obscenity. Only that first glimpse though, for a full glance or even a hard stare read at once the absence of shame in her. In all of the little subtle cues, she projected only the unselfconsciousness of an animal. A sight both common and unremarkable.

For a moment her determination wavered.

She did not really know why she had come back. She had not planned to come all the way in originally. She had just wanted to get close, needed to get close. She was aware of what coming in would commit her to. Even now she didn’t believe she would dare take the irrevocable step. She only knew that she had felt the urge to see something loved and familiar. It had not occurred to her that something once loved and intimately familiar would come in person until he was blocking her path. She spotted him as she came in sight of the mall. She stopped. A powerful surge of emotion leapt up within her. Hesitantly she resumed her approach, eyeing him carefully. He watched her advance, painfully aware how like some wild animal she regarded him. It took all her will to bring herself within a body’s length of him, part of her hungry for him to touch her and bring her into his still loving arms, part of her afraid that if she looked in his eyes she would see his sorrow at what she had become, the grief that had made him turn away when the person he had loved had been erased. What she most feared to see, if she looked into his eyes, was hope.

Before she could gather the courage to look up, however, he turned away, unable to look at her and not see the person he remembered. Something within her ached at the realization that he had never stopped seeing her as a person, and burned with the sense of shame he felt for her for mute nakedness. He would never forget that she had been bared to the world, whatever else happened. In his devotion he had made it impossible to ever recognize her absolution. She knew as she looked at him that what they might once have had was forever gone.

It bit through her suddenly. What, then, did she have to lose?

Swallowing her heart, she stepped around him and pushed on into the interior of the mall. More eyes followed her, wondering if she actually dared what she had come here to do. No one attempted to rebuke her or bar her way. The law was well known. What she had come for, any nameless soul could seek. Like all of the privileges of civilization, anyone could assume any responsibility. They would be judged solely on the merit of how they met the test of obligation that went with what they assumed. Abuse, miscarriage or failure of one’s responsibilities was not ignored. Justice was not blind, and the sentence did not punish the “crime” but concentrated specifically on the accused or guilty party’s failed obligation. A cause is identified and the person may either face it or turn from it.

Many throughout history had chosen to face death rather than turn from their name. She wished what still waited to confront her was as simple as facing death. What she faced, she would have to face living with forever afterward.

One time when she had had a name, she had known that to face her test or to turn from it either way would mean giving herself up. Losing herself. She had chosen. Perhaps she had chosen the harder path, certainly the longer path to suffer. She knew now that the other path would be far harder on those who would have to test her than it would be on herself.

She reached her first destination altogether too soon. With the slightest hesitation she lay her palm on the door plate. The lock recognized her and the door clicked open. She looked into the dim room beyond, surprised that there was no lingering smell of disuse. With shaking hands she went over to the bureau and slid out the drawer. It took only a moment to select the items she would need. Soft footsteps sounded behind her as a familiar shadow slipped by to start the bath. She bit her lip and forced her hands to continue arranging the clothing she would be wearing to face her test. By so much as slipping a tunic over her head she was bound by law to face what must come. But she would not go to face this test shy in the slightest detail of her true obligations and responsibility as they had once been assumed by her.

As the moments drifted forward, she was lulled by the sound of the water gurgling cheerfully into the huge tub. The silence from the other room was the only warning she got before familiar hands brushed at her shoulder to gather her wild hair into something that, painfully, could be deftly combed out and stripped of whatever leaves and brambles and such her own fingers had been unable to dislodge in the wild. All the while that she sat there gritting her teeth while the comb caught on snags, she tried to ignore the warm, wet drops that occasionally splashed her shoulders. That the young woman knew what her friend and mistress faced, did not surprise her. She only wished she were capable of the words that might reassure her that whatever happened she would survive.

Very soon now the worst would be over.

Nume finished untangling her hair and escourted her into the bath. Sitting down she let Nume wash her and sucked in her breath at the bracing cold of the rinsing water before being able to luxuriate in the hot pool. Despite her reluctance and the growing tension of fear, she allowed Nume to urge her out of the bath before her fingers started to wrinkle. After patting her cousin dry, Nume led her back into the bedchamber where she helped her get dressed in the elaborate dress of a *naomna.* The sensual garment quickly came together and transformed her tall, lean frame into the flower of sexuality. As the young woman finished securing all the ties and clasps of the dress, Nume plaited her hair to display the nape of her neck. As she finished she leaned close to her cousin’s neck to whisper in to her ear.

“I’m so sorry, Av, I know what this is going to cost you,” her whispered words ticked a few stray hairs against Av’s hot skin. Av merely looked up to catch her cousin’s eye in the mirror in front of them. Av’s fear was buried under a carefull poise and calm. She reached up a hand to stroke the other’s cheek reassuringly.

They were interrupted then by a man entering the room unnanounced. He took in Av’s appearance at a glance. With a gesture, he dismissed Nume from Av’s side and beckoned for Av to rise. Av nodded a bow and rose gracefully to her feet.

“Welcome back true sister,” he said in a slightly husky voice. He reached out and brushed her forehead with his fingers. All at once a chaos ran through her mind as words errupted through her mind to cage her thoughts. “I doubt you will find it comfortable to have your voice back after this long, but you have made your choice. I give you back your person, your name, your obligations...” he almost chocked out the last, no less aware than their cousin what his sister now faced.

Av stared at him for a second, almost able to feel the sharp edges of his emotions, almost able to sense the stir of his thoughts. But the gift he had so strongly, she had not at all. “Thank you,” she breathed. He started to turn away when her fingers brushed the cloth of his shirt. “Kev,” she said in a stronger whisper, “I will be fine. This will be hard for all of us, I know, but far more for others than for myself. I lost control, I failed to fulfill my obligations and I grossly exceeded what was needed to defend myself. I should not have needed to defend myself. Aetidiamas was right.”

Kev turned his face to the side and said nothing. There was nothing he could argue. He had tried the last time to point out the difference between what had happened and what this testing would call for. The moment passed on in silence. Finally he shrugged off her fingers, angry at his own helplessness, and angry at allowing that to make him angry in the first place. His younger sister, his only true sister had always touched him too close for him to exercise the discipline of his mind to shut out his feelings. “They will be ready for you by now. You have time for last details, but someone will come to get you if you don’t show up in a few minutes,” he looked back at her and added with brutal honesty, “This will be far worse than what would have happened... it is all too forced and deliberate.”

Av looked at his stony face. “What happens in the arena is no less forced and deliberate,” she retorted. With that, she gathered up her weapon and turned for the door. “Shall we get this over with?”

Kev and Nume looked at each other. Kev asked, “What is that for?”

Av patted the sword, with a strange, delicate look. “I had a sword before and made the mistake of using it. It I dont have the option here we will never know if I really learned anything about the true nature of my obligation to the responsabilities of *naomna,”* she murmured. She set her chin and started out the door, thinking of a group of men who’s responsibility obliged them to deliberately rape her to test her obligation as *naomna* to turn her own rape into... plain sex; no victim, no serious injuries, no fatalities. Not because it was a rational idea, but because she, like thousands of others like her, had been trained to do just that. Because not teaching people how to handle their sexuality was a dangerous idea in general, and because the people trained to do that training were automatically a principle target of a sexual predator, as she had experienced herself.

Her obligation was to survive and adapt, her responsability was to stay alive, intact and able to walk away. Excesive use of lethal force, out of fear of rape, from someone with her training was essentially murder. Fortunately strong witness testimony had established that she had refrained from using lethal force until she had had no choice.

As her ancestors before her, as an animal, she…