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Melt from You

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Leanna held my hand as we walked. Most of the time, she eschewed lingering contact—to risk mixing even the oily residue of our fingerprints. She was independent like that. Proud of her untouched appearance, the projection that no one had access to her. It made me wonder why she had bothered staying with me as long as she did.

“Do you want the ring?” I asked. I felt the way our hands were warming up, melding together, but she did not pull away.

Leanna eyed the box in my back pocket. “I shouldn’t. It’s much too pretty for me to take.” Nothing was too pretty for her. “I understand.”

We made it to my car. Our hands were syrupy now. My callouses were catching on her palm, and her finger pads covered the back of my knuckles. She let go, and our skin pulled away in waxy strings. I flexed my hand until it coagulated back into shape, a shade lighter than before.

“See you around?” Leanna asked, holding up her mottled hand in a wave.

The lights of my apartment flickered. There was no whir of air conditioning or blare of television, which meant that my roommate, Daniel, was doing homework. I turned off the light switches as I saw them, stumbling across the blackened living room and through the hallway until I pushed open the kitchen door. All our small bowls were strewn about in a frenzy, holding different herbs and spices. The fridge doors were ajar while pots steamed, and the oven vent roared.

“How did it go, man?” Daniel asked.

I held out the box in answer.

He let out a long, reedy whistle of sympathy.

“Do you mind if I destroy this with your equipment? I promise I won’t let anything stick to the bottom.” The ring was made out of the good stuff. It wouldn’t fuse to human skin even if it melted.

Daniel laughed. “Equipment? I’m a culinary student. Use as much as you need.”

His face shined with perspiration, and the sweat ran grooves down his face. A jade roller came out of his pocket, and Daniel drew it across his face, resettling the skin in an even layer—though it made his face strained and tacky like stretched taffy. Daniel never gave his skin time to fill itself in. One chunk of his arm would bubble up, and he had to roll it all out immediately.

Leanna never had taffy skin. Not even in hidden places. Where I stuck to her, Leanna knew the perfect ways to slim her flesh and let it grow in without a passerby knowing the wiser. I flexed my hand again. My discoloration and misshapen skin told a story I found pride in, but

Leanna was a different type of beautiful. I worshipped her perfection while she had marked her ownership under my sleeves.

“Thanks. I’ll wash everything when I finish.”

Daniel teetered back and forth on his toes. Rather than look at me, he caught his reflection in the door of the stainless-steel refrigerator and studied his strained smile.

“Hey, I’ve got to go to class, but hang tight. Smelt the ring. Make yourself presentable, and we’ll go out on the town tonight, eh? Leanna won’t know what she lost.”

Daniel clapped a hand on my elbow, and I caught his too. When we pulled away, I noticed the lightened tint of Leanna’s hand, and my stomach swooped. Every fiber of skin that was not my own, both the visible inches and the patches hidden under layers of overgrowth, crawled. The second Daniel left, I set a pot of water on the stove and turned the thermostat to eighty-seven.

My skin started to melt when bubbles were forming on the bottom of the pot. The top layers of Leanna slid off first. Then the grip of the old lady I walked down the stairs last week. Daniel’s cheek from when he fell asleep on my shoulder on movie night. The recesses of countless secret handshakes. Tears mixed with the memories. To lose Leanna was to lose every piece of me from the last three years. Maybe if I had stretched my skin, better protected my limbs, it would feel different, yet even the raw patches of myself were tinged with her influence.

Her oldest mark was three years old, three small dots on my forearm. The first time we met, Leanna accidentally rested fingertips on my skin. The mistake convinced her to give me a chance.

When the water began to boil, I became a creek, layers dripping and twisting over my uneven ridges and veins, collecting into pools on the linoleum. I fumbled to take the ring out of its box, and when I did, the ring flipped into the water of its own accord.

The ring sunk to the bottom, melting and slowly spreading itself into a misshapen puddle. The rocks clinked against the steel before depressing themselves against the pot as well. My chin dripped, and my forehead oozed into the water, turning into tan memories that clouded my vision. Recollections of lazy hours spent at opposite ends of the couch and long talks in the car when I knew I was being cruel. I continued to stare until the ring mixed with the boiling memories and turned the mixture into a lustrous copper draught.

I looked at my forearm, the three dots from Leanna. The only inches of myself not raw with pain and newness, they trembled in anticipation, and I tipped them into the pot as well. The memories bloomed for a moment before fading into the mixture. I was all that remained.