

Perspective Flip



Kris Schnee

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by Kris Schnee

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The Treasure of Jardin's Island

* 1. Connor *

The tropical wind smelled of salt and ashes. The big man wrinkled his nose and drowned out the scent with another swig of beer. Half the foam got into his red mustache. He swiped one hand through it and focused on the smells and the drink, instead of the job ahead.

"Hey, Connor!" Fianna called out in the distance. Her feet kicked up sandy soil as she ran, waving. Everyone drinking in the thatch-roofed, wall-less bar turned to see her. A couple of village kids were following the girl around, which made Connor grin and lift his mug to her.

"Bribing people again?" he asked.

Fianna hefted her oversize backpack and dug through the many pockets of her vest and belt, finally pulling out some candies from a city a two hundred miles away. She passed them out to the kids and said, "Sorry, guys, but I need to go talk with my friend."

She went under the bar's thatch canopy and flopped onto a stool opposite Connor. "So, I made some friends and asked around. They think we're crazy."

Connor drank. "Did they tell you about the Salted Place?"

"What the kids said was that a scary plant-monster washed ashore years ago, and they thrashed and burned and salted that whole patch of ground. So that was probably Jardin's work. But they haven't actually seen Jardin or any of his other creations."

"Jardin's Island is thataway" — Connor pointed toward the coast — "so this salty spot is probably close."

"Yeah, I see it. Weirdly grey, no beach grass."

Connor squinted. "You and your young eyes. Where is Lugh, anyway?"

"I see someone over there, probably him. Are you sober enough to talk strategy with him?"

"Bah!" said Connor. The girl was always nagging him to quit drinking, trim his beard, and let Lugh lecture him on magic. "Fine, bring him."

Here in the Arbore Islands, there were few enough visitors that word tended to spread when any were around. "Excuse me, sir," said an old man just after Fianna had run off. "Do I understand that you plan to go to Jardin's Island?"

Connor nodded. "We'll take care of him for you."

"But surely you know he's dangerous. Wizard Jardin of the Oaken Army, the Blossom Plague, and all that?"

Connor finished his drink and said, "We also know about the monster you killed at the Salted Place. It must've been impressive. But we three have experience in fighting things like that."

The old man lowered his voice and said, "That 'thing' had been a person. It was just human enough that we could tell."

"What?"

"And Jardin has done nothing against us other than that one time, thank Maia. As far as we know, he simply came to the islands to retire, and has no interest in conquering anyone."

"Retiring?" said Connor. "Do evil wizards just hang up their hats and *stop*?"

"Presumably, if they live so long."

Connor said, "But he's made several comebacks. Just because he's had a long and villainous career doesn't mean he's harmless." What Connor didn't add was that would-be conquerors tended to have a fortune in treasure. Anyone ridding the world of him would get a nice bonus for fighting evil.

"You should also know," said the native, "that you're not the first to attack the

island. There was a group of knights and mages the year after Jardin's arrival. We never saw them again."

"Thank you, sir," said Connor. "We'll be sure to be careful."

The native left shaking his head. "We'll be happy to sell you supplies for a one-way trip."

Connor sighed and pulled out a coin. "Barkeep, I'd like to try that rum after all."

* 2. Fianna *

Lugh woke them up at dawn, at the inn. It was always strange to see him without his robe, with all his burns and scars (much worse than Fianna's, though he was hardly older) visible around his tunic. The scars outside, anyway. "You were snoring," he said.

Fianna yawned and made herself do a few situps. "Blame him." Connor lay like a bear on the straw cot, already snoring again. Fianna fished through her supply of gadgets and upended the everfull vial over him, making a trickle of water splash his face.

Connor sputtered and opened his eyes. Lugh nodded to him, then limped away to get himself ready. Fianna prodded Connor until he got up too, grunting. They were almost family.

Before long they were at the beach and geared up. Connor had his spear, shield, and axe. Fianna had all her pockets and stuff and was wearing her grab-you-'cross-the-room gloves and boingy-boots. (These were the correct technical terms no matter what Lugh said.) Lugh wore his deep red robe and sword-belt and was doing something to a pair of ugly straw hats in their canoe.

"Why'd you buy those, anyway?" Fianna said.

"Insects. We should avoid having exposed skin." He handed her a hat. His hood covered his own baldness.

As she tried the pointy thing on, a faint red glow flickered into place around her

head. The air suddenly felt cool and dry in her lungs. Lugh said, "The air goes elsewhere on its way in. That will kill insects."

"Where, exactly?"

"*Outside*," said Lugh, in a tone that made Fianna shiver. He'd never fully explained the term. Mostly he mumbled it in nightmares.

"Let's go," said Connor.

The big guy did most of the paddling, which let Fianna relax and enjoy the sea spray on her face. Jardin's Island was a speck on the horizon, with shapes that were hopefully just trees. "Hey, Lugh, can you sense anything?"

Lugh, sitting behind her with an oar, said, "Reading details of spells is one of my blind spots, remember?"

"Yeah, but don't you detect anything?"

"Of course. The island's crawling with magic. But you already know that." Lugh was silent for a moment. "I think the water is safe, but I'm not good enough to be sure."

"We'll be fine, you two," said Connor. The canoe bounced through the waves.

Fianna tugged Connor's shoulder. "Hey, Connor, are we there yet?"

Connor grunted. "Kids."

Soon the island loomed large. Fianna couldn't decide whether it was pretty, with its huge forest and flashes of colorful birds, or unnerving. She went with, "Pretty."

"Bah," said Connor. "You think elementals' lairs look nice."

Lugh added, "They smell good." Fianna and Connor turned back to look at him and caught a bewildered expression on his face. "Don't they?"

"So, where do we land?" Connor asked.

Fianna squinted. "No obvious docks, but there's a safe-looking shore on that

side."

When they beached the canoe, nothing happened. Fianna hopped into the shallow surf and ran onto the sand, then looked around and fidgeted with her magic boomerang. The others were more cautious. Lugh seemed to have decided he liked the double-bladed oar he'd been using and kept it for a weapon, using a spell to add glowing red edges to it. Fianna took up position at Connor's right. "All right! Let's have some fun."

* 3. Lugh *

Lugh blinked. "Fun? We're here to kill someone."

"Don't tell me you're losing your nerve," said Fianna.

"No. I just need to focus." He hefted the nice, well-balanced oar, made sure everyone was protected with what long-lasting barriers he could make, and slipped into second sight.

Jardin's Island rippled with green energies. Magic splashed with their every step on the grass and shined in the trees. Lugh thought he could sense a brighter energy somewhere in the distance, but with little detail. He pointed it out anyway. He looked around once more and smiled, spotting one of the tiny, lucky whirlpools that the sages called Salvation Points. He tapped it with his oar and it made a chime no one else could hear.

"Hello, Lugh? We're going."

Lugh looked up at Fianna. As usual, her whole body was a rainbow of magical energies from all the miscellaneous gadgets she carried. Something for every occasion. She always seemed so confident on trips like these. "Yes, of course," he said.

The forest had no trails, which left them to wander in the rough direction he'd shown them. They hacked through dense brush for a while. The salty breeze kept them cool in the muggy morning air.

Fianna called out, "Bugs!"

At first Lugh didn't see the cloud, but then the buzzing became unmistakable all around them. He swatted the air with the two-bladed oar. Where it struck the cloud, he felt it resist and buzz louder.

"Ugh!" said Fianna. "I hope your special hats work."

Connor swung his shield. "We need shelter! I can't hit what I can barely see."

"They're like a net," Lugh said, seeing the faint light trails that linked all the insects in midair.

Fianna bounded over Lugh's head to a high branch, drawing part of the cloud upward. "What do you mean?" she called down at him. She whipped out an iron fan and slashed with it, creating short-lived blades of wind that killed bugs by the hundred.

Lugh said, "They're all connected by one spell."

Connor sputtered. "This is useless. Do something!"

Fianna balanced on the tree limb long enough to put her fan away. She pulled out her boomerang again and took aim. Lugh watched the thing sail past him and hit the bugs to no obvious effect... but then the entire cloud crashed to the ground with a visible splash of magic. The buzzing stopped.

Fianna called down from the tree, "The swarm looked like that spot was the center."

Lugh stared up at her. Even without those boots (from the hoard of a small sheep-stealing dragon), Fianna moved fluidly, easily. Lugh limped over to Connor, then turned back to watch her land perfectly with her Boots of Agility.

Connor muttered, "They got my arm a couple of times." His axe-arm's sleeve had come loose, and there were several welts on him.

Lugh said, "The laces came off? Fianna, antivenom." He'd let Connor down; he should've devised a full-body shield spell.

"Great," Fianna said, digging a medical kit from her pack. In a moment she'd grabbed a jar of salve and started dabbing the nasty, musky stuff on Connor.

"Not the first time we've gotten waylaid by bugs."

Connor said, "It's nothing."

"We don't know how dangerous these are," Lugh said. "Jardin's known for using sentries, so hopefully —"

Fianna was glaring at him, but he couldn't guess why. "Hopefully there's nothing beyond the usual venom in these."

His friend sighed; had he said something wrong? She said, "And hopefully we killed 'em quickly enough not to get anyone's attention."

Lugh looked into the forest and saw the swirling green sparks of the jungle's magic. They were still quiet and inactive, for now.

* 4. Connor *

An hour later, Connor covered his itching arm and took the lead. They were all battered and tired. "Spread out. I don't want us all caught in the same pit trap. Again."

The trees loomed close around them as they plunged into another especially dense part of the forested island. The sunlight took on a sickly green shade that filtered down between the leaves. He kept one gloved hand on his axe, ready to hack Lugh or Fianna free of a feisty branch.

There, a flash of color! Connor craned his neck to spot a bird with a feline tail, preening and posing as if to show off its spotted wings. Connor pointed.

Fianna just shrugged.

"Be careful. We're heading for — can that thing hear us?"

"Maybe."

"Let's just go, then."

"I think I see something," Fianna said. "A blocky shape covered in vines."

"A building?" Lugh asked.

"Worth checking."

They hiked through the woods toward it, and started to see the greenery-blurred outline of a stone pyramid. The salty breeze helped keep Connor comfortable under the supposedly bug-proof clothes. He kept glancing at the bird that followed them, but it made no attempt at stealth. If anything it seemed miffed that they weren't paying it more attention.

Fianna said, "Can we take a break?"

Connor found they'd reached a glade of blue flowers among the trees. "We haven't gone far." But Fianna's stride was short and Lugh was no great hiker, not that he'd ever complain when the girl might hear. Connor raised one hand to call the group to a halt. "All right. Don't go too far."

Fianna pounced the ground and sat with her head propped up on her arms, humming. Lugh brushed his robe to one side and sat cross-legged. Connor stood looking around for a moment, but reluctantly he lowered himself to the soft ground too.

"Lugh," said Fianna, "What's with that bird?" It was still chirping at them and posing.

"Sometimes a bird is just a bird."

The girl yawned. "Whatever. So, how will we get in?"

Lugh shrugged.

Connor said, "Between you two you'll find an entrance."

Connor took in the sweet scent of the glade and spent a minute just enjoying the breeze. "Let's get moving again."

Fianna just muttered.

"Hey, this is no time for napping." Lugh was meditating or something, and Connor had to admit the spot was relaxing, but the damn bug bites itched too

much for him to rest, even in such a nice-smelling, sleepy place...

Connor stood up sharply. "Get up, now!"

"Five more minutes," said Fianna.

Connor said, "The flowers." He reached down and grabbed the girl's hair.

"Ow!"

"Up!" He made her stand, then shook Lugh awake. Fianna was picking up her backpack, but looked about to collapse on top of it. He felt like a nap himself but held both the youngsters by the scruff of the neck and marched them out of the clearing, until he could no longer smell the flowers.

Fianna blinked sleepily. "What's the big idea?"

Lugh said, "Some kind of knockout dust. I should have guessed." He turned toward the glade and held out his hands, creating a ghostly red wall between them and the flowers. When he turned back toward the others he was holding back tears. "I'm sorry! I've failed twice already today."

Connor laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right. All three of us were caught off guard. It won't happen again."

"Yeah," Fianna said. "You already helped."

Lugh looked down and brushed pollen off the bottom of his robe. "Well. We should be going."

"Does everyone have their gear?" Connor said. They checked, then hurried away.

Even from nearby, the pyramid was tricky to see. It didn't look all that old, but the jungle had claimed much of the brown stone surface. The building had many flat tiers like a fancy garden that'd been neglected.

Fianna said, "Are the vines moving?"

Lugh watched for a while. "I don't think so. The space there on the left is

different somehow, though. It might be a door."

Connor's arm throbbed, but he let the kids chatter and head for the spot they mentioned. That meant climbing up from the ground to the first tier; there were no stairs.

Fianna charged up her boots, then bounded over Connor's head to the mossy ledge. She lowered a rope for the admiring Lugh, struggled with his weight, and finally managed to haul him up. Connor wasn't going to be able to follow them the same way; the boy couldn't lift much either.

Lugh said, "Let me try something." He waved his hands and spoke a few odd echoing syllables to cast another spell. A ripple of air condensed into a dim red ramp from the ground up to his level. He tried stepping on it, then waved for Connor to join them. Once they were all up, they looked around for a door up here on the elevated garden. Nothing tried to kill him, which was refreshing.

"Is there a thinner wall?" Fianna asked.

"No," said Lugh. "Thinner space. Look." And at his gesture, part of the mossy stone faded and became a passage into darkness.

Connor pushed past them, axe and shield at the ready. The interior smelled dusty and dead compared to the forest, with wind blowing from behind him down a sandstone passage. He waved the others forward, and hissed in pain.

"What's wrong?" Fianna asked.

"Just my arm. Never mind." It was tough to keep his grip on the axe. He ignored that and led the others down the passage. There were halls and alcoves in various directions. "I don't like mazes."

Lugh created a series of ceiling lights like dim flames and Fianna held up a glowing ball. Connor led them creeping around a corner, and found a storeroom.

Shelves of rakes and shears lined the walls. Connor eyed a dark shape that turned out to be a crate with writing on it.

Lugh stepped closer to read. "Jardin."

Connor pried open the crate and pulled out one of the many dark glassy things inside. "Wine bottles!"

Then his whole arm and side seemed to catch fire from the persistent sting of the bug bites. He staggered and crashed into the wall with a shout.

"Connor!" said Lugh. Fianna made a grabbing motion with her gloved hands, and the falling bottle stopped in midair and drifted closer to her.

Connor clutched his pained arm. "Open that bottle," he said through clenched teeth.

Fianna pried out the cork with a knife and handed him the bottle, while Lugh muttered. He gulped a lot of the stuff and the pain faded quickly. The wine had a good but salty taste. He undid the laces on his shirt to expose the bite wounds, thinking he could pour some of the alcohol on them.

"That's plenty," said Fianna, snatching the bottle back. "Let's try the antivenom again." She looked at his exposed arm and gasped. Connor's vision was blurry all of the sudden, but he tried to see what she was looking at. Grey skin?

Something fell onto his sleeve. Hair. *His* hair, great clumps of it! The others were staring at his face. "What?" he tried to say, but there was only a weird buzzing in his throat.

Fianna started rapid-fire cursing. She threw down her pack to root through it. Lugh said, "I tried to warn you. The wine doesn't look evil, but —"

"But what?" said Connor in a squawking voice. He realized his mouth hadn't moved when he talked. He reached up to where the sound had come from: the top of his suddenly bald, slick head. His glove had torn to reveal rubbery, fleshy webbing between grey fingers, and his fingernails were detaching and falling off. Then something snaky brushed against his leg. He whirled in panic. Fianna jumped out of the way. He caught sight of something long and flexible, attached to his spine above the legs.

He grabbed it and they all stared. It looked like a thick extension of his torso, slimming to a pair of sideways fins. Very much like a dolphin's tail.

Fianna stood holding a small potion-vial and wearing a dumbfounded

expression. "Uh, Connor?"

Connor pulled off the bugproof shirt so that he wore just a thin vest on his chest. His pants had torn in the back to make room for the big, heavy tail. His arms were hairless and grey. Other than that, he felt fine. "Powerful stuff," he said, resting against the wall. When he spoke his forehead buzzed and he became more aware of the beaklike snout that jutted out in front of his eyes.

"You're strangely calm about this," Lugh said.

Connor shuddered. "I thank the alcohol. But I was in a lot of pain just now. This is surprising but it doesn't hurt."

