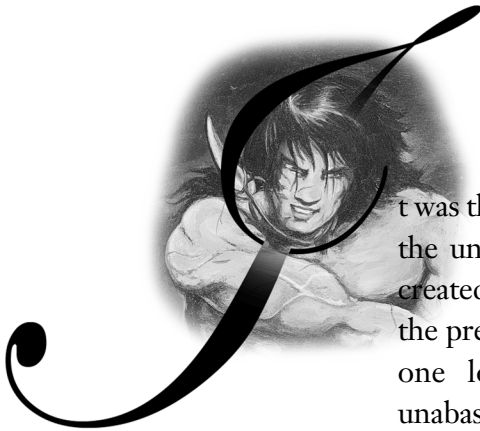


XIII: Shakespearean Savage

*Think how unspeakably sweet
The taste of snow at midsummer,
How sweet a kind spring breeze
After the gales of winter.*

—Asklepiados (ca. 320 BCE)



It was the exultant cry of the primeval; the unconscious, longing roar of all created things, declaring itself against the presumptuous forces of nature in one long, soulful outpouring of unabashed mortal challenge.

The roiling of Tiffany's stomach was erased as the magnificent young archer of the forest turned to face her, surrounded by showy fuchsia and white oleander blossoms, with blood dripping down his chin. Timidly, she bowed slightly to show her respect to the regal, muscle-bound savage standing before her.

Was this a man or a beast? He was practically naked, bronzed to a mahogany sheen, with merely a jaguar-hide loincloth covering his vital areas. His lithe movements reminded her of Sheeba, her jaguar in the Baltimore zoo. She was sure he had spoken to her in a tongue resembling English, though uttered with a heavy, growling

accent. She felt her adrenaline still racing from her brush with violent death as her mind struggled to comprehend the rapid-fire events unfolding on this strange planet.

Yes, she was certain she'd heard a strangely powerful voice speaking to her, just after the zinging arrows had pierced the snarling bear. Then this exceedingly muscular giant of a man had leaped in front of her enraged attacker with only a primitive weapon in his hands, apparently fighting to save her life. She shuddered at the memory of the deep, rumbling growl of warning emerging from the savage's great chest. Then this brave demigod, apparently not affected by the powerful Opalonian gravity at all, had fought ferociously to overcome a creature twice his height and seven or eight times his weight.

Why had he risked his life to rescue her? And why was he standing atop his colossal conquest's carcass, releasing that bloodcurdling howl of triumph? How was that accursed roar generated from his human vocal cords? Tiffany shivered in horror. Could he want her for himself?

The savage's powerful face was dominated by his keen, challenging eyes. Like a personification of the carnivore he'd killed, his voice was deep and resonated a gravelly aggressiveness. She drew back in terror as he moved toward her, fresh blood still oozing down his rippling chest. The row of five slashes from the short-faced bear's mighty front paw told the story of his courageous deed. His face was remarkably handsome—stoic, yet boyish in its curiosity. His emerald eyes were those of a jungle cat. His mountainous chest and washboard stomach continued to heave from the death struggle. Around twenty years of age, he was at least six-feet-eight-inches tall and no less than twice her weight.

Tiffany had never seen a man who exuded this forest god's towering mental fortitude, physical prowess, or imposing self-confidence. She trembled with admiration for this creature before her, as she unconsciously brushed back her thick, disheveled blonde locks. Suddenly she snapped out of her trance, for reality was upon her. Cowering against the tree where she'd taken cover from the bear, she said, "Stop! Don't touch me! Who are you?"

What do you want?"

To her shock, this child of Nature, this towering wild thing of breathtakingly masculine perfection and terrifying strength spoke.

"Are you all right, mademoiselle? Tophero...at your service. How do you do?"

The giant seemed unexpectedly awkward—as shy as a schoolboy, and perhaps even overwhelmed—as though he had never seen another human. English was clearly not his native language, but his heavy guttural speech didn't interfere with his soft-spoken manner.

"I'm...fine, and you?" She felt her back press against the massive tree. *You've handled a bull elephant before, and you managed to beat Diana Plastina, the cannibal queen of tennis, didn't you?* She took a deep breath and swiped the cold sweat off her forehead. The great feline man had been sauntering toward her with the quiet dignity of a king of beasts. Seeing her retreat, he stopped a few yards away.

Up close, he was so enormous that Tiffany couldn't help but wonder, how did this titan of a man acquire such a modest, even childlike demeanor? She could even see him breaking out in a sweat to match her own. She drew herself to her full height. This was still a man, right? She knew how to handle men. Somehow his discomfort made her feel as if she had the upper hand.

"I'm...well, thank you," said the barbarian. "I hope...the inquietude...caused by the bear...did not disincline you...toward the generous beauty...of my land."

Inquietude? Disincline? This sounded like a line a thespian would use on a Shakespearean stage! Yet he clearly meant to be hospitable.

