

## *Animalia*

Naomi Mercer

He called her 'Gazelle' because she was lithe and graceful and small; because she had the soft brown eyes of a too-trusting fawn. She called him 'Panther' because he was dark and powerful and moved with cat-like silence.

They lived in a studio apartment on the Westside with large windows to let in the light for his painting and a wall of mirrors for her dancing. The Panther liked to watch the Gazelle dance while her pink slippers glided across the parquet floor and the frothy, white ballet skirt swirled around her ankles. He was inspired by the Gazelle's beauty of movement and tried to recreate it on canvas. But each time, the painting turned dark and brooding and he'd stop, half-finished, and tear the canvas to remnants. The Panther wanted to paint his Gazelle as she was—all light and tenderness.

They lay awake at night, the sheet somewhere at the foot of the bed, and talked about how she would dance with The Company and how his paintings would be shown at The Museum. Those were their dreams.

The Gazelle worked and practiced every day and the Panther rubbed her aching feet at night. She fell asleep under his soothing hands. The Gazelle was to dance the lead in her company's next production, and rumors flew around the ballet community that a scout for The Company would be at opening night. The Gazelle's chance seemed within her grasp.

I know I can make it, she told the Panther in the dimness of their bed. We'll go to New York and find a flat in Greenwich, and I shall dance and you will paint...

Yes, he said. She could not see his face in the shadows and the blackness of his eyes. She thinks I'm a failure. If I could finish a painting of her, then...

The Panther painted furiously and furiously destroyed the unfinished canvases. He told the Gazelle he was getting closer and closer; soon he would have his masterpiece...of her.

He did not think that she knew he was no closer than before, and she forgave his lies to save what pride he had. The Panther saw that the Gazelle would soon realize her dream, and he didn't want to be left behind.

On the night of the opening performance of Gazelle's company's production, the Panther had a seat in the second balcony. A talent scout from The Company and his entourage occupied the first balcony. The envy that burned deep in the Panther's soul roiled and twisted under the surface of his handsome, flawless face.

The Gazelle danced upon air that night with all the skill and passion of a prima ballerina. Success was too sweet for her to let slip away, even for the Panther's sake. She prayed that, once in New York, he would be able to paint and success would touch him also.

After the encores and curtain calls and parties, the Gazelle and the Panther left the stifling crowds and returned to the quiet of their apartment. The Gazelle still rode the waves of euphoria, because a contract for her to sign the next day lay in the talent scout's briefcase. Nothing could stop her now.

Dance for me, the Panther said, once the door had slid shut on the rest of the world. Though she was weary from her performance and the evening's excitement, the Gazelle assented. He hadn't asked her to dance for him in so long.

She glided around the floor in the light cast from the street lamps below and the enormous full moon in the sky. Her eyes spoke to him, but he wasn't seeing her anymore. The Gazelle stopped before him, to ask what was wrong, to empathize, to coddle him if she must.

The Panther drew one great claw and slit the Gazelle's throat.

Five years later the Panther retired to his country estate, to create in private, he told the press. His earnings from the sale of The Gazelle Collection had made him a very wealthy man. Critics lauded the dark paintings of the Collection as the Panther's mourning of and tribute to the promising young ballerina who had mysteriously disappeared the night of her greatest success.