Lugh examined another wine bottle. "This has a 'J' seal, as though it were made by him, not for him."

"I don't think I can undo this change myself," said Fianna.

Connor turned around and felt the tail — his tail! — move with him. He couldn't get his shield to stay comfortably on his arm, so he left it and switched to the two-handed spear, which was scratching against something on his back.

Fianna looked behind him. "You have a fin, too!"

It felt like a rubbery block attached to his back, flexible and pointed. "Weren't you the one telling me to have fin?"

She razzed him.

Connor counted his blessings. He looked for the scar left by a manticore's claws last year and didn't see it. If anything, he felt better than he had in years! As long as he was still alive, there were more important things to worry about, like keeping the others safe. Curse-breaking could come later; it wasn't the first time one of them had been hit with some kind of unwanted magic. "For the moment I'm fine. Let's go on."

* 5. Fianna *

She was still tired from the flowers, although seeing Connor spontaneously turn into a dolphin-man was an eye-opener. She let him lead the way past the storeroom through more tunnels that looped around the pyramid. They found only another storage room full of seeds and tools, and no treasure to speak of. But in the hall that would take them back to the start, there was a little passage that led inward and down. At the end stood a sturdy oak door.

Fianna tugged Connor's tail to get his attention. Kind of as an excuse to feel it too: fishy but warm. She motioned him to step back. Connor nodded and let her do her thing. So, Fianna crept ahead and listened at the door, inspected it, then looked at Lugh, saying, "Magic?"

Lugh shook his head. No obvious magical traps then. Fianna took out lockpicks and cracked the lock after a few minutes. She gave a hand sign for, "Ready?" and when they nodded, she opened the door.

There was a large stone room whose floor dropped sharply just past the door. Plants filled the pit, and they were twitching. Then a very large fanged flower reared up on a stalk covered in thorns, and gave a roar of challenge.

Fianna blinked and shut the door, leaning back against it. She yawned. "Normally I'd be all for jumping down there and getting the hell beaten out of me by giant demon plant tentacles, but today I'm just not up for it." She had Lugh block the door while she rummaged through her pockets.

"What's the plan?" squeaked Connor.

Fianna pulled out two vials and mixed them. She opened the door, threw the vials at the bellowing flower monster, shut the door, and counted to three.

The whole pyramid seemed to shake with the explosion. "Better living through alchemy."

Connor whistled. "That works."

Fianna opened the door cautiously, only to have it fall off its hinges into the room. Down there the oversized bouquet was roasted and petals decorated the walls. She hopped down, pulled out a telescoping rod, and poked at what was left. "It's dead, Lugh."

Lugh made a ramp down into the room, letting Connor go next. Fianna found the remains of a shelf and some fancy vases and bottles that had been on it. "Oops," she said. At least there was also a big wooden treasure chest — finally something worthwhile to loot! So she pried that open, too hastily. Some mechanism inside the thing threw a cloud of pollen at her face.

Fianna fell back sputtering and flopped down on the charred floor, with the powder tickling her nose and eyes. She would've checked the lock if she hadn't already been so sleepy... yeah, sleep sounded good now.

Lugh shook her, doing something meanwhile to the pollen in the air. "Get up." But Fianna just flopped, unable to keep her eyes open as Lugh shouted distantly, "She's had a double dose!"

She dreamed of the island, and of the wizard walking around it preparing strange defenses. The pyramid was covered with enchanted, dangerous grapevines and the trees came to life to eat people. Jardin himself sat in an evil throne room guarded by a giant demon plant, plotting to curse and poison people with his wine. But Fianna was too tired even to dream, and started to sink past sleep.

After a while she started coughing in the dark. She didn't much care until someone started shaking her too. That made Fianna flail one arm, which didn't move right, and open her eyes.

Lugh looked down at her with a weird expression. Could it be he was actually smiling? "You're all right! I thought —"

Connor definitely had a grin on his beaked face, but he didn't seem to mean it. "I'm sorry," he said. Lugh even hugged her!

"Sorry for what?" Fianna asked, sitting up. There was a weight propping her up from behind, but everything felt wrong, and her voice —

"Oh, you didn't!" She batted at her face. Her hand brushed against whiskers and a bulky shape sticking out with her nose at the end of it.

Lugh now looked puzzled as he crouched beside her. Connor said, "We couldn't find anything in your pack to help, so we tried the wine."

"Should've checked the second left pocket on my belt," Fianna grouched, with a

low growly sound. She scratched the black fuzz of her flat chest. There was an odd scent along with the drifting smoke of the explosion. "Hey, what exactly did it do to me?"

Fianna stood up and nearly fell over, but the long new tail kept her balanced on big, clawed feet that stuck out from the front of her boots. She grabbed the tail, covered in sleek black fur, and said, "Something like... a cat?" Then the facts came together for her: the broad set of her shoulders, the skinny chest, the deep voice.

For *him*. "A... cat-man?"

Lugh stared, blushing. "After all that — why? We almost lose you and then you're a male all of the sudden, and an animal!"

Fianna said, "Cool it, Lugh," and laid one clawed hand on his shoulder, but Lugh turned and stepped away, shaking his head. "What's gotten into you?" Fianna said. At the back of Fianna's mind he felt like panicking, but making sure Lugh was all right was more important, and Connor had survived drinking the wine. If Fianna thought too much he'd probably be confused and scared, followed by dead, so the solution was to get back to work. Fianna picked up his stuff, realized how poorly all his clothes fit, decided he really didn't want to think about exactly where and why, and rearranged everything as well as possible.

When Lugh turned back to them his face was a locked door again, making it more obvious how upset he'd looked before. "I'm all right," he said, shutting his eyes for a moment.

Connor was watching the entrance above them, and a charred oak door on the far wall. "Jardin could be here any moment."

"Another door?" Fianna was still surprised by his own voice. The echo of it didn't sound the way it did inside his own head. Whatever! Awkwardly, Fianna strode over to the door and attacked the lock with his lockpicks. These new catty fingers felt too big. Each click of his claws against the door startled him, making his weird pointy ears flick to catch the sound. At last the lock shifted and he smiled, feeling newly sharp teeth. "Got it."

Lugh came over from rummaging through the halls. He held a few torn sheets of paper. "I found something. The end of a mage's notes."

"Jardin's?" said Connor.

"No," said Lugh. "Someone else who came through here." Fianna backed away from the unlocked door and let Lugh read:

"He's caught the others one by one. Poor Rogg. I thought he was dead, and I'd already mourned him, but he came back as a mossy giant shooting burning needles. I had to kill him myself. That bastard Jardin is going to pay. As soon as I've rested here and refreshed my spells, I'll make sure of that."

Fianna turned around slowly. There were bits of leaves and roots splattered everywhere. His stomach churned; they might've once been a person. "Where did you find those notes?"

Lugh said, "In a shredded journal. There were bits of clothing but not even bones."

Connor whistled. "Got shot with needles by his changed friend, and turned into something himself, maybe."

Lugh nodded grimly. "Jardin hunted them down."

"Stop it!" said Fianna, hands on his knees, head shaking, tail lashing. "We're going to be — we'll be fine. Lugh, let's have your best magic barrier in front of us as we move."

"We could just leave," said Lugh. "While we can."

Connor pointed at the door with his spear. "Let's finish this."

Lugh said, "He must be waiting below."

Fianna looked to Connor to decide, but realized Connor was standing there working his triangular jaw and nervously feeling his new sharp teeth with his tongue. Lugh was sullen and fidgeting with his fighting-oar, not really wanting to advance or retreat.

Fianna shut his eyes and sighed. "I don't want to run, not now, and I don't want an evil wizard *behind* me. Let's open that door."

At this the others sprung into motion. Fianna pushed the door open.

* 6. Lugh *

Immediately Lugh put up a dim ward against spells of the crude projectile kind, just in case. Since stealth wasn't their strong suit today, Fianna tossed a pebble down the wooden stairs beyond the door. It rattled and bumped with what seemed like terrible loudness. Lugh winced, expecting some horrible hybrid beast to pounce it, but nothing reacted. They were all walking into some kind of trap, even so.

Connor seemed to sense this, and crept first down the stairs. Lugh went last, shuddering at Fianna's tail twitching in front of him. The stairs and the hall below seemed grown rather than built, and the wood gave faintly at each step.

Below stood an underground garden. The wooden ceiling was partly translucent, letting sunbeams through from the exterior garden above, apparently straight through the soil as well. The light shimmered down onto rows of jagged-leaved plants. Their scent was faintly fragrant, making them all stop. Lugh sniffed cautiously, then gave an "Okay" sign. Fianna stood there basking in the sunlight. Beams highlighted... ugh, *his* fur like velvet. Lugh sighed. He'd always wanted to talk with Fianna about anything other than traveling and treasure-hunting, but they were always busy on their adventures or planning for the next. He'd never worked up the courage to ask for more of Fianna's attention, and now he felt he'd lost the chance. If they got out of here and broke the spell on the other two, Lugh would try talking more to them. For now his friends were cursed. He had to keep on guard; they needed him.

Connor tousled Fianna's ears and Fianna purred, then looked surprised at the sound. He went back to business, wielding a knife and a boomerang.

The next room was a laboratory dominated by a wooden table, covered with scrolls, bottles, and potted plants. There was a device Lugh didn't recognize that had a tube aimed at a leaf trapped between glass plates. To one side was a dank little room with a skeleton in a cage. No time to investigate yet. And through another doorway —

"Jardin," Fianna whispered. Lugh hurried forward, ready to fight, and saw a

bedroom. A man lay on the oaken bed with his stringy white hair loose and his wrinkled fingers clutching green sheets. A staff rested in the corner.

Fianna made a grabbing motion with one of the distance-grabbing gloves, which barely fit on his larger, clawed hand. Instead of flying over to him, the staff scraped across the floor and clattered down, striking green sparks. Fianna yelped and said, "Grab it!"

Lugh lurched forward, snatched the staff, and crashed into the wall. Green energy swirled around him but he was afraid of what it'd do if he let go. Connor stepped toward the bed, ready with his spear.

The old man in the bed didn't move.

Fianna poked him. Nothing. "Dead?"

"An illusion?" asked Connor, looking quickly over one shoulder.

Lugh looked at the man's magic-saturated body and its faint ties to the staff and something in the laboratory — treasured items, probably. "No sign of trickery. He's either dead or very good at faking it." Lugh would have liked to meet him, to see what he could do, even if it immediately ended in violence. Whatever Jardin's skills had been like to witness face to face, no one would see them again.

Fianna stomped the floor. "Somebody already killed him? They why didn't the islanders know?"

"Looks like he died in his sleep," said Connor.

Lugh thought. "Everyone was afraid of him. Depending on the timing, he could have been dead for years and no one would care." He shook his head. Of course they wouldn't care, except to cheer his death and loot the place. Like they were doing. "No one would know, I mean."

Fianna prodded Jardin again. Connor said, "Quit poking the dead wizard."

"I want to see something," said Lugh, and stepped back into the laboratory. The glow of Jardin's soul-connection led him to a shelf of books. "Plants: The Time and Life Series. Green Wizard Needs Food. The Green Miles. Journal."

Lugh pulled that last one from the shelf and ran his hands along a cover made of smooth, warm leaves bound with linen. (Much nicer than the library of the necromancer they'd once fought.) He flipped to near the end and began to read while the others looked over his shoulder.

"My next army will be both plant and animal. The new spell will warp bodies and minds to serve me..." Pages of notes followed.

"How convenient: test subjects have come to me. Unfortunately one escaped into the sea during his change, but I can at least watch from here as my new monster ravages the Arbre Islands on its own."

Connor squeaked. "The thing that washed ashore at the Salted Place."

"Blast," Lugh read. *"The villagers banded together and used some sort of local folk magic, and a lot of pointy sticks and fire. How dull. I wish there were more suitable subjects."*

He went on: *"My own age is showing. It may be a preposterous idea, but if I were to invent a milder version of the curse, it could be an indirect way to restore myself! I've stumbled across a fountain of youth... Blast, again! I didn't think it through. Of course I couldn't use it on myself."*

Lugh looked up from the book. "Every wizard has blind spots. Apparently one of his was on who he could affect." Lugh read again.

"Not even the indirect approach works. I had hoped to put the enchantment into potion form and use it that way, making myself young again by accepting the random changes of the 'curse'. But even the potion is useless on myself. The surviving prisoner is two-thirds mad, but perhaps if I could teach him the spell..."

Fianna glanced in the direction of the alcove with the caged skeleton. "I guess that went badly."

"I tore what flesh was left from the fool's bones. He had just enough of a mind to hear my demand and spit and hiss in response. I need a proper apprentice to learn the spell and use it on me. Then I will have my health back, and then I can return to my work of conquest! It won't matter how the spell changes me; I will be in peak form again."

Lugh stared at the last written pages, reading them with wide eyes. "What?" said Fianna.

"Some time passed before Jardin wrote any more." Lugh went on.

"After a life spent seeking power, I find that no one will trust me as their master. I now lack the strength to search for pupils on my own, and those I try to summon by various means all resist me despite my promises of magic and youth. The only exception was the one boy driven by vengeance and easily tempted to serve me, but who immediately turned on me like a viper. Much like I would have done in his position long ago. Since no one can be found to listen to me, learn from me, and master the transformation spell so that it can be cast on me, I am alone and helpless against Time itself.

"And so, I will make some use of my powers to make some last mark on the world. Not to bend others to my will; there's no further point in that. Instead, this will be... a gift. I will take my best wine and lace it with the spell that will make its drinker a healthy youth along with whatever unwanted change it does to them. A bit of fur or even bark is worth it. The magic is no good to me, but I might at least be remembered for making it, instead of for my other deeds.

"A crate of the wine is ready. I will try floating it to the islands tomorrow, with an explanation, and then... then perhaps someone will accept my apology, and come to visit this old man."

Lugh paused. "That's where it ends."

Fianna's whiskers twitched. "That can't be the end! He died trying to curse the islanders and that's it?"

Connor said, "I'm not sure it's a curse."

"Look at us!" said Fianna.

Connor did, making clicking sounds. "After all the venom and poison of this place's defenses, I'm a healthy young man with a long life to look forward to. From the looks of things, so are you."

Fianna shuddered. "He didn't mention an antidote. Of all the ways to heal the sick!"

"And I liked fish anyway."

At this Fianna cracked a nervous smile. "You look okay, at least."

"As do you. Lugh, tell Fianna this isn't all bad."

Lugh stared at Fianna and felt tears in his eyes, which made no sense. He just wanted Fianna to be alive and happy, so it was stupid of him to care that the girl he'd known had become... this fuzzy thing. Fianna didn't belong to him.

"Hey," Fianna said. "Lugh, it's all right."

Lugh sniffed and saw the cat-person's eyes looking back at him with concern. Fianna was there for him, and always had been.

"Thank you," Lugh said. "Do you... suppose the wine would help my leg?"

Fianna looked at his bad leg. "You'd drink it just for that?"

He met Fianna's eyes. "No." It was better to join the others in being changed than to be left apart from them.

Connor went to get a bottle, leaving Lugh with Fianna in the dead wizard's laboratory. In Jardin's home and crypt.

Lugh looked through the clutter and said, "There's the wine, and a formula for it on these scrolls. We could help a lot of people with this and get rich, even without whatever else is here."

Fianna nodded. "Are you sure you want to do this? You don't know what will happen. We could be stuck like this." Fianna started to get a panicked look.

Lugh said, "But we'll stick together, right?"

Fianna was distracted from worry. "Yeah. We'll find other places to go."

Lugh looked back at the peacefully dead man. "He wasn't all bad, then. Not in the end."

Fianna tugged thoughtfully at his whiskers. "But if Jardin had never gotten old, he might've stayed evil. And if we give the wine to people, what'll happen? They

might be better off dying peacefully."

Lugh blinked. "You'd rather be dead?"

"Well... no. I wouldn't."

"Good!" Lugh was surprised at how forcefully he said it. "Anyway, the old and sick people we save will gang up on the occasional evil wizard we also save, right? Just like at the Salted Place. That's better than us deciding they should all just die because we're afraid of the consequences, I think."

Connor returned, saying, "Besides, who would take an evil warlord seriously with such a ridiculous tail as yours?"

Fianna said, "You're one to talk."

"Give me that water vial. I'm all dried out."

Lugh let himself smile, listening to their banter, but then he thought of his bad leg, his bald head, his many scars. For those he had the wine. For the nightmares he had his friends. He raised a toast to them, and drank.

Lugh knew something of what to expect, but the feeling of fur crawling across his skin still startled him. When his ears twitched and a huge tail sprouted from his spine he nearly fainted. Fianna distracted him from the fear by reaching out to scratch his fuzzy chest.

Which started to feel soft and nice, as it swelled...

Lugh saw the others getting taller, or maybe it was himself shrinking a bit. He was stretching and squashing in strange places, but Fianna and Connor were there for him and had been through much the same thing.

Lugh shut *her* eyes for a minute, wrapped in Fianna's warm arms as her change finished.

Connor squeaked. "Not bad. A squirrel, I'd say. Very mobile."

When Fianna let Lugh go and squeezed her fuzzy hand, Lugh took a few steps. A different gait, big tail, and strong legs made her trip and end up in an upside-

down heap against the wall, laughing with the others.

Lugh stood and hugged Fianna, trying to see the girl she'd known. The same smile was there on that new feline muzzle, which was getting closer. Fianna's snout bumped against Lugh's own and both of them blushed. Lugh stammered, "I never got to ask if you, um..."

Fianna murmured. "Liked you? Of course, silly. I was afraid to ask, too. These bodies are strange, but I suspect I can get to..."

Lugh glanced over at Connor, who had a grin plastered on that dolphin face of his. "Ah, just say it!" the man said. "Fianna, are you or are you not tempted to jump in the sack with the cute squirrel-mage?"

Lugh and Fianna sputtered, but Fianna eventually nodded.

Lugh had been embarrassed enough today that she went for it at last, leaning forward to kiss her friend and see what it was like. Warm, musky, confusing, and something she wanted to learn a lot more about.

Connor said, "We do need to make sure we leave without getting killed by any other stray traps, you know. Jardin didn't bother to disable everything on his way out of this world."

Lugh nodded. They all had plenty of time, if they were at least as young and healthy as they'd been going into this place.

They soon found that when Lugh created walls and ramps of magic, the energy he summoned was no longer a dim red, but bright and golden.

When they got back to the shore, there was a bit of trouble hacking their canoe free from stray killer vines, but the three dealt with that. The real challenge was in loading up the loot, plotting how best to use it, and burying a bottle of good wine in the grave they'd dug for a bad man.

A Walk In the Park

Jake grumbled at the gate to Adventure Studios, where he was holding a free pass. He'd looked forward all week to using it. But once he drove all the way out here, he learned that there was a special Christmas and New Year's event going on for the rest of the year, and his voucher didn't apply. He'd argued with the gate clerk's manager, then stomped away to think about their offer to sell him a half-price weekend ticket. Fine, he decided; it was better than missing out completely. He shelled out the money and tried to shake off his bad mood.

The whole park was relentlessly decked out in Christmas stuff. Fake snow, candy canes, and speakers blaring absolutely every standard carol. All despite the place being in Florida, and seventy degrees and sunny. It was weird walking around in a t-shirt past piles of cotton snow! The rides were all open, but mobbed with tourists. Jake stood in line for forty-five minutes or so for a ride that was just a 3D-ish movie with water jets and confetti being blown at him for some reason, for five minutes. Blah. He tested out one of the roller coasters for more excitement. Forty-five minutes to wait, five minutes of terror.

Why did this place have to be so popular and crowded? Jake sighed and gave up on the rides for now. Adventure Studios was overrun with people, so that he kept banging into someone whenever he moved without glancing over one shoulder. Blah! He couldn't let a bad start spoil his whole trip. He needed to relax.

He dodged away from the worst crowds and found himself in one of the restaurants, the Doorway Cafe. Doors everywhere, ranging from ornate temple gateways to glowing blue and orange holes in the wall. Jake thought it was a pretty good place, even if what it sold was mostly the same overpriced burgers as every other restaurant in the theme park. And even though finding the men's room was hell.

He still had the free pass he'd gotten as an early Christmas present. It was a fancy plastic card, faintly translucent and glittery. Although it hadn't been what he hoped for at the entrance gate, there might be another benefit to it. The park

sold "fast passes" that were kind of obnoxious but useful, letting the owner cut in line at any ride. Maybe the special card counted as one of those. He shrugged; it was worth a shot. He ate a quick meal to help calm down and ignore the throngs of people walking by. Once he was done, he stretched and headed out to take another shot at the rides.

He'd started his weekend adventure right after work, so it was dusk already and starting to get dark. The park looked strange at this hour. The unreal haze of the slanting sun helped make the fake stage-set buildings look more natural, so that he could pretend he was really in an Arabian market that happened to have a roller coaster.

Which was a little odd, because he wasn't in the market area anymore. He'd *entered* the Doorway Cafe through it, but had left by a different exit. This one had taken him to a whole other district of the park. The buildings here were in a bright cartoonish style. They looked full of energy, practically ready to leap off of their foundations and bounce along to a happy song. The winding street of gift shops and restaurants made a nice contrast to the Arabian zone and whatever that spooky castle in the distance was.

The castle looked interesting. He wandered in that general direction and past a fried-dough stand. There didn't seem to be much of a line outside, so it looked like a welcome break from standing around. He dodged around another cart selling whole turkey legs, then stopped at a rope barrier he hadn't noticed.

There was a whole zigzag waiting area for people to stand around in, like he'd been doing for other rides, but this one was empty. Jake thought he'd just seen someone walk in, and there was no obvious "Closed" sign, so he shrugged and ducked under a few rows of empty guardrails. The line led from the castle exterior into a dungeon, with torches on the walls. It took him a moment to recognize that they were electric. The effect would've been neat except that there were also flat-panel TVs to amuse the guests while they were waiting.

So was the ride open or not? The TVs were off and nobody else was here. For that matter, which ride was this? Jake pulled out his park map, which gleamed eerily in the fake torchlight. He was in the Cartoon Zone, and so this must be... Mouse Quest Castle. One of the movies this area was based on, was about a bunch of adventurers who'd been turned into mice by a witch's curse. There was no actual ride listed here, though; the map was outdated.

Jake shrugged and headed farther down the tunnel to find out whether this was a roller coaster or a motion simulator or what. Other than one sign warning people away if they were bothered by flashing lights, there wasn't much to indicate that he was even in a theme park. Jake pulled a silver pocketwatch from his back pocket and realized he'd been walking through this castle for ten minutes. There was a grinding noise ahead, and dripping water, but when he got to the actual ride, no one was working there. He'd come to a tunnel that led into darkness, with a set of carts on a track. They were rolling along and pausing briefly at the loading area as though nothing were wrong.

Jake called out, "Hello?" Considering that the attendants were basically only there to keep some kid or stupid person from hurting themselves, he might as well see what this thing was. He took out a large wooden sign and a marker from somewhere, set them down, and wrote "Unattended Ride — Use At Own Risk" for anybody else who walked in. He hopped into a cart, thought better of it, and hopped back out to attach a complaints box to the sign plus some paper and pencils. There! He flicked his ears backward, got back on the ride and let the cart carry him away into the tunnel.

Creepy music started up. He hadn't seen the movie this place was based on, but it seemed scarier than typical cartoon fare. The lyrics were something about ravenous cats prowling for prey. He actually found himself ducking in his seat when the special effects started up. Lots of flame jets and swinging blades and feline shadows. The cart sped up and the track veered this way and that through a dungeon. There was even a scent of dust and dripping water down here in the dark. An experience that had started out as a vaguely gothy version of "It's A Small World After All" had started to become a roller coaster... And he was all alone in the tunnels.

It was a relief when the cart finally stopped. Jake had been in the dark so long that the lights of the exit station seemed surreal, like blacklights making everything from the walls to his skin glow. The last area had featured an evil cat king about to eat him. Jake had felt like he was clawing at the seat, more scared than he had any right to be. He managed to laugh. "That was not a kids' ride," he said, as the cart's safety bar released. He got up and stretched...

Just in time for the cart to plummet into darkness with him standing in it.

* * *

Jake woke up lying painfully on his back, in a dark room. He sat up, saw an odd glow around his hands, and held them up. They were shining as though under a blacklight again. But stranger yet, they were grey, there were little claws at the ends, and two fingers on each hand had been squashed together into one. Jake yelped and scrambled to his feet. A whiplike tail behind him caught his attention next, and it wouldn't pull loose when he yanked at it. It was as though he'd been doused in glowing paint and decorated like a mouse! He tried to brush away the grey fur painted along his arms, but the stuff wouldn't come off. The faint light overhead had that same unreal quality that made everything glow without really helping him to see his surroundings. That had to be why he looked like this, yeah, plus nerves. He laughed. He'd get out of here and tell everyone it was an awesome ride, very convincing.

The only door out of this little spot was locked. He pounded on it and shouted, but no one came. What was going on? He looked around and realized that the room looked like a fantasy castle's version of a broom closet, with a glowing oversize key on a high shelf. He tried to hop up to the thing and fell over backwards onto the stone floor, hard enough that he thought he'd be badly hurt. Instead, though, he felt like he'd been squashed against the floor for a moment and sprung back up without a scratch. Weird! Even so, he couldn't grab the key. In frustration he took out a battleaxe and just smashed the door down.

He blinked. "Wait a minute. Where did I get this?!"

Jake was holding an unreasonably big steel axe notched from heavy use, with a tiny scrawled inscription reading "Property Of Ulfgar". It glowed like everything else in here. Come to think of it, where had he gotten that sign earlier, or the pocketwatch? The door was laying in pieces on the floor. Jake dropped the axe so that he didn't get arrested or something, then hurried out. He glanced back into the room and saw that the axe had vanished, like it had stopped existing as soon as he wasn't paying attention to it.

A feline hiss distracted him. He was back along the ride's tunnel, and for all he knew, the special effects were more real than they should be. He stumbled through the darkness toward where he'd been literally dropped off. An empty cart whooshed past, but it was too fast to get into. Finally he made it back through a long and winding hall that led to the station, and hopped out to relatively normal ground. "Hello!?" Still, no one was here. At least there was an exit! He could get out of this weird light and figure out what had happened to

him.

The outdoor air was a little chilly. Night had fallen. People were still walking around, though a lot fewer than before. He peeked out from a doorway, then looked back down at himself and gasped. He hadn't changed back! Despite leaving the castle and whatever special effects it was using to make him look like a mouse, he still had glowing fuzzy skin and a tail! The streetlights overhead were normal but his rodent hide still looked like something from a cartoon. He said to himself, "Okay, apparently I'm seeing things." He wondered whether to try walking in the open and risk being seen. Why not?

A mother beamed at him and said, "Hey, look! It's one of the mascots. Wave hello, dear!" Her kid waved meekly. Jake waved back, confused. He supposed he did fit in pretty well with the toon castle theme, if he was glowing and mousy like this. So had he been sneakily dressed in a costume and doused in special paint, or what? Hopefully somebody around here would know. He walked down the toon-city street and headed for the next area of the park, in search of answers.

He hesitated at the bridge where cartoonish colors gave way to dark jungle wood. The air was felt vaguely tense along the border, as though crossing it was special, somehow. He took out a giant, ancient-looking scroll from his back pocket and... "Now wait a minute." He glanced back and found he wasn't actually wearing pants anymore, just a long and vaguely medieval tunic. Great; not even the gift shops sold pants! He took a few steps, trying to figure out where he'd have the best chance of finding someone in charge... and stepped across the bridge without meaning to.

Jake shivered and felt fur bristling along his tail. He marveled at being able to feel the thing curling behind him at all. "I have stripes, now?" It didn't look mousy anymore, and neither did his paws. He glanced at the map again. He'd crossed over into the Lost Temple Zone, full of towering trees and jungle drums. That kind of matched what he was seeing on his own body now: orange and black stripes all along his arms and tail, like... "A tiger. I've turned from a mouse into a big cat." He darted off of the main pathway, into the trees that hid the park's maintenance sheds and other behind-the-scenes equipment. He needed a moment to hide and think.

Though he'd expected time to catch his breath, the changes kept going. His

medieval tunic was shifting now too. Starting to look like a ragged, buttoned shirt tied up around his chest to leave his midriff bare. He was going to get arrested for running around half-naked. Yeesh! He whipped out a needle and thread, tore down some big leaves from the trees, and quickly made a proper skirt for himself so there wouldn't be any lovestruck explorer guys expecting him to pounce on them.

Jake stood in the little jungle, starting to count just how many things were wrong with what he'd just done and thought. Now that he looked himself over again, that shirt looked awfully puffy around the chest, and the top button looked ready to burst. He poked at his chest with his hands, trying not to use the sharp little claws on his delicate fingers, and blushed. Considering how well the skirt fit around his hips, too... well, *her* hips, the latest changes had made her not just a tiger but a tiger-girl in a jungle outfit.

Jake shuddered. She had to get this situation dealt with somehow! She dashed back across the bridge to try undoing the latest change first... Whew! She found herself turning back into a mouse, not that that counted as normal. The jungle finery was shifting back too, into the peasant tunic he'd had in the castle.

That was progress. Maybe if he concentrated on keeping his clothes the same, sort of like how he'd kept his props around for as long as he focused on them, he could stick to mouse form. He took a deep breath, crossed the jungle bridge, and immediately became a slinky tigress again. "Oh, come on!" There was even a flower in her hair.

Park guests were staring at her. The attention was strangely nice, like basking in a sunbeam.

"Hey, miss! How does that costume work?"

It took Jake a while to figure out that the guy over there was talking to her. She blushed. "What costume?"

The tourist laughed. "In-character, I see. Makes sense for a toon."

When the man had walked on, Jake asked herself, "Is that what I am? A cartoon character?" It would explain a few things, sort of. "If that's true then I should be able to..." She pulled out a stone-tipped spear from... someplace. It had felt like reaching into a strange, cold space hidden behind her back. She chuckled the

spear into a nearby tree and used it as a springboard to vault into the treetops, before realizing she could do that too. She lurked in the branches, tail lashing, thinking vaguely about dinner as she looked down on the park guests.

"Psst." A man in a yellow suit leaned casually against a trunk, twenty feet off the ground.

Jake nearly fell from her perch. "How'd you get up here?" He didn't look like another toon.

He flashed a badge. "Park security. We can go anywhere. Anywhere." The man gave an insincere smile. "Apparently you've been into a spot you shouldn't have reached."

"The ride looked open! At least I saw somebody else going in, and the ride was running. What's happening to me?"

"You saw one of our technicians, working on the special equipment. At Adventure Studios we bring people movie magic. People don't quite understand how sincere we are about that. Usually it's hidden behind animatronics and other stagecraft."

Jake looked down at her glowing body. "So I'm literally a cartoon character now?"

"Of course. Experimental procedure. It was meant to be more subtle, for a new group of park mascots, but you got the full dose when you blundered into the castle. So, you live here now. You're hired."

Jake hopped over to the man's branch, which swayed under them. She was able to keep her balance easily with a single twitch of that long striped tail. "Wait a minute. I never signed up for this. Change me back!"

The security guy said, "We ripped a hole in the laws of physics. It's not that easy to put everything back the way it was. Look on the bright side, though; there are advantages to being a toon."

Jake thought back to all the cartoons she'd watched, all the adventures the characters had had without ever getting hurt for more than a scene. Her head spun at the thought of getting to keep doing what she'd done in the last few

minutes, like climbing this tree with nothing but a spear she'd *summoned* because it fit a theme.

She said, "Am I cursed to be a mouse or a tiger full-time, then?"

The man shrugged. "You can be whatever the park needs. You've crossed over from the toon castle district to the jungle, and noticed the changes there, right? Try walking toward the Mars Mania ride or the Robot Riderz Xtream Arkayd or Chef Veggie's FableTable Show and you'll adapt."

There was some loony logic to what had happened. "One form per area," she said. "What will I become in each place? Can I control it?"

"This is new 'technology' to us too. It seems to give people forms they're reasonably happy with, so apparently you don't mind too much. You make a fine tigress, I must say."

An angel and a devil, both feline, poofed into existence on Jake's shoulders and started arguing with each other. Jake let them handle it instead of just fainting, which she'd been about to do. Her foot-claws dug into the branch beneath her. "What about when I go outside the park?"

Another smile. "I said, you live here now. The..." He lowered his voice. "The spell doesn't seem to sustain a toon anywhere past parking lot B. But hey, there are plenty of places you can live while you work here, and there are bound to be new attractions built over the decades."

"Decades," said Jake. Stuck here forever? It might actually be forever, so long as the theme park existed.