The loin-clothed man nervously brushed his long hair backward, as if imitating her gesture. Since he didn't seem impervious to human vulnerability, she felt somewhat less intimidated by his giant frame.

"What about your chest?" she asked. *Be brave*, she thought, as she warily shifted her horrified glance toward the man of the forest's wounds.

"Flesh wounds. Far worse...found me after...an attack of the hyaenodons." He looked down at his chest with a timid but carefree smile.

“It looks painful,” Tiffany said, her heart touched by compassion. After all, this man had risked his life to saved hers. His wound looked serious, with open flesh subject to infection. Without any success, she desperately tried to think of a way to stop his bleeding.

Suddenly a light flashed in the man-beast’s deep green eyes, as though he had read her mind. He dug up a pile of clay with the tip of his spear, then applied the clay to his wounds with his large hands.

“Now, it must therefore...perforce be better?” he said, as though he’d ministered to his wounds for the sole purpose of putting her at ease.

Tiffany nodded in disbelief, more so from his speech than his nonchalant attitude toward the treatment of his bloody gores. They stood there. She studied him. Her gaze did not prevent him from studying her back. His poise reminded her of the majestic ways of the big cats she’d spent two summers with in the misty rainforest of the Baltimore Zoo.

“I’m Tophero, the son of Tyra...the smilodon. What’s your name?”

Tiffany thought he had stated his name with the gravity of Oedipus pronouncing his claim to Queen Iocaste of Thebes, after he’d answered the man-devouring Sphinx’s deadly riddle. Quelling her amusement, she replied with equal gravity, “I’m Tiffany Sommer from a country called America on planet Earth. How long have you been on this planet? You say your mother is a smilodon?”

Curiosity filled her as he strode back to the short-faced bear and began cutting several large chunks of steak from its hindquarters. The red meat looked delicious after a day without any food of substance. The juicy starfruits had long ago passed from her body amidst the excitement she’d experienced.

The caveman of the Opalonian jungle pondered her questions. “It’s so fast, how you speak...and so different from my reading.” He scratched his head. “And you probably don’t want your face licked the way my brothers would appreciate after a near-death experience, correct?”

Tiffany quietly nodded her appreciation for sparing her the

face-licking ritual.

The savage swiftly skewered the chunks of meat onto his spear as he replied. "I've been here all my life. My late mother was Tyra the smilodon, a most remarkable mother. My brothers, Kobu and Kota, and my sister Koko, live on the other side of the mountains." He paused, then asked in rapid succession: "What's the name of this planet? Are you related to L.C. Tiffany, the Favrile glass artist who refused to head his father's prestigious silver and jewelry firm in New York? How far is America from here?"

He balanced what looked like a giant shish kabob across his mammoth shoulder.

Studying the many scars from primitive claw marks on Tophero's shoulders and back, Tiffany couldn't hide her amazement. How had this beast-man survived—so savage, yet so refined?

"This planet is called Opalon," she answered, taking care to speak slowly and clearly. "Although I admire Louis Comfort Tiffany's artwork, I bear no relation to him. My family name is Sommer. I'm Tiffany Sommer. America is 3.6 billion miles away from here. Your mother and siblings are smilodons? And you speak their language? Do all the animals talk on Opalon?"

Now it was Tophero's turn to be amused. "Smilodon is my native language. I speak all the animal languages—but they do not speak this English tongue. Although I look different from Tyra, she'll always be my mother in my heart, for she raised me like her own cub, taught me to survive the jungle, and died defending our family." A touch of sorrow shadowed his piercing eyes. "Is this America farther than the Sea of Zbi?"

Tiffany gestured skyward. "I'm sure that it's farther than the Sea of Zbi. It's farther than your sun. I'm sorry you lost your mother." Tiffany wasn't sure what to say next. Their simple conversation had fully disarmed her, for she saw a side of this Opalonian boy that indicated he was kind and good-natured.

Upon his urging, they walked away from the clearing, for the carcass of the short-faced bear was beginning to attract carrion eaters from the sky, the prelude to larger land carnivores and scavengers. Walking next to him, for the first time in her life she

felt insignificant. She had to scurry to match his purposeful strides, and soon was breathing heavily from the unfamiliar gravitational pull. At the same time, however, she felt completely secure in the company of this gentle giant, despite the terrors of the Opalonian jungle.

She thought of Karen and Paul; they were surely worried about her. She hoped they had made it safely back to the ship. But she seemed to have lost all sense of direction. And deep down in her seventeen-year-old heart, sweet infatuation was unfurling like an insistent shoot. She didn't want anyone interfering with her sole companionship with this English-speaking son of Tyra, the smilodon. She thought of Derek. Would they run into his expeditionary group? She couldn't help comparing the handsome billionaire to the tall forest god before her.

"How did you learn English?" she asked. "Who taught you?"

Tophero slowed his pace to match her own. "When I was eight years old, I found a painted cave on a cliff not far from my hunting grounds. Inside there were many strange things, and the walls contained beautiful murals depicting two men, a woman, and a baby. Among them there was a talking box with more pictures. It was from this black box that I learned to speak and read English. From it, I knew there were other creatures that looked like me. I'm not a sabertooth cat, nor am I a tailless monkey. I'm a man."

Tiffany nodded soberly.

"But in all my life, I never saw any other creatures like me until this morning." He paused, shy again. "That's when I saw you."

"You learned the English language from a computer?"

"Is that what you call it?"

"That's remarkable. Even though you've had no one to speak with, you have a wonderful grasp of the language."

"Thank you. I've read five hundred books in the computer."

"Really?" Tiffany's fascination was approaching overload. "What kind of books?"

"Literary classics, military histories, philosophy, poetry."

"That's why sometimes you speak so formally, like people from

generations ago. A little Shakespearean influence?”

“Perhaps. At first I didn’t know Shakespeare was a playwright. I thought it was a way of fighting—shake a spear up and down before making an offensive drive.”

Tiffany laughed heartily. “So you like to read.”

“As a reader, I feel very much like a traveler. Going to places I’ve never been before, exploring the human condition and psyche through great stories. Others’ experiences and wisdom empowered me to better understand happiness—to make sense of how to live, what to value, what’s real, true, and everlasting. I found that inside, I am more than a simple cat of the forest. I’m confident, yet I’m shy. I feel young, yet I feel old. I’m a hero to my family, yet I’m a villain to the families of my prey. I learned that interspersed within every dark period, there is remarkable opportunity and hope.”

Tiffany continued to marvel, nodding without interrupting. Now that the jungle man had found a willing listener, his words seemed to spill from him as if a dam had burst. He clearly had no notion of small talk. He went directly to the most profound and personal of ideas. This was a man she could converse with forever.

Presently he led her to a deserted cavern, where they sat close to the opening, overlooking the jungle. It was getting quite dark now, and her stomach rumbled from hunger. “You saw me this morning?” she asked, a slight blush rising up her cheeks.

“Yes. When I heard your song, it seemed that my heart had stopped, for time stood still for me at that moment,” he confessed unapologetically. “It was much like the moment Tyra died in my arms, but it was very different, too. I felt so drawn to you when I heard your melody. I’ve never heard anything like it before in the jungle, so I started to follow you, hoping that I would hear you sing some more.”

Tiffany was flabbergasted. Not only was he interested in the deepest questions of human existence, this godlike man was so untainted by civilization that he had no trouble showing his true feelings honestly and plainly.

Tophero tore the bear rump into strips of steaks with his powerful

fingers and offered them to her at once.

Her eyes widened. "I see that there's no reason for you not to consume your meat raw, but I was raised on eating cooked meat, and..." She paused, hating to complain. This meal was hard won.

Tophero looked puzzled. "You mean burning the meat in a fire? Like the fire Nero used to burn down Rome? I saw a fire in the forest once, after the volcano rumbled and spewed red. It was scary. Many animals were trapped and charred to death alive, including some of the largest and most fearsome ones. You prefer to eat your meat like the incinerated corpses from the forest fire, eliminating all the wonderful flavors?"

"Cooking is different from burning," Tiffany said. "You've probably read about it. And yes, I prefer to eating meat after cooking it in a fire," she added unequivocally, although she felt silly for her answer. She had never questioned her eating habit before, much less seen it as ridiculous.

"But how do you start a fire?" Tophero asked.

"Just watch." Tiffany drew a lighter from one of the numerous pockets in her safari outfit, and started a fire with some dry twigs strewn at the mouth of the cave.

"RAARR!" Tophero jumped backward and snarled in fright.

"Come, come, it's okay," Tiffany said in a soothing voice. Fire would be a threat to any animal, she thought, and it actually made her like him even more for openly showing his fear.

Tophero calmed down and reluctantly strung several cubes of bear steak on a green branch. He watched suspiciously, sniffing in distaste as Tiffany rotated it over the crackling fire. When the steaks were cooked, they commenced to eat. Tophero tore into his raw bear meat with great fanfare, squatting on his powerful legs. It didn't take long before his mouth and cheeks were completely red with blood dripping down his chin. Tiffany cocked her head looking at him, then frowned with revulsion. With his giant shadow looming behind him, the stalwart caveman squatting in the firelight was more mysterious than frightening.

Perhaps due to her heightened appetite, Tiffany had never eaten such great steaks. With no salt or spice to be had, the meat tasted

gamey and wild, as well as tough. But the freshness and the sumptuous flavor of the bear's rump satisfied her hunger for a substantive dinner.

This is better than the Porterhouse I was craving, she thought to herself, silently thanking this laconic stranger of the forest. But soon it would be nightfall. *Oh, my God*, she realized. *Then what?*