"Hey, don't feel bad. It'll be fun. You get to participate in special events like the Christmas... uh, Holiday Parade. Why don't you come down and check it out? It should be starting soon by the Congo Cruise."

Jake didn't know what to make of all this. There was a bit of tiger instinct pushing her, though, or maybe cartoon-logic instinct. Instead of calmly making her way back down the tree, she tackled the security guy, pulled out a trampoline in midair, tossed it down, and bounced with him a couple of times before landing on all fours with a big toothy grin and a lashing tail. "Okay then," she said. "If I'm working here, I have free run of the place. Want to dispute that part of my

'contract'?"

The man's suit was disheveled and he was shaking, brushing bits of glowing toon fur off it. "Y-yes, of course. I mean, it's fine."

"And free room and board."

"Yes, though I'm not sure you even need to eat."

"Then I'm off!" She bounded away from him to go exploring without any more hand-holding. There'd be plenty of time to figure this toon thing out. It could be fun.

The jungle land gave way to more fake snow. People in ordinary costumes were lining up to show off in stilts and princess gowns and other boring gigs. Unlike them, she'd get to strut around as a tigress! She scratched around her ears, wondering why her head felt heavy all of the sudden. She got her answer when the antlers came in, and when her fingers turned into hoofy things. No more stripes! Now she was getting an implausible furry dress and sweater that left her legs bare, down to her new foot-hooves. Red-and-white Santa gear on brown fur. "Reindeer!" she said, and laughed. There was a lot of potential here to be something new, to change with the seasons and her mood.

Jake grinned, and hopped into the parade line for the first of many times.

A Family Tradition

"Am I going to be in the family club now?" Andrea asked, as she fidgeted with several sets of clothes in the apartment's bedroom. The sweatpants didn't seem appropriate for her first Christmas Eve on Zeke's family's farm, but the dresses wouldn't be warm enough.

Zeke leaned over her shoulder and kissed her on the ear, making her shiver. "They weren't sure about you. Told me you weren't the one, but you kept proving otherwise. That time with Mom at the hospital especially."

"Then are they going to let me in? Two years since we met, two months since the wedding, and I still feel like they're trying to shoo me away whenever I see them." Secrecy was her worst complaint against the Eisen family. She didn't mind that Zeke was so adamant about having time to himself every so often, but there were inside jokes the family swapped that she never understood, and she hardly knew his parents.

"Ma and Pa said they'd be honored to have you there. You don't have to dress formally though." Zeke grinned as though the very idea were ridiculous.

Andrea grabbed sweatpants after all. "Your great family Christmas tradition involves dancing around the maypole naked rather than in hooded robes, then?"

"You have no idea." Zeke suddenly looked nervous, running his hands through his prematurely grey hair. The rest of him was young and frisky. "I don't know if you'll like it, though."

It was her turn to kiss him. "Just let me see. It's not blood sacrifices to the devil or anything, I hope?" She saw his horrified headshake, no, and added, "Then I'm sure I'll be all right."

* * *

Andrea drove down Harrisburg Pike to find the family's house. Zeke had gone ahead yesterday; he had studying to do for his last year of law school. The Eisen place was one of many farms dotting the land between forested hills. The local church was one of the more permissive Mennonite groups; power lines crossed the fields, and cars with bumpers painted black "for humility" stood on the dirt driveways. Andrea spotted Zeke's beat-up van and turned off the road.

Pa Eisen (or so he'd always been to her) greeted her at the door. "You brought wine! That's good of you. We'll lap that right up, ha ha."

Linda squeezed past the big, bearded man. "There's supposed to be snow tonight. Want me to pick anything else up before that?"

He clapped her on the shoulder, saying, "Don't worry about it. We're in for the night no matter what."

The house lacked electricity but for a few hand-cranked gadgets Zeke had bought his parents. Andrea liked the feeling of stepping back in time whenever she visited, especially since Zeke's grandparents had given in and installed toilets a generation ago. The place had a lived-in, faintly animal smell and its rooms seemed arranged to bring people together.

She hugged white-haired Ma Eisen, who immediately took her aside. "There's a privacy curtain we put up on nights like this, in case we want to get to the barn. Mind helping?"

Puzzled, Andrea helped her carry a pile of tarps out to where a set of poles marked the path from the back porch to the barn. Ma explained, "Nobody's nearby to the south, but on the north side we have the Hochmanns, and they're a bit nosy, bless them."

Andrea followed Ma's lead and hung up the tarps to block the view to one side. "You must have some wild parties."

Ma gave a youthful giggle. "I married Pa without knowing much about the Eisen way. Tell me, ah, are you and my Zeke well and truly married?" The woman blushed, so that Andrea could tell what she really meant.

Trying to be equally delicate about it, Andrea said, "Yes, the honeymoon was... busy."

"We're not wasting your time, then. And you can be sure my Zeke won't go running around behind your back. He'd probably trip anyway." She laughed again for some reason.

Andrea forced a smile. She still felt like an outsider. The family was trying to include her, though, and she owed it to them to be patient. "Can I help you with the cooking?"

"Yes, indeed!"

An hour later, Zeke emerged from his little bedroom, the one he'd grown up in. "Contracts, contracts," he said, setting down a law textbook. He perked up when he spotted Andrea. "Sorry to keep you waiting, hon." He turned toward Pa and looked suddenly like a kid. "Do I get to tell the story this year?"

Pa smiled. "Seems appropriate if you're studying deals gone wrong."

"Sun's going down!" Ma called from the porch.

Pa said, "Let's sit. You're going to want a drink for this, miss Andrea."

They had all changed into pajamas and sweatclothes. The living room had no chairs, only large cushions and a few low tables. The decorations added to the room's out-of-place Middle Eastern theme, with framed inscrutable calligraphy and landscapes of desert ruins. Andrea settled onto a cushion next to Zeke with a wooden mug of hot spiced wine. Though he looked comfortable, he was trying to finish his drink quickly. The fireplace crackled, making up for the dimming sunlight.

Zeke took a drink, cleared his throat, and spoke. "Sometimes a man makes a really stupid bargain. But sometimes a man's so inept, he wraps around to being smart. That's how it was with Great-Great-Great-Grandpa Hans. The man lost a card game and gambled away his ticket to ride the *Titanic*. He fell down a mineshaft and found gold others had passed over. He tried to throw a boxing match, won by accident, then found that his friends had bet on him by mistake. Charmed life, that man. But then, one dark night, he tried to make a deal with the Devil. *Something* answered him."

Andrea startled, spilling a few drops of wine. "What? Is this another joke?" It wasn't funny.

Zeke leaned closer to hug Andrea. "Hear us out; it'll be all right." He went on: "Old Hans more or less got the wrong number. We've never known quite what force it was that heard him, but it didn't seem interested in hurting anyone. More like playing a prank."

Andrea winced. She'd somehow sat on her foot... no, that wasn't it. She wriggled and felt something slip out from behind her. A stray blanket? The dark fuzzy thing was tough to see in the shadow of the fireplace, but she could feel her hand brushing across it, as though it were attached to her spine.

Zeke let his story drop and brushed Andrea's ears, making them flick. "Ssh."

"What's happening?" she said. The fuzzy thing behind her was growing by the second, curling behind her like a snake. She tried to get a good view of it, and only gradually registered that it was a *tail*. She yelped.

Zeke hugged him and said, "You're a little ahead of me. But look at Ma for your answer."

Ma was crouching on all fours like an animal, with a similar dark fuzzy mass waving behind her. Her long white hair seemed to have grown so long that it flooded down her shirt and out from her sleeves, covering what Andrea could see of her arms and legs. The woman tugged down the back of her pants to let her own tail slip free. Even so, it all looked tight on her, and she was pulling her shirt off in full view of everyone.

Andrea looked at Pa in fright. His face was changing, pushing outward into a long shape like... like an animal's muzzle. His hair and beard were growing out into a continuous coat of dark grey fuzz.

Andrea yelped, then tried to stand up and run away. Instead she fell over onto all fours too. "My hands!" she said, looking down at them. Her thumbs were shifting around and her skin was prickling with a thickening layer of grey hair like Pa's and like Zeke's.

Zeke brushed little claws down her back and smiled with his growing muzzle. "Ssh. It's still me. Doesn't hurt, does it?"

"What did you do to me? What are you?" Andrea couldn't stand up properly; her hips were bending weirdly now to make standing on her hands and feet seem

more natural. Only Zeke's touch kept her from sprinting toward the door.

"Part-time wolves," he said, and nuzzled her. His nose was wet and cold, making her shiver when he brushed against the, the *fur* that was now covering her. He was having trouble using his hands as they began to change into lupine paws. Even so, he wriggled out of his shirt and pants and began to help Andrea out of hers.

"Werewolves?" she said, shuddering.

"Here." Zeke had used that joke before, and she'd had no idea he meant it this way. "But we don't hurt people."

She laughed hysterically, but the sound came out as a yip. She pinched herself and was surprised to find she still had thumbs of a sort, and that she'd just drawn blood with her claws. She looked around in search of something to prove she was dreaming, but Zeke's parents were almost completely wolfy. Ma looked huge next to Pa. Random colors, random sizes? Andrea ran her tongue along her sharpening teeth and said, "Not monsters?"

"No." Zeke nuzzled her. His voice was growly, oddly cute even in this shape. Andrea looked slightly down at him as they stood together. "There's another part of this change that might be a little uncomfortable, but again —"

She got distracted from his words when a sharp twinge struck low in her belly. It felt like she'd been tugged on, turned inside-out. Ma was going through the same thing, but when the same change hit Pa and Zeke, they started to look... softer, somehow. Zeke shifted his hindlegs, so that she was staring at him, at...

The man she'd married had definitely not had one of *those*, and the sight of it really should not have been giving her the sensation of a fuzzy sheath rapidly growing between her legs and swelling out, warm and needy. She yipped, hopping back away from him.

Zeke turned toward her. "So you noticed," he said, blushing through his fur. "This happens to all us Eisens. It's... kind of a perspective flip. I hope it's less of a shock than the wolf thing."

Andrea flopped down on her hindlegs, barely getting her tail out of the way. Her husband's voice was even a little higher. "Okay. Wolves. Does this mean magic

exists?" For his sake she tried not to panic at the deeper, growly tone of her own voice.

"Seems so," said Pa Eisen, a lean and curvy she-wolf. "We're all sorry for pulling you into this, but there was no good way to tell you. We're private folk, and we don't take relationships lightly." He stood up and stretched from fuzzy ears to heavy tail, showing off his long lupine body. Ma was ogling him.

"Can you forgive me?" Zeke asked. His ears drooped.

Andrea felt her ears do the same thing. "Am I stuck like this? I can't be. I mean you turned back. You were a human. And a man. We can't be stuck as wolves."

Ma nuzzled Andrea. "It was a shock for me, too."

Zeke said, "Around once a month, you'll have to change for most of a day. We'll teach you to hold it back or let it out so you don't sprout a tail and all in public." Zeke's forepaws kneaded his pillow, making him look as nervous as the day when he'd offered her a wedding ring. "I wanted you to be with family for your first change. You've got Christmas and the day after to learn how to control the curse. And then, if you never want to see me again..."

To calm herself down as well as him, Andrea stumbled back up to four feet and bumped her muzzle against his, trying to kiss him. None of it hurt, and she was with family. "Some advance notice would've been nice," she said. "Why wolves? Why this... other shift?"

Zeke said, "You're not mad?" His ears and tail made him look like an ashamed puppy.

She giggled nervously, and it came out like a low bark. "I'll forgive you if you explain what to do for clothes."

Ma said, "We tend to go without, since it's just us and not in public, but we do have a few of these." She reached into a basket, using her teeth and forepaws, and pulled out a sort of skirt with a large gap for a tail.

Andrea took a few wobbling steps and grabbed it, then wriggled around trying to flex enough to put the skirt on. Her spine was flexible enough for her to reach around herself somewhat, but she had no experience at trying to dress without

thumbs.

"Want some help?" asked Zeke.

"Sure."

Her husband slid the pleated cloth over her fur and with some help, buckled it around her tail. Andrea stared down at the ruff of thick fur on her neck, then shuddered at the sight of the bulge between her hindlegs. "I take it you've found ways to do everything you need to do in this shape."

Ma yipped. "I had this conversation a long time ago. How about a family lesson in the barn?"

Zeke walked close beside Andrea, helping her get the hang of trotting around on four feet. Her claws clicked on the wooden floor, and she wobbled whenever she thought too much about it.

"Oh!" she said, looking around. "Where did our wedding rings go?!" Though it seemed silly to worry about bits of silver right now, even their frugal investment wasn't something she wanted to misplace.

Pa grinned, exposing sharp teeth. "You know, I worried about the same thing way back when. Don't worry; they'll be back. Jewelry seems to work differently than clothes. Good thing, considering Ma had pierced ears."

"Awfully considerate curse," said Andrea. "So, Zeke, have you had this happen all your life?"

"I was a late bloomer, you might say." His ears flicked bashfully back. "It was awfully confusing. Never expected 'the talk' to include all this."

"You two hid this from Zeke for that long?"

Ma said, "It's how Pa's parents handled teaching him about the family tradition. It'll be up to you to decide when to tell your kids, though."

Andrea looked forward to having that problem.

They went outside once it got dark. Andrea's fur fluffed up along her back as she

padded bare-pawed along the dirt. Her vision had changed a little, making the night seem brighter than the moon (only a crescent) would justify. Pa opened the barn and flicked a few electric light switches on the rustic wooden wall.

Andrea stared into the room. She'd seen the place once before and found it jarring, mostly because of her own assumptions. Besides the obvious farm stuff like tractor parts and tools, the Eisens used the barn to hold an office area with a couple of cell phones and a computer charged by solar panels on the roof. It all looked huge from down here on her paws.

Andrea said, "I guess I know now why you arrange furniture the way you do." The desk had a beanbag chair next to it. The whole house had things placed a little oddly, with more room in the kitchen than had seemed necessary, and with doors that could be pushed open without knobs. They'd made room for wolves.

Zeke's family practiced hopping and climbing around on some footstools and a mechanical treadmill. Andrea got drawn into their exercises; the four-footed workout was kind of fun. Then Ma pulled a tarp off of a piece of equipment Andrea had never noticed.

Andrea blinked at it. "A Guerrilla Dance arcade machine?" Once it was powered up from the barn's battery, the game came to life and showed arrows streaming along the screen. A metal platform with matching arrows invited players to come and dance along.

Zeke bumped his hind hips against hers, making her stagger and blush. He said, "My idea. We don't let these machines get in the way of a peaceful life, but we're allowed to have some fun, too. Good exercise on winter nights while we're stuck this way."

Andrea laughed. She'd seen him play this game on a date, years ago. "Are you as bad at it with four feet as with two?"

"Better!"

She tried stomping the platform in time with a few songs. Good practice for figuring out how having four legs worked. Zeke's parents even took over for a round. Andrea flopped onto the beanbag chair to watch, draping her forelegs over it, and panted with exertion. Now that she had a little more coordination from practicing, it was pleasant being able to stretch way out from ears to tail.

"Battery's getting low," said Pa, looking up at a gauge. "Would you be more comfortable here with the electric lights, Andrea?"

"I'm all right with going back to the house."

Pa shut off the game machine. The barn fell quiet but for some wind outside, reminding Andrea of the hum of heaters and lights that she was so used to. "We were hybrids already, before this change, weren't we?" she said to Zeke. The two of them lived in a modern townhouse, working on making Zeke a modern lawyer, to help keep farms like his family's safe from politicians and other con-men.

"You noticed, huh?" said Zeke, ruffling her ears. She caught herself making a deep rumbling noise down in her lower body, a sort of happy growl. Zeke said, "Would you mind grabbing that basket of wolfy blankets from the house, hon? The one Ma got your skirt from, I mean. I meant to carry it over here but got distracted by a handsome new tail."

Andrea grinned and swatted Zeke with her tail. "You're going to have to teach me how to do everything. Oh, wow. Does this mean Pa Eisen is your *mother*?"

"No, no." He busied himself with his paws and mouth, to help his parents pack away the gear they'd been playing with. "I've been... wanting to show you how much I love you, and what you can do with that new body."

Andrea blushed, suddenly getting a vivid mental image of what it'd be like snuggling behind her husband, reaching up along his back, under his tail... As scary as the thought was, the fact that it would be Zeke sharing that experience with her made it a little exciting. Her tail wagged. She nosed at him and whispered, "I'll take you up on that. Let me grab those clothes first."

Andrea awkwardly batted the barn's door open and stepped outside, feeling her fur prickle in the cold wind. Snow whirled through the air, making the world seem black and white. She felt the breeze pushing against her long flanks and tickling through her coat. The line of tarps from earlier that evening fluttered, and one had fallen. She grabbed it and tried unsuccessfully to fling it back over the pole where it belonged.

While she was doing that, headlights blinded her.

Andrea winced and turned away. Her tail flicked higher in alarm. Someone shouted. She dashed back toward the barn and rapped on the door, glancing back over one shoulder. "Psst."

Zeke greeted her at the door and saw her waving tail. "What's wrong?"

"Somebody saw me!"

He pulled her inside and let her explain. Everyone's shoulder fur bristled. "The Hochmanns!" said Zeke. "What do we do?"

Ma said, "They couldn't have gotten a good look from a few seconds of headlights in the dark."

Pa told Andrea, "It's not the first time one of them's thought they saw something strange around here. They went out to our house to ask about it last time. They'll know we've got guests from your car out front, so if nobody's at home they'll check here in the barn."

Zeke rested his head on Andrea's shoulder in a sort of hug. "We need to hide."

"No, son," said Pa. "Andrea's got to meet them." He turned to her. "Time to learn how to change. You need to picture yourself folding up, compacting, back into how you used to look. Meet them at the house door and tell them you haven't seen anything."

Zeke said, "Why her? I'll do it."

"Can you turn back yet? I don't think so. She's new at this and the 'curse' hasn't quite settled on her, so I think she'll be able to manage turning back for a little while."

Andrea tried it. She shut her eyes and concentrated on her strange horizontal spine, on her tail and paws. There was resistance from a direction she couldn't understand, as though she were a coiled spring. Still she worked at imagining her old human self. Her fur faded away and she opened her eyes to see her hands hairless and clawless at the end of bare arms. She was freezing! She suppressed a yelp and snatched the tarp off the game machine to cover herself, then stumbled.

Zeke propped her up, stopping her from a bad fall. "You've got it. Take a few steps and try to concentrate."

Ma held out a spare shawl in her mouth, which Andrea took gratefully. "Quickly, get your clothes back and answer the door."

Andrea staggered but quickly recalled how to walk on two legs. Her wolfy ones had been shorter and her balance was completely different. "Back to the house, then."

She covered herself as well as she was able and hurried back through the cold, wary of any more watchers. She reached the Eisens' house and signed in relief. Already she felt that springy resistance building up, though, making her shudder and have to focus on not changing again. Her body felt like it needed to bounce back to that wolf form again, and soon. But within a minute of her reaching the living room, there was a knock outside. Andrea struggled into a pair of sweatpants and a pajama top, then opened the front door.

A bearded man in a scarf and mittens peered at her. "Haven't seen you around here, miss."

"I'm Andrea. Andrea Eisen, as of a few months back." She offered her hand.

The man didn't shake it. "There's something odd going on around here, miss. Are you sure you know what you've gotten into?"

She laughed. "I'd say so. Can I help you, mister... Hochmann, right?"

"Saw something running around. Stray dog, maybe?"

"We don't keep dogs here."

"I know. Been here a lot longer than you. Long enough to know my neighbors, except somehow I don't. May I come in?"

Andrea's legs twitched again, and she had to force back the sensation of fur and a tail growing in. "I'm afraid I can't invite you tonight, but maybe tomorrow —"

"Why's that? Where is everyone?"

"They're sick tonight. I think I'm coming down with what they've got, too, so I'm tending them as well as I can. Thanks for dropping by, though. Hope you find your lost pet or whatever it is." She shut the door.

Moments later she yelped, unable to hold the curse back any longer. Her hips wobbled and pushed her forward so that she flopped down onto all fours. Her tail grew back in suddenly and banged against a coatrack, knocking it over.

Hochmann was close enough to the door to hear. "Something wrong?" he called out.

Andrea glanced at the windows and made sure they were covered. She tried to speak in a higher tone than felt natural for this body, more like her usual human voice. "I'm fine, thanks. Banged into something." Under her breath she muttered, "Now go away."

She reached back and brushed her tail to calm herself. She carefully backed away from the door and waited. Her ears perked up. She couldn't hear the man out there anymore. Now what, though? She couldn't force the change to recede again; it wasn't working. If she stepped outside she might be spotted in more detail, even photographed. Andrea's tail hid behind her legs as she imagined she'd be the one to ruin the family's secret. It'd be nice to let people know, and not have to hide, but that wasn't her decision to make.

Andrea paced on four feet, then peeked out the back door towards the barn. Their privacy curtain was still mostly intact, but the nosy Hochmann might be lurking somewhere nearby just to see what was going on. Zeke and her parents-in-law waited across the way, hiding, as unable to shift back to human as she was. She could stay apart from them all night, cowering alone and hoping nobody ever checked in on her... more or less for the rest of her life. They were waiting for her to go back to them and get on with living.

She grabbed a few blankets from the basket she'd meant to fetch, then slung them over her back. Andrea Eisen went to her family to wait out the danger and relax with warm fur and tails to hug. Nobody bothered her for now.

She nuzzled Zeke, who growled pleasantly at the touch. She asked, "Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? For that matter, if the curse is triggered by" — she glanced toward Zeke's parents-in-law — "marriage, why didn't I change sooner?"

"It always starts around Christmas," Zeke said. "I hope you like your present." His cute fluffy tail wagged.

She had a new family with a secret they'd finally shared, an introduction to a world of magic, a warm home, and a husband eager to share some very unexpected fun with her from a new perspective. "I do," she said, deciding to make the best of everything.

Vixen Visitor

* 1. Audition *

You wake up sprawled on a hilltop. Grass tickles your nose, smelling vivid green. You snuggle with the fuzzy blanket beside you, sleepily thinking about that crazy dream last night. There was a glowing door, taking you suddenly from being an ordinary guy on Earth into a wizard's trap. A tangle of stairways in space that led only to costumes. Animal costumes, mostly, and there was a sign saying you had to pick one...

Morning light gets in your eyes and something twitches behind you. Your eyes follow the rusty-red fuzzy thing, up to where it connects to your spine, and you yelp at the feel of your hand on your new tail. Your hands are white-furred, clawed and slender, and as you look yourself over you remember that in the dream, you picked a fox costume. Also, you realize why it looked strangely padded around the hips and chest. Beneath the simple blouse and skirt you're wearing that you've never seen before, you're a shapely vixen.

Your heart thumps and you sit again on the grass, trying to catch your breath. Pinching your arm just hurts. Your tail twitches and the morning smells like clouds and flowers and other things overloading the black nose sticking out between your eyes. You whimper, trying to make sense of it all.

In the distance someone is walking up a hill. He spots you, then calls out, "A visitor?" in a language you've never heard yet suddenly understand. It's another fox-person, on two legs and wearing a backpack.

"Help!" you say. Your voice is soft and an octave too high. It makes you feel sick. Yes, okay, you like animals, but suddenly being one — and female at that — is too much of a shock.

The fox-man gets closer, then stops and stares at you. "Lenara."

"What?"

"It's nothing," he says too quickly. He's taller than you, with reddish fur that makes you think of autumn leaves, and dressed in shorts and a vest. "I won't hurt you. I saw a light and knew our world had another visitor. The important thing is to calm you down and — it's your first round, I bet. Did you check your pockets?"

As confused as you are, it's good to have a guide and a distraction from being so thoroughly lost. With your unfamiliar hands you fumble for the pockets on your skirt, and snag one of your claws on the fabric. After untangling yourself you find a folded note. The fox-man watches you frowning at the unfamiliar script. It means nothing to you at first, like the spoken language, but then the knowledge of it snaps into place. The text is written right-to-left in long angular marks, saying:

"Welcome to my game! In short, you're stuck here for three local weeks, and then you can hop to another world. From there you'll get to explore other worlds, gaining magic of your own. You'll be supplied with a local identity and a house (burrow, nest, etc.) appropriate for this species and world. Enjoy your life here, or just survive long enough to leave and become a wandering shapeshifter. Have fun!"

The fox watches your bewildered expression. "My name is Bragho. I saw you arrive because I'm from *elsewhere*, myself, and I sensed someone was going to arrive. Don't go blabbing it, okay?" A wide grin splits his muzzle and he offers his black fuzzy hand to help you up. You take it and shudder, feeling little claws against your leathery palm.

"Why? Who did this to me?" you say.

"The Wizard of the Wardrobe." Bragho directs you to look at the other side of the note. The fine print there describes the wonderful powers you can get for racking up visits to other worlds and species. Maybe this wizard is watching you even now as though you're some sort of celestial game show contestant. Bragho says, "I don't know much more, but he's a thorough bastard. And thinks he's generous. Are you hurt, hungry or anything? I brought supplies."

You shake your head. "Just confused." It's best to tell him. "I was human, and male."

"Human? You mean the furless bipeds? Hey, I've been one of those! Not too different from this species. It's mostly a world of barbarian tribes and one massive empire, right? When I left, they were doing these huge sea expeditions under a guy called Zheng He."

Your brow furrows as you try to match that up with history. Maybe there are multiple Earth timelines. Then you remember: "That sounds like China, but that was centuries ago!"

His outbreak of a smile fades again as he looks you over. "I'm sorry. You get used to the changes after a few costumes, and lose track of the years. While you're here, you can be useful; you have a job to keep you busy."

Now he has you curious. "What kind of jobs do foxes do?" You look downhill and realize there's a whole town spread out below, with quiet paved roads between buildings of brick and stone. No skyscrapers, no airplanes. What's this world you've gotten stuck in?

Bragho says, "It's hard to explain. We have more advanced machines than I saw in your world. You're filling in for what we call a 'movie star'."

For the first time in this world, you laugh.

* * *

You open the door of a movie studio hangar, with your guide Bragho beside you. Suddenly you're in a Western town where Napoleon is whapping someone with a director's megaphone. Well, not a French dictator, but a fox with way too many buttons on his vest and too many decibels for his size. The poor stagehand he's berating says, "Boss, wait! She's here!"

The director whirls and peers up at you. "Lenara? It's about time you... Wait. What's wrong?"

Bragho steps in. "Lenara is a *visitor*." He nods meaningfully and the director shudders. You start to explain what's happened to you, but the director recovers and makes up his mind. "Close enough!" He snaps his clawed fingers at his assistants, adding, "Script, costume — attack!"

Five bewildering minutes later, you're wearing some kind of black motion-

capture suit and another fox is coaching you on how to drawl a line about paintin' a wagon a'fore the cattle get here. Then you get dragged out to the fake street where a bunch of foxes are rehearsing an argument. But they're almost all in Western costumes. No, not 19th-century American stuff, since the fashions are different, but it's rugged and familiar just the same. "Hey," you say, thinking of your own outfit. "Am I in the wrong show?"

"Places!" the director bellows, and everyone scatters. A fox-man in a techno-suit like yours grins at you and takes your hand, saying, "Over there, ma'am." He's got this knowing grin like he's been in a hundred movies — or he knows all about this costume game you've gotten into. And somehow you just know he's playing a cowboy, even without the getup.

You run through a scene from a story you don't know. The foxes argue about the wagon, and then the other suited fox breaks it up. Then you hear "Cut!" and it's over in one take. You were just getting into the role, wondering whether somebody was going to get shot or what.

"Not bad, ma'am," says the other suited fox to you. The "ma'am"s still distract you, but he makes them sound good. "The name's Wylan, by the way."

"You do movies with motion capture?" you say.

"Sure! Whoever wants to play a lead role can watch it from your view or mine, or put somebody else's picture there while they watch it from the couch. Don't care for it myself, but it's the big thing in Fen country."

Wylan looks you over, making you conscious of the tight suit and the way your tail curls inside it. "You're a costumer? A visitor?"

You end up looking nervously aside, scratching your ear. "Yeah."

"'s all right, ma'am." He turns to the director and calls out, "Hey, are we set for lunch yet?"

The director's been badgering everyone in sight about lighting and noise, but he stops and droops his ears when the other actor talks to him. "Sorry, Wylan. Our caterer is having trouble."

The actor gives that same cowboy smile. "No loss. Say, Bragho and my co-star

have some things to discuss with me. We're gonna grab a bite off-set, okay?"

"Of course, sir," the director says.

Wylan waves Bragho over. They get you to walk a bit away from the set, and then the two of them fall silent and look at you.

You're not used to seeing foxes that are also people. Or even used to *anything* about this life you've been forced into. But you could do worse, and there's the promise of escape in a few weeks, maybe even to get you back home. Something's bothering you though. If Lenara is an actress, did her persona get created from nothing when you got here? Or did you replace someone?

He and Bragho walk with you to a restaurant outside the studio. The decor isn't any style you recognize, but there're benches and cushions around a big central firepit. Lots of roast meat spins on spits, and suddenly you realize just how sensitive your nose is to the sizzling roasts and faint charcoal smoke. You're about to start drooling by the time you get a bench and waiters come out with portable tables.

"So," says Wylan, with a strange expression. He glances at Bragho, who's staring at the food and sniffing. "There's something you'd best be telling our new guest."

Bragho says, "You've taken Lenara's place. You found a costume of our species, right?"

You relate what you thought was a dream, about the glowing door and the maze of stairs and species.

Bragho whistles. "It's been a while. But yes, that sounds like something that happened to me. As for you, you look like the talented young Lenara Vale, and the real one has vanished."

You shudder. "Does that mean someone's wearing *my* skin?"

"Maybe — a costume of whatever you used to be. Close enough that they might pass for you at first glance. We're not sure whether the wizard takes people only through this species-shuffle, or what." He lets this news sink in while he attacks a plate full of cornbread and sizzling meat. "When I showed up here with my sixty-eighth costume, a year ago, I took the place of a stagehand at the studio.

And the stagehand suddenly vanished."

You tell yourself you're not hungry, but lunch smells and tastes amazing. Maybe it's your new nose helping. "So I'm Lenara?"

Wylan cuts in. "No, ma'am. A fine vix she is, wherever she's gone to."

"She'll be fine," Bragho says, though his ears hang low. "Off on her own adventure, right?"

Wylan just nods, picking at his cornbread.

Bragho says, "You're a substitute. You're stuck here for a few weeks before you go back to trying on bodies. In the meantime, it looks like you have a house standing where Lenara's was yesterday, and we need someone with her figure on the set. We'll call you by her name. There's a movie to finish."

"The show must go on," mutters Wylan.

"I don't know about all this," you say, looking back and forth between them and your lunch. "I didn't ask to get into this world, or to kick Lenara out of it. I'm not even female." A waiter happens by while you blurt that out, and ends up giving you a long appraising look. You try to ignore it.

Bragho snorts and hides a grin. But Wylan says, "We didn't ask to have our rising starlet, our friend, hauled tail-first out of the universe for some wizard's fun." The cold stare he gives you is one you hope never to see again, especially if he's armed.

Bragho intervenes, waving a greasy black paw between you. "It's not her fault."

Wylan says, "It's not. I just want her to know where things stand, see?"

Wylan's ears droop and his tail curls between his legs. So do yours, another feeling you're not used to. You find yourself starting to reach out a hand toward his shoulder, but you pull it back. What're you doing, touching people like that? "I'm sorry," you say.

"There's a movie to finish," Wylan repeats. "Shouldn't take more than a couple weeks. It'd be good of you to stick around for that, before you run off to be

somebody else."

The three of you eat together and get back to the studio to work. Wylan perks up the moment he's back on set. You're not sure how to feel, but Bragho and the other stagehands assault you with new lines to learn. From what you gather, the movie's about a gang stealing cattle-like animals from Wylan's ranch and him going out to kick some tail with a crossbow. Fortunately you don't have a big role.

Oh, and he's your husband. Not real-life, someone hastens to tell you, so that your heart can start beating again. It's just that viewers love seeing you — uh, Lenara — and Wylan together. You've got "chemistry". It doesn't feel that way to you, though. Wylan looks sad and angry beyond what having his cattle stolen would justify. But you get through a few scenes where he's telling you everything will be okay.

You leave the studio at sunset, find your house, and use the key you found on a chain that tickled your chest. The place looks blank. No art on the plaster walls, no family photos or junk lying on the furniture, nothing in the kitchen, a few never-worn outfits in the closet. There's an envelope of fancy papers that you assume are money on the kitchen counter. Everything's set up for you to do as you please, replacing Lenara or not.

You sit blankly on the couch, not knowing what to do with the endless possibilities before you. And then there's a knock on the door. "Who is it?" you say.

"Bragho," you hear. You open the door and see him in his black vest and shorts. "I was thinking you might want company."

"How do you mean that?"

He waves a paw. "Not a date. You don't know this world though."

You've spent almost the whole day with him, stuck in a movie studio and pretending to be someone you're not while everyone else resents you for being there. "Then I'd better start figuring it out for myself!" you say. You're still not used to your higher voice and the weird echoes of it through your muzzle. The local language comes naturally to you, probably the wizard's doing.

"All right," he says. "But be careful, okay?"

You wait in your house until he goes away. A few minutes later you've got your hair fixed up and are out the door.

* * *

You can see in the dim light. The town's narrow streets are paved, and the buildings are made of wooden boards but with an unfamiliar curved shiplike look. A few foxes stroll along or ride bicycles. Electric streetlights stand in a few spots where there're shops still open. You find something that could be a convenience store and peek in.

Three foxes are playing a board game. One notices you and smiles. "Hi, miss! Haven't seen you here before. Interested in a game of skulk?"

"Sure," you say, looking around at the shelves of merchandise. Games and books and magazines, mostly. "Mind if I look around first?"

"We'll be a few minutes finishing this round anyway."

You paw through the reading material. Every article of the fox news is a puzzle. "Gorzam Trade Treaty a Success." "CP Solar Wins Contract." "Carmelita Leads McCloud 5-3." Nothing in it is totally alien, not even the photos of dignified foxes giving speeches, but none of it makes much sense without context.

"Ready!" say the game-playing foxes, distracting you from another headline. You head back to their table and get into a game they teach you, something about monster hunting. It's fun, but after a few rounds of that you're looking to do something else.

"Say, has anyone got a map?" Maybe you can do some traveling over the next few nights, and see a little more of the world.

Someone fishes out a map and you spread it on a table. A road stretches out from the valley to a city and from there to a shoreline. It's too small-scale though for you to know whether this is Earth geography with different names, or a totally different place. That's something to ask Bragho. You sigh; there's work tomorrow and there's only so far you can go. You thank the foxes for the game and head on out.

You wander through the streets. It's quiet enough that you wonder why, and realize what's missing: cars. There're a few bicycles and a motorized scooter or two, but that's it. Maybe they don't have gasoline engines? There's a fortune to be made if you can "invent" them here. There's a big difference between knowing the basic concept and actually being able to build a prototype, though.

You find a glittering electric storefront and deduce that it's a movie theater, with a wonderfully-scented coffee stand. Inside, it's cozier than the megaplex theaters you're used to, maybe because this is a small town. The ticket booth guy smiles at you, saying, "Hey, Lenara! You look a little different tonight. New hair?"

You're not sure how to answer that. You've been told to keep posing as her, and you're not eager to explain that you're actually a visitor from another world who's accidentally booted Lenara into a convoluted magical trap. So you just dodge the question. "Hi. What's playing tonight?" But at some point you're going to have to explain, right?

"The bodysuit equipment's got a flea in the software, so we have to wait for an authorized technician. The regular theaters are up though. '*Legend of the Chalice: Guardians of Glory*' isn't as awful as it sounds."

"Oh, the suits? I could take a look at them if you'd like."

"I don't want to get you arrested, ma'am! You get your usual ticket discount though."

You fish money out of your pockets. "Sure. The fantasy one, please."

Yes, it is terrible. Awful script-writing seems to carry over between worlds. There are these big-eared ape monsters, see, and they go around ripping the pelts off foxes, and then this one fox gets turned into a were-ape and his girlfriend hates him but then he brings peace to the land. It's not clear where the chalice comes in, but there'll be a sequel.

You stretch your cramped tail and leave the theater, feeling vaguely superior for being part of making a better movie than that. It's pretty dark now, so you'd better get some sleep. What a long, strange day!

It occurs to you that you're lost, when you turn down a dim empty street and hear footsteps behind you.

* 2. Casting *

"Looking for something?" says a deep voice behind you. There's a metallic click.

You freeze; there's a figure in the shadows. And then, you run and shout.

A dart whizzes past your ear and you stumble on a box. He's chasing you. You crash muzzle-first onto dirty pavement and the mugger is right there. With a yelp you flip around, trying to hit him, afraid of what he'll do to you. Your hands are outstretched...

A roaring blast of flame lights up the alley and flings you back with your fur on fire. You hit your head and spend the next minute frantically swatting out the flame. Then you're crouching in the alley, clutching your skull while the scent of your own scorched fur hits you. Your attacker is on fire and he's not moving. The smell is terrible. You grab a filthy towel from the alley and beat the thing against him until he's not burning. Then you run away, hardly able to see through the tears in your eyes, until you find what you think is a policeman.

A little while later, you're sitting in an underground room. There's a medic lady fussing over you and draping a blanket over your shoulders. A man brings you a hot drink and says, "Tell us again. What happened, ma'am?"

You can hardly think straight. It was awful — and you shudder, knowing it could've been a lot worse. You tell the cops everything that happened since you left the theater.

The two of them exchange a look. "It would explain the burns," the man says.

The woman curses. She covers her muzzle and goes back to reassuring you. "Let's keep the fire part between us, okay?"

"Can't hide it," says the man. "Ma'am, I think I know the answer, but I take it you're not already a known magic user?"

You look up at him. "Magic?"

"Didn't think so. People who've got the talent tend not to find it until they're

under a lot of stress. So you hear sometimes about a suspicious fire, or someone getting melted out of an avalanche."

"And then the Fens come," the woman adds.

You shake your head. "I don't know anything about magic!" But then it occurs to you that you've had intimate experience with it, back in the costume place. You're not sure whether to add that detail.

The male cop says, "That puts us in a bind. We're required to report sightings of magical talent so that these people can get trained and employed for the good of society. Supposedly. I take it you've heard of the Fens' mage corps." He sees your blank expression. "No? Let's just say you'd get to help spread the Teachings by force."

What happened to the happy fun harmless world of fox people?

The cop turns to his partner. "Are you with me on this?" She nods and he looks relieved. To you he says, "There was some grease and a fuel can in that alley, and we're going to say we found that idiot robber with a lighter. It's better than having one of our people drafted. For your part, you need to keep quiet about what you did."

You feel dizzy just sitting there. "Did I kill him?" you say. It's a stupid sappy thing to worry about, but still. And you'd like to stop weeping.

"He'll live. And if he knows what's good for him, he'll go with our story."

You nod and let the two of them comfort you for a while. The woman says, "If you'd like, I can send Officer Ren to patrol past your house for the next few nights."

"Me?" says the guy. "I think she'd be more comfortable with you than with some strange man prowling by."

You say, "It's okay. I just want to lock myself in my house for the night and forget about this." Not that you're likely to sleep.

"Okay. We'll take you home then. Oh, wait, my boss has the keys..."

The female officer tosses a keychain at him. "Just charge it up when you're done."

The police have something like a motorcycle. Officer Ren gets you into the sidecar, then speeds off from the underground police station through the quiet streets. It's the closest thing you've seen yet to a car. From the purr of the motor and the subsonic rumble you can feel at the intersections, you don't blame him for taking the scenic route. You end up back at your house with windblown fur and a grin on your muzzle.

"Good night, ma'am," he says. "Think I could get an autograph sometime?"

You thank him and head inside alone, but you don't manage to sleep much.

* * *

The next morning, the alarm clock startles you awake. There's a bad moment when you flash back to being attacked in the alley and somehow creating a burst of magic fire. Your fur's standing on end... which is your first reminder of where and what you are. Nearly three weeks of being a fox, and female, left before you can escape. Sort of.

You open the curtains to a sunny, peaceful morning. The valley town feels different today. You sense that there's more going on than your tourist visit. You don't want to wear your burned clothes to work, and your leg-fur is still singed, so you end up in the long skirt you had earlier.

At the studio, there's still a movie to shoot. You're not on duty for a few hours, so Bragho and one of the extras (in bandit getup) take you aside for an acting lesson in a vacant studio.

They're walking along with you when the lights shut off, leaving you in the empty room in darkness. With your foxy eyes you make out the dim shapes of the actors. Just then, Bragho points behind you and shouts, "Look out!"

You turn and see... nothing. The extra laughs. Bragho pats you on the back, saying, "Nice startle pose. Hey, out there, get the lights!"

The lights come back. "That's one lesson," says Bragho. "You've got to *feel* the role."

Your heart pounds. "Don't do that!" you snap. "You're lucky I didn't..."

"Didn't what?"

"Nothing, nothing." You glance at the extra. "Say, Bragho, who exactly knows about my — tourism?"

The extra says, "Him, me, half the studio. We're pretty close-knit."

Bragho adds, "When I showed up, nobody much cared about the guy I replaced. But if you tell the world you're a dimension-hopper, I bet there'd be an unpleasant investigation, or at least some embarrassment when people call you crazy. There's no need for that, though. You've got Lenara's body."

"But not her mind."

Brago sighs. "Not many people knew her personally. If you act a little strange, people will assume you're just an eccentric actress."

Maybe the real Lenara's isolation had something to do with why she chose, or got chosen, to get pulled into another world.

"Anyway," says Bragho, "we need to work on your emoting for the next few scenes. You're supposed to be skilled. No offense, since you're not really experienced at acting, but you're not up to her level so far."

You hold up a hand. "No offense taken. But please don't startle me like that again. And before you train me more, there's something I want to know. Who are the 'Fens'?"

"Why do you care?" says Bragho. The extra's tail flicks nervously.

"I've heard muttering about them."

Bragho says, "They're... in charge. The country got taken over about twenty years back, so we're part of their empire. Let's see. Do you know what a... math machine is? Runs on electricity?"

"You mean a computer?" You cover your muzzle. The word that you just spoke isn't the one you'd have used in English; it's an unfamiliar rasping thing in the

natives' language. It hasn't been spoken in your presence so far. "The movie equipment uses them, right?"

"Yeah. Only the Fens are allowed to own computers, or even fix the things without a permit. Same with paper-copying machines and some other things."

"Why?"

The extra mutters, "To keep control." Bragho nods.

This situation doesn't sound like something you want to get involved in, not after the incident last night. "Maybe we should get back to the acting."

They have you strutting around the empty set and saying ridiculous things, pretending to argue and carouse with Bragho and the extra. It helps take your mind off the trouble and makes you feel like you might even have some acting talent.

Bragho's decently satisfied with you — "for a first lesson" — by the time you break for lunch. You get back to the main set a little later, feeling relaxed.

The costume squad mobs you and gets you into the electronic bodysuit. The little director finds out you haven't been given the script for this scene yet and starts cursing people out. "I have scenes to film, and my female lead doesn't know what movie she's in!"

While the costumers assault you, someone hands you a script. You skim it and blink. "'They kiss passionately'?"

"So it is written," says Wylan, suited up already. "Don't worry about it, ma'am. It doesn't mean anything. Just a story."

In a way that makes you feel worse. Wylan sees you drooping and says, "You get used to it."

"Acting?"

Wylan hunches his shoulders and looks off into a fake, painted sunset the stagehands are setting up outside the mock saloon. "I can pretend to be something I'm not. It's why people think I'm some kind of hero, when I'm just a

pretender."

You realize something. "You and the real Lenara..."

"No," he says. "She was a swell lady, and I think she'll find a new place somehow. But the one I really cared for got taken from me, and I did nothing." Wyland gestures to the crossbows over in the prop chest. "Do you know how hard it is to pretend I'm brave enough to rush out and avenge someone, when I couldn't do it in real life?"

"Avenge?"

"My wife was in the war. When the Fens took over, they made an example of her." His ears and tail are held carefully still, but you can smell something clammy and frightening in his scent. "But that doesn't concern you. You're a tourist, if an unwilling one. Now show me how you pretend to be in love."

Wyland has straightened up and smoothed his exposed fur already. You look at the script more carefully. Says here that he's just gotten back from clobbering the bad guys and finding some treasure, which he left behind for your sake. So get in character... do you really have to do this? There's the possibility of hiding under your bed for the next few weeks.

No! You're going to do this right! Or at least get this movie done with, so you aren't making things in this world any worse for Lenara's absence. You bristle a bit inside your suit, step closer, and blush as he wraps one arm around you. You look up into his sad eyes, try not to bonk muzzles, and imagine him riding out to save you from a horde of muggers. He'd be good at it if he tried, with those keen eyes and strong muscles... You feel warm breath on your neck as the two of you touch, nose to nose, and embrace tighter. You're pulled into some kind of head-tilted, dizzying nuzzle with your co-star, and after a little while you pull back and catch your breath while staring wide-eyed at him. It was *nice*.

Softly, the director says, "Cut."

* * *

You have time off in the afternoon. There's a library in town, so you walk in search of that. You're glad for the broad daylight as you pass the town's alleyways.

The library is styled like some kind of fortress, even though it's only two stories tall. When you step in there's a lot of greenery, lit by sunbeams from the ceiling. They're growing vegetables in here.

A librarian named Jahnuck greets you and shows you the history section. You're quickly confused, even after you remember that the pages go right-to-left. So why are you here again? Well, you'd heard about this country having been conquered, and there's the too-personal subject of how magic works in this place.

You bask in a pool of light, browsing a stack of dusty books that make your nose twitch. It looks like these Fen people are from an empire of deserts and jungles, and have some religious "Teachings" too weird to explain. Apparently they're very convincing at swordpoint though. The empire isn't obviously killing people these days, at least not locally, but it's not particularly nice either.

A pair of ears twitches over the book in your hands. "Senorita?" says their owner.

You look up and find a long-eared, sand-colored fox. He's the first you've seen in town, actually; everyone local seems to be the red or grey-and-red kind. His clothes are odd too, with many buttons and pockets on his dazzlingly white vest. He says, "The illustrious Lenara Vale, I presume?"

You freeze. First of all, if your sense of the local language is right, he's one of the "Fens" people here resent. Second, *are* you Lenara for purposes of talking with a strange outsider? "Um, hi?" you squeak.

"Bueno, senorita!" he says. (He's not speaking Spanish. That's just the easiest thing to compare it to.) "I am Eloy Alejandro, visiting town as an admirer of your studio. A 'fan', yes?"

"You came here for a movie tour?" you say.

"Unofficially. But I am here as a repairman. I mend things that are broken. Computers, mainly. A surprise very pleasant to meet you here. It speaks well of your intellect."

You smile. "Just studying history before getting back to work."

"I'm not interrupting you, I hope?" His ears droop in obvious pleading for

attention.

Oh, what are you doing letting somebody flatter you like this? "I have a few minutes."

"Well. I want to say, I've noticed the theme of your work, and think it brave of your studio. Do you know Zellon Fabrosi personally? His 'Chalice' movie is brilliant in its own way. But the interactivity of your productions is something else again. You get to feel the anger, the resistance in the way Wyland moves. Or yourself."

Lenara's been in other movies with Wyland, and they're mostly the kind where someone can hop into first-person mode using the motion-capture data. That means this Eloy guy has probably watched the things, and romanced you from Wyland's perspective. Or him from yours. Either way it's kind of disturbing. And he actually liked that Chalice thing? No taste!

Wait a minute. Evil big-eared things were the villains, and the paranoia plot was about someone getting forcibly turned into one? That's more political than you'd imagined junky fantasy to be. "Thanks, I think. I'm not trying to make trouble, though."

"Of course not," he says with a wink and a tailwag. "But it's nice to see some among your people having an influence cultural on the empire. Many young Fens watch films, and over time, who knows where that leads?"

Time. "Oh! I need to get back to the studio," you say. It's strange to think about your having an influence on the world here, just by performing.

Eloy bows to you. "Glad to meet you, in any case. I hope to take a studio tour later, if they'll allow it...?"

"I'll try to get you a pass." His eyes light up at the offer. Fanboy fox!

As you get up, the foreigner moves to fetch the books you've pulled out. "I will return these for you, senorita." He glances at the titles. "Oh, planning a magical tale next?"

"Maybe," you say with a nervous smile that you hope gives away nothing.

"Excellente! I shall look forward to it."

You get out of the library, feeling flustered several ways at once by the foreign man with his odd compliments and questions.

* 3. Method Acting *

The rest of the work day is easy. The director bellows at you to say your lines with "more zest" or "more ennui". Come on, you're talking about cattle! You catch the stagehands smirking about it, and share in making fun of him when he's not looking.

You're comfortable here in a way. You've got a job, a house, and friends. People admire "your" work and think you're having a good effect on the country. On the other hand, you're an impostor. People like you for things you didn't create. The filmgoing world has decided that you are an Upcoming Star and it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you keep at this, though, you could become a decent actor for real.

In an idle moment you stare at the white-furred, clawed hands this world gave you, and can't help glancing at your soft-furred, ample chest. The body's not what you're used to, and it means a different life than you ever expected. Besides the obvious changes caused by your gender, you're expected to get used to brushing that luxurious tail and all your fur, to having a muzzle and seeing slit-pupiled eyes in the mirror. Then there's the fact that you've walked into some kind of long-term racial problem. You lost your life and got handed a completely different one.

Is that so bad? Maybe your attitudes have shifted a bit. Your tail can be a nuisance, but you could learn to like feeling it flick and curl around behind you once you quit getting startled by the thing. Depending on your feelings before you got zapped into the costume place, you might be disturbed to notice that guys like Wylan are actually... attractive, and that it's because of a random costume you put on. Who has the right to mess with your head like this? Then again, would it be any better if you'd hated every second as a half-animal woman and ended up killing yourself? Or if you'd gotten stuck with some kind of fish-monster costume, or replaced the Pretty Pink Princess of Pig World? In this form, you've got a choice about what to be and how to act. And there's always

the chance of going back for a different costume, a different life. But you can probably never go home again. You want to meet the wizard behind this game, and have *words*.

The filming for this movie is almost over, and people seem to like how you're doing. That's your excuse for taking a walk with Bragho that evening. Besides the two main filming halls, there're some shacks, a cafeteria, and so on. Some of the studio's land is left as natural forest, giving the place a peaceful scent. This new sense of smell and your night vision aren't as powerful as you might have expected, but you've kept your color vision. If the fox-folk were colorblind by human standards, would their screens use only red and blue?

"What're you thinking about?" asks Bragho.

You say, "This costume thing, and the differences between this race and what I was. How long have you been in this world, anyway?"

"A few years. I got tired of the game of wandering between worlds, and this place is all right."

"So you kept jumping to the next one as soon as you could?"

He gives you a sheepish look. "Sometimes I stuck around to sightsee and help people out a bit. It was usually fun."

You look around at the sunset over the valley. "Must've been a lot of lingering. You're really old, aren't you?"

"A couple of centuries, I guess, though the different calendars make it confusing to tell." He tells you a bit about worlds where time is measured in terms of imperial reigns, or literal rains, or even deliberately kept vague.

You whistle pretty well through your muzzle. "What were you to start with?"

He scratches his ear and avoids your gaze. "I had tentacles. You'd have said I was ugly, in more ways than one. But those days're over." Together you walk into a prop warehouse, where in the dim light you spot dozens of ordinary movie costumes. "Since then I've been plenty of things. A human like you, an obscenely busty dragon — don't give me that look! — a superpowered cat-centaur race, you name it. Then there was that world of birds... That was a tough

one. Long story."

Your ears droop. "Not much chance of finding a human costume, then?"

"I did, once, so there's a chance." Though you'd end up as someone else, and apparently kick some random human out of Earth and into the game you're stuck playing.

"So why haven't you kept looking for a costume that'll turn you back into your own kind?"

"I don't want to!" snaps Bragho. He grabs a sequined cape from a rack. "Listen. You'll probably never see your world again. I saw over a thousand costumes when I was in the wizard's maze, and I couldn't reach them all. Either settle down here and let yourself be Lenara, or run off and be an anonymous vixen who looks like her, or resign yourself to seeing other worlds. Some of which are terrifying." He looks about to shred the cape he holds. "Is it worth giving up what you have here for whatever is hidden behind the next outfit? Would you pick up a script and commit yourself to that role without reading it?" He puts the cape back, shoulders trembling. "From what you've told me, this is a good gig for you. Famous, gorgeous, and — ah, never mind."

You blush, thinking again about the "deal" you've gotten here. Bragho's standards must have changed from his tentacled days.

He says, "If you do go world-hopping, there are benefits. Over the years I've gained some shapeshifting abilities I can use voluntarily, among other things. But I'm done currying favor with the master wizard to get magic powers. Especially ones I'm afraid to show off around here. If I ran that costume-game, it'd be different!"

"You said that most of the studio knows what you really are. How did you convince them?"

Bragho looks around at length and visibly steels himself, setting his ears high and his tail straight out. He holds out one hand. Gradually, his fingers twinkle like stars and become bird-like talons. His arm's fur shifts into a mass of dark feathers. "I showed them things like this. As far as we... I mean as far as the fox race knows, this is impossible even by magic."

You reach out to feel his talons, recoil from their sharpness, then touch again more carefully. "That's amazing."

He lets his hand and arm revert, showing the same unearthly light for a moment.

"This is a lot to think about. Thanks, Bragho. I'm glad to have somebody that knows what I'm going through."

"Yeah," he says, looking off to one side. "If you need help with fox stuff, or girl stuff, or the local culture, ask. I've been through it."

"What about this empire — the Fens?"

He shrugs. "Doesn't affect us much. I've seen empires that murder their own people while bragging about their kindness. This one's mild."

You think of your world's Communists and National Socialists, but instead you tell him about meeting Eloy. Bragho says, "Sounds like a fop. Fens usually are. Just don't tell him about the costumes, or you might get drafted as a supposed magic-user. And of course, don't tell him about me."

You laugh nervously. "All right. Can we get him a tour?"

"Once the major filming is done, sure. How's your house? Looked pretty bare from what I saw."

"I've hardly noticed, but yeah. Didn't come with Lenara's things."

"That's typical. Want to do some shopping? Holy day's tomorrow if you don't know; we're not allowed to act. We could go into the city." He pauses from his nonchalant inspection of more costume racks. "Although, it's kind of pointless to buy anything if you're leaving by month's end."

You frown; he's right. "I do have free starting money though."

"Yeah. You could treat it as just a game if you want. And you've got wages coming."

It could be fun to see more of the world.

* * *

It turns out there's a bus running from here to Peacholt, the city you saw on the map earlier. As you ride out of the valley you spot billboards for restaurants, fur shampoo, new homes. "Not many cars," you say.

Bragho watches the other buses, a few things recognizable as cars, and various motorcycles and odd tricycle craft. Some roar with internal combustion engines, shooting down your idea of "inventing" them.

Bragho says, "Our kind needs permission for motors, especially the heavy kind. You might be able to get a scooter, or a motorcycle if you play up the famous actress role."

"What're all these restrictions about, anyway? Racism by the Fens?"

"Partly. There's only so much gas available too. There was one world —" He stops, noticing the other passengers.

"There are solutions to a gas shortage," you say. "Though my people hadn't found a great one yet, last I saw."

He leans back, smiling. "Ah, it's nice to find someone else well-traveled."

Peacholt City dwarfs the town you arrived in. There's only one tower you could call a skyscraper, but lots of shiny white limestone buildings lining a harbor. Iron-grey warships lurk in the water, carefully avoided by the sailboats and some fishing craft heading out. All in all it's a pleasant-looking place. As the bus parks, your nose catches the scent of salty air with a hint of smoke.

"Got your money? That's the biggest bazaar in the city." Bragho points to a huge blue canopy that flutters in the wind. Beneath it, hundreds of people mill around shaded stalls of merchandise. Eagerly you follow Bragho in to see the place. It's wild: part food market, part clothing store, part entertainment center with woodwind bands and drummers. You didn't know there were this many variations on fox-musk, perfume and the scents of cloth. Bragho grins at how your nose is sniffing everywhere.

The races mix here, including Fens and red foxes and even a slit-eyed white breed. Nice to see them getting along with... your kind.

Bragho leads you past vegetables and fine leather jackets to a booth of ribbons and dresses. The sight makes you blush and say, "You're not serious."

"Why not try them?" he says.

The high-tech bodysuit from work was one thing, and the skirt you've got on now brushes comfortably against your legs and tail, but you're not really eager to walk around in some frilly silk dress. Much less in the outfits consisting of nothing but ribbons, like a couple of vixens are wearing! "I guess I'm a tomboy," you say, sliding a paw through racks of outfits. Dress, low-cut blouse, dress, blah. Bikini (whoa, you could fit *that?*), dress, griffin costume...

You freeze. This does *not* belong here. The material of the soft white feathers is unlike anything else in the bazaar. You unconsciously run your clawtips against the fur of your own arm, which used to be part of a very similar costume.

"Bragho, look!"

He opens his muzzle to speak, stops, and shakes his head. His ears droop as he whispers, "Buy it. Explanation later."

You find the shopkeeper, a Fen woman with elaborate earrings and with a blue ribbon winding all around her otherwise bare fur. You'd been told that haggling is expected in these shops. "I found something unworthy of your store, senora," you say. "This silly thing."

She looks surprised herself to see it. "Oh? It's quite unusual, isn't it? You have a keen nose for the unique. For you, how about a special price..."

Ooh, that was fun! You're grinning and clutching a shopping bag to your chest. The shopkeeper threw in a blue bikini and a ribbon-scarf like hers, and you even have money left over. As you strut away you find Bragho biting his lip, no easy feat with a muzzle. "What, what?"

Bragho grins. "She totally played you."

"Did not! I got her to throw in —"

"More than you planned to buy, yeah. But hey, great bargaining, vix." He ruffles your ears.

"Hmmpf." It was still fun. "So what about the costume? It's one of *those*, isn't it?"

He points to an open-air cafe on the bazaar's edge. Warm breeze flutters through your tail as you walk to a terrace, admiring the shimmering harbor below. The two of you relax at a table under snapping flags.

Bragho's buried his muzzle in a menu. "Come on, tell me," you say. "How'd I just happen to find another one?"

He leans his head on the menu, giving you a strange look of curiosity. "Can I see it to make sure?"

You take out the griffin suit. The thing feels soft and excellently made — presumably by magic — but looks out of place on the wooden table. Bragho sits up to feel the golden fur and peers into the expressionless beaked face. It occurs to you that the outfit has the first zipper you've seen in this world. Everything else has buttons.

Your fingers explore the wondrous thing you bought. Bragho does the same and lets his warm hand drift over yours. "This is the real thing. If the rules of the game haven't changed since I last played, there'll be two other choices in suspiciously convenient places, near where you arrived."

"Why? I thought I could just wait for three 'local weeks' and then go back to the magic wardrobe maze."

"That's not how it works. You have to *find* your next costume to reach another world."

"But I had that note in my pocket when I arrived, and it didn't mention that."

"Yup. I don't think either I or our wizard 'friend' explained everything clearly. Sorry. So you have this costume now if you want it. But you shouldn't use it."

"Then why'd you tell me to buy it?"

"I wanted you to have the choice." He grips your hand and speaks quietly. "It's a rare thing to meet someone who knows about the game, who's seen another world. It's selfish of me to want to keep you here. So you should have the choice

to go. I just don't want you to."

You're breathing shallowly and you're not sure what to say. Bragho looks off to one side. "Sorry. I hardly know you, and I'm more comfortable wearing a different skin than you are. But over time, I think you could really like it here. I wanted to show you around a little. We could take a boat out and see whales. You have whales where you're from, right? This one time I turned into..." He's babbling nervously now.

You break free and stand, wobbling as you go to the balcony's railing. You should be grateful for this new life, with fame and respect and even magic powers. The grey warships in the harbor sit there, hinting at the culture clash happening around you. You could probably make a difference in this world.

You turn from the harbor, one hand on the warm railing and the other steadying your long hair in the wind. The sun shines on your fur. You could take the costume and go to the world of griffins once the three weeks are up. But there's more to find in this world, and at least one other wanderer who'd like to share it with you.

Bragho comes over to you and points below. "Would you like to go sailing? It's something that half the races I've met enjoy."

It's tough to turn that down, looking at the bright sails and smelling the salty breeze. Whatever you do next, this will be a memory to hold onto. The two of you rent a little sailboat and he shows you how he can slice it through the harbor, cutting between the warships. Water sprays up over you and you lean to one side, tail wagging overboard as you help steer. You wave as the boat races past other rental craft and their own happy couples...

The sea breeze turns cold for you, and before long Bragho senses your mood and turns the boat back. You ride the bus "home" in a daze, trying to nap after a confusing day and sort out your feelings. Stupid sappy alien fox-girl emotions from a life that's not even yours! Your whole past has been stolen and now this world is messing with your mind! When you get back to town you try to keep yourself together and give Bragho a good handshake and a smile. And then you run off to the hill where it all began, and let the tears flow.

* * *

"What do you want?" someone asks.

The voice sounds like your own... no, like your old human male self's. You look up from burying your muzzle in your hands, but it's just you on the hill. Your tail's soaking up water from the grass and flowers. "I shouldn't have a tail!" you say. This new voice of yours is ragged and you can't quit crying like a sissy self-indulgent teenager. You don't have a right to be whining. Not with a wonderful life laid out for you!

"Keep telling yourself that," you hear. "It's not like you can ever go back."

Your ears flick to catch a rustle in the grass. If it's Bragho he'll cuddle you in his arms and everything will feel okay... Damn it, no!

Old You asks, "Is it the thought of being female? Walking to the altar in a white dress or whatever they do here; becoming a mother? Or is it the fact that you'll never be human again, stuck with a big pointy muzzle and fur all over? Or the fact that you could've made a difference back home, and you ran away from that life, and you're looking to do the same thing again? Unless you find exactly the right costume, you're never going home."

"I'm scared," you whimper. "Scared that —"

The grass rustles again, distracting you. Then you catch a comforting scent. Wylan smells like well-worn leather and trail dust down to his skin or beyond. "Evenin'," he says with a tip of his hat. He moves stiffly up the hill to reach you. "Feeling all right?"

"I'm not some damsel in distress!" you say.

"Didn't say you were. When I see somebody that needs help, I get my conscience poked with pitchforks till I do something. Doesn't have to be damsels. Or foxes."

Right; he knows your story. When you look up pleadingly into his eyes, they flash like an animal's in the moonlight. Not human. But the feeling behind them is the same. You pat the grass beside you for him to sit. "Just don't touch me."

Wylan lowers himself to join you. He tilts his hat back and looks at the stars fading in. "Nice night. You have stars like this back home?"

"Yeah," you say, sniffing. The sun's vanishing in a blaze of purple and gold, wind's teasing through your fur, and there's a scent of flowers on the breeze. "I ought to be happy."

He glances over at you, then looks back at the sky. "Used to camp out during the war. I wasn't a fighter like my wife, just a maintenance guy. But we were outside together." His scent takes on that clammy tone you sensed from him before. There's hurt buried in him.

You start to lean over to hug him, but stop yourself with a shudder. "Nobody knows what I've been through to get here. Nobody except Bragho, and he... he..."

Wylan looks up sharply. "Did he do anything improper?"

"No! That's just it. He was wonderful, and I felt like I wanted to stay. But what am I doing? I like all the wrong things, I have a tail, I don't know anybody here, my old family and friends are gone. I'm not Lenara, and I'm being pushed into being her!"

Wylan grunts. "I think I get it. You're worried that the wizard fella stole your soul."

"What?"

He waves his hat toward the sunset valley. "This here's my world. Never known another. I've got its dirt in my fur and some family in the soil. And when I get a script I'm always basically the same guy, typecast as a cowboy. The time I played an ancient warlord instead, it was just awful. If you handed me a script like that again, I'd feel like quitting."

"A script," you murmur. Here, the wizard and Bragho basically told you: you're a different person now and here are your house and your job and your new name. "And if I quit, I still can't go home."

Wylan nods. "I know you're not our Lenara, and Bragho takes a shine to you because you've gone through the costume thing like him. The thing is, have you kept what's most important?"

"What's that?"

"You tell me."

You take stock of this strange body you're in. You used to be a decent-looking guy, but you weren't vain enough to think your furless face was the most important thing about you. You're uneasy about some other parts, but even those changes aren't the end of the world. You shut your eyes and think back to your Earth, your childhood, your friends. There's no going back to them. What's left are the memories, and some part of you that wants to keep them.

So there is something left of your old self. "I'm still the same person, at least a little. Even if the rest of me got stolen, eaten, rewritten, I still remember where I'm from, and I still think the same way."

Wylan's tail flicks across the grass, wagging a bit. "That'll change a bit, though. Life does that to you."

You force a smile. It's getting dark and the stars are all blurs as you keep blinking back tears. "I got shoved into this role, but I can play it how I want, right? As long as I keep that memory with me, and some of how I think, I can let myself change and still be the same. Even if I end up using another costume. Oh, I'm not making any sense, am I?"

Wylan says, "It sounds good to me. Actually, there's something I've forgotten." He hauls himself to his feet and offers a hand. "I don't think we've rightly been introduced. I'm Wylan, and I'd like to be your friend."

You look at his fuzzy hand and tell yourself you don't need the help... but your macho pride isn't important, right? You reach out and let him pull you up, feeling light. It's then that you notice the night breeze, making all the plants around you whisper. Every strand of fur tickles you, making your outline blurry and constantly changing. But you feel your own breathing and your heartbeat just the same, inside.

"Hello," you say, shaking his warm hand and pulling him into a hug that feels right no matter what you are. "For now, at least, call me Lenara."

* 4. Stunt Double *

The next day at the studio, there's little for you to do. It's clear things are winding down for this movie, especially your part in it. Hanging around the set with Wylan and the little director makes you feel like an extra, in spite of Wylan's smiles. Bragho shows up late and bashfully avoids looking at you, for which you're grateful. You're not sure what to say to him.

There is one little scene you're needed for, in the afternoon. One thing you've been proud of is doing your acting job well, and trying to live up to Lenara's reputation. The others have been patient with you and given you training. Still, you're new to the actress role and you got the job by sheer luck rather than by earning it. It's humbling to know that.

You head out to lunch by yourself. At the restaurant you pore over the script, and not till the food's gone do you realize you're not fretting about home for once. You grin at this moment of professionalism, then wipe the barbecue sauce off your muzzle.

Then you're strutting through warm sunlight down the streets. The town's quiet as usual compared to a human city full of cars or even the seaside town. Maybe you could ride back there next holy-day and try that restaurant Bragho suggested...

You pause. Okay. You shouldn't worry about enjoying things here; you don't have to pick between losing yourself to Lenara's persona and defying it on purpose. You really owe Wylan one, considering how tough it must be to deal with a depressed fox. You make tentative plans to buy him a good meal.

Warily you peek into the same alley where you were attacked. You should've known better. It's a nice town overall, and you're getting used to the odd logic of the buildings. What's so weird about selling board games and snack food in the same shop, or movies that're really virtual-reality sort of things? The computer laws are obnoxious, but it's not like your homeworld was lacking in social problems. There's always a chance for reform. There's a lot to learn so that you can help with that! What's with the fortress-garden design of that library, anyway? There must be some neat history behind it.

Your ears flick, making you reach up to touch them. There's cheering ahead from the park. You can't stay long — gotta get back to work — but maybe you'll get to see what sports look like around here. Come to think of it, you could probably

make a fortune "inventing" baseball.

Some foxes are gathered on the grass. Mostly ruffled young men kicking around a ball or something, with bystanders watching or... wait. That's not a ball.

They're beating the tar out of a man. He's got short sandy fur and big ears, and when he spots you he calls out "Senorita!"

"Eloy?" you shout, running toward the gang. It's the Fen guy from the library. "Stop it! Stop hitting him!"

Some of the people gathered here aren't in on it. They're trying to tell the gang to stop, too, or just standing around, for whatever innocence that buys them. As you get close and a couple of the punks turn to you, you feel small and weak.

One of the goons glares down at you. "Back off, lady!" The others are kicking Eloy and he's covering his face.

You try to interfere, but the guy yanks you, tearing your sleeve, and shoves you backward. "Help me break this up!" you call out to the onlookers.

The thug says, "Dirty Fen-lover. His kind's behind everything!" Oh god, you can see blood matting Eloy's fur. People are wavering, hesitant to pick a fight with these criminals in the name of a foreigner. And you can't get through, can't help him. They might kill him, and all you can do is walk away...

No. There's one thing you could try, if you can remember how you did it before. If you're willing to put yourself in a lot of firey-hot trouble.

You try to remember the fear from that other night in a dark alley. It flares up disturbingly easily. A red-gold flame spins into existence around your fingers. People start to turn and gasp, but you hardly notice, focusing on pulling more fire from wherever it comes from. Your finger-pads feel seared without actually hurting. You tighten your grip on the flame and point at the goons. "Let him go, *now!*" A blazing jet lashes out and you twist it, somehow, trying not to kill anyone.

The foxes all stare at you, thugs and bystanders alike. And then everybody scatters, except for one kid whose huge eyes are locked on the swirling fireball you're trying to put out. "Whoa..." And except for Eloy.

The fire sputters and goes out as you waggle your hand, leaving your fingers tingling. Hurrying over to Eloy, you kneel on the wet grass and pry his arms off his face. "Eloy, it's me, Lenara. Talk to me."

He moans. His eyes are bloodshot and his yellow-grey fur is streaked with grass, mud, and blood, like some maniac's attacked him with a box of crayons. "Senorita Vale, I did not know you were an action hero."

With a weak smile you look over his wounds and brush your fingers over his filthy fur. You tear off the already-ruined sleeve of your blouse and wrap that around a gash on his arm. Eloy hisses.

That kid's still standing there watching. "What are you doing?" you say. "Get the police or an ambulance or something!"

"I'm here," says another man running onto the scene. He's got a crossbow-pistol thing and a radio on his uniform.

"Officer Ren!" you say. "A mob attacked this man."

Ren says, "I saw some of them fleeing. And they were saying, 'magic'." He crouches by Eloy, his face a professional grimace as he looks the wounds over. "You'll live, mister." He gets on the radio and calls for medics.

Eloy says, "That was a display impressive, senorita." You hold his hand to comfort him. "Now you must run."

Ren says, "I warned you about that talent of yours, ma'am. I can't advise you to take a vacation, but can point out that the mage corps will come to investigate."

Your heart's already pounding from the magic. "To draft me?" you say. Ren nods. "How aggressive are they?"

Eloy coughs. "You could maybe delay a few weeks, if you knew some Fen influential. I know such a man, but he is rather bruised right now."

"Just a few minutes for the medics," Ren assures him.

You wait, looking back and forth between the policeman and your battered Fen admirer. Eloy holds your hand until the medics get to him with a stretcher and

unfamiliar medical gear. Ren says, "Stop by the station and we'll delay the mage draft as well as we can. Or you can skip town. Either way, good luck. You're a hero to us."

A hero? You step back, one hand over your muzzle. You didn't do anything special besides use the powers handed to you. And now you might end up as the Fens' wizard-slave for doing it. You run off, crying and hoping no one sees you.

Bragho spots you as you enter the movie studio. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"No, no, it's —" You pour out an explanation.

Bragho's eyes widen. "Oh, hell, you have magic besides the costume thing? You're in danger." His ears flick back and he turns to spot Wylan and the other actors. They're running up to see you, the panting vixen with torn, charred clothes.

Wylan says, "Lenara, what's wrong now?"

Bragho tells him, "Never you mind!" He frowns and shakes his head. "Sorry. I trust you all. She's just been spotted using... magic." There's a collective gasp. Under his breath he mutters, "Easily impressed low-mana world."

You face the people you've been working with. "Thanks, everyone. You've been good to me. I just don't know what to do now."

Wylan says, "I take it you don't want to work for the Fen government?"

You shake your head no. "As interesting as it'd be, I don't want to if they're the kind of people who'd force it on me."

Wylan nods. "Then it's time to lay low, see if we can make this thing blow over. And nobody here's gonna say anything, right?" He gives a frightening stare to each and every one of his co-workers, whose tails tuck between their legs.

Except Bragho, whose fists tremble at his sides. "There's another option. It means she hides for another week plus, which I think we can manage, and then... a way out opens from then on."

"What?" you ask.

"Costumes," Bragho says, laying his ears flat. "I have three I never used, and there's the one you bought. We might even find two more in a hurry." Some of the other actors look confused; do they not know the full story of that?

You realize the meaning of his idea. "You mean, wait for the game's minimum time and escape with another outfit? Just to avoid this draft? Bragho, couldn't we, I don't know, fight this in court? It's a stupid reason to decide to leave."

"The Fens are in charge, ma'am," says Wylan.

"Someone should stand up to them!"

Wylan droops guiltily, then forces himself to stand up straighter. "If that's what you want to do, I'm with you."

You turn to Bragho. "And what about you? You're saying I should throw away this world, now?"

The fox-man is shaking. "No! I mean, you were thinking about becoming a world-hopping adventurer, right? I want you to be safe and happy, even if..."

Your tail flicks against your legs for several seconds, like a metronome. Then Bragho darts forward and wraps his arms around you, planting a long kiss right on your muzzle. He's warm and strong and the moment makes you happy and terrified.

Bragho lets you go and steps away, swiping the back of his hand over his eyes. "Go. See a hundred other worlds and do good in them."

You stand there flustered, battered. If you stay, there are danger and friends waiting for you here. If you go, there are many unknown wonders awaiting beyond the next costume.

It's *you* that we've been talking about. Your life. So it's only fitting that you be the one to choose where it goes. What's the true ending to this little adventure?

* 5A. Staying: One Tale's End *

~ Years Later ~

"That's how it was," you say. "I told him, I could trade away his world, but he was something I wanted to keep."

George gazes up at you, muzzle hanging open in amazement. On the other side of the sofa, Bragho ruffles the boy's pointy ears. "Bet you didn't know your mom was so cool, eh?"

George stammers as he looks over the mansion's living room with new eyes. There's the menacing black space-knight helmet in its plastic case, the silly photo of Wylan posing with boxing gloves outside a museum, and the fedora and bullwhip. "So all your movies are from a whole other planet?"

"Only some," you say. "The 'Skyhopper' ship there is from a book that wasn't a movie back home, and the bat-girl figurine there with the halberd is based on a true story. The 'Legend of the Chalice' franchise isn't our fault. And your dad made up some of the others by himself."

Bragho says, "With a lot of help. Anyway..." He glances over at you.

You gulp. "Right. George, that's why we need you to stay out of that box of costumes in the poolside room. I thought we'd locked it away."

"You kinda did." George taps his claws together guiltily. To distract you he says, "So you were a boy once?"

"Yes, and I used to get into trouble like that, sometimes. Which is why I'm not grounding you. For that *or* the little incident with your sisters and the box of worms."

"You knew?!" The twins are chasing each other around the living room, oblivious to your story. You get the feeling you'll be telling it all again someday.

You say, "So, that one box is a family secret, okay? And you are definitely not to touch them unless you want to give your parents a heart attack — and *never see us again*. Or until you're older, and fully understand what you'll risk."

Bragho chimes in. His fur's a little grizzled and he's gained a few pounds, but he's the same guy who's been on your side all along. "Someday, you'll have that chance to explore other worlds like we did. If you want to. Your mother and I agreed. And there're six that we found between us, so that's enough for all you kids with three choices to spare."

You glance over at him, tail twitching, and mouth the word, "Two." Bragho's face is suddenly a mix of joy and terror as he looks down at your almost-flat belly. You'd been meaning to tell him anyway... For now you give a Mona Lisa smile.

George is caught up in looking at the movie souvenirs, and at the wooden bat above the fireplace. "And baseball? That's from another world too?"

You nod, then sniff the air and look back at the big custom oven in its brick hearth. "And the pizza over there, which smells about done. A lot of the things that made us so rich are from our... unusual background, but we still worked hard to get where we are."

"Back to the beginning," says Bragho. The family mansion stands on the hill where you first arrived, a place that's special to you both.

The twins wobble back to you, panting. You scoot over so they can sprawl on the sofa beside you, tails draped over your lap. They and George are the most wonderful things to have happened to you, and that's saying a lot.

Your son's ears flick, as though he's not sure what to make of you. He's just learned he's sort of an alien, and his parents are both from other dimensions. ("It figures," you can practically hear him think.) And he could take a costume and go to a world of griffins, or a couple of others, or stay here and live in a world more complicated than he'd known it was. He looks up at you and Bragho again, finally fixing big eyes on you. "You were playing a game. That's what this whole costume thing was about, right? So... did you win?"

You blink, surprised to be reminded of the rules you once fished out of a pocket. The costume game seems far away now, hardly real. But you got through it with your mind and spirit intact, and brought some of your favorite things from Earth along. This world's more peaceful and free thanks to you, too, though how that happened is another story. There's hot pizza in the oven, the warm fur of your kids brushing against you, your best friend Bragho sneaking his fingertips over

to scratch your shoulder, and an independent country out there that you helped create. The fur of your cheeks feels matted with tears. And there's more to see yet in this wonderful new world, more to discover.

"Yes," you tell him, and hug him close. "This is what winning feels like."

* 5B. Leaving: Higher Up and Farther In *

~ Years Later ~

"That's how it was," you say. "I told him he was a good man, and I'd never forget him."

Around you beaks clack and feathers rustle. You've told the raven tribe about your first dimension-hopping experience, as part of your very unusual initiation ceremony. See, it happened only after you fought the Red-Beaked Tyrant and freed the land...

"Wait, wait." Warrior Leif interrupts your story about the foxes' world and reaches one wing out to you. You and the other raven-folk perch in a vast cliffside cave. Firelight dances, and the gruesome carrion of the battle you all just won is only half cleaned away from the once-sacred stone buildings. Leif says, "So you were one of these 'human' creatures, became a talking fox, and only then became one of the People? That's where your magic came from?"

You stand and stretch your wings, then will yourself to shift. Feathers ripple and fade as you assume one of the battle-forms you used today: part human, part wolf. Through your fanged muzzle you say, "I didn't get them from the fox land. This is planet number two hundred and six for me. I've been many, many creatures." There's a gasp at that, and you show off your vixen form too before returning to raven. With this many costumes behind you, you've built up some impressive powers.

Leif's mate Kvelda toasts more fish over the fire. She says, "We knew you were special even before you offered to fight the Tyrant for us." That marauding bird now lays broken on the jagged rocks below, being picked over by hungry cliff-racers.

You bow your beak. "I wanted to do good deeds in a hundred other worlds, like my friend said. It's a good deal for me. I'm not getting any older, and by now I've got..." Two hundred-odd worlds, in which you spent from three weeks to four decades... "Ages of experience. Now that the Brightbeak Clan is free, I can teach you about iron-working and many other things."

"Before you go?" asks Kvelda.

Leif's head-crest sticks up uneasily. He's likely to be the next chieftain, unless you claim the title. You give a screeching laugh. "Don't worry, Leif. I'll move on, as beautiful as your world is. I do need help in finding at least one costume, though. The Tyrant tore apart the first one when he captured me."

"You have the gratitude of all the People! We'll scour the area at dawn."

A fledgeling at the edge of the fire's light chirps nervously. Nobody respected the kid till today. In the end he not only figured out how to disable the Tyrant's secret lightning idol, but made sure the Tyrant didn't just fall off the cliff and out of sight. (You hate it when that happens to villains.) Now he says, "What if we find more than one?"

"Well, there should be two costumes somewhere nearby," you say. "And I want first choice. If you find both, why then, there'll be a spare for somebody."

His eyes go wide.

You open your beak in what passes for a smile. "Don't be too hasty to leave home. If you do, though, I'll teach you what to expect."

A squawk from Leif interrupts you. "What? You would let the boy fly off to another world?"

"If he wants to," you say with a shrug of your wings. "It won't be the first time I've ended up having spares that people wanted, especially when they were really strange and flashy. There was this world that ran on sixteen-bit... never mind; you wouldn't know what that means."

"But he's a weakling!"

You fix Leif with a piercing stare. "The Red-Beaked Tyrant thought he was the

strongest bird in the world. It turns out there's always someone stronger, somewhere. You should remember that." You're not entirely sure that Leif will turn out to be much better as a ruler. But you've tried to spread certain ideas in the places you've visited, like "kill all dictators". You came to that stance after world sixty-six, which you'd rather not remember tonight. You shake your head and smooth down your feathers. "Anyway, he's earned the right to go where he pleases. And he'll get stronger if he does... and maybe even come back someday after helping people in all the worlds."

Kvelda passes grilled fish around. You tear into one of them. You've collected some interesting recipes, but simple ones are the best. Kvelda looks deep in thought. Suddenly her wings flare wide and she squawks, "This all sounds familiar!"

"Oh?"

"There's something you should see. An old legend, higher up and farther in." She points away from the fire into the dark cliff-city.

You crane your neck to peer into the shadows. Suddenly you're not so hungry. "Let's go see it then."

You and Kvelda and the boy take wing, carefully flapping up along the desecrated roofless houses in the darkness. In a little while you reach a high tier of buildings past where you broke out of the Tyrant's prison. Kvelda lights a torch and shows you a space that's been walled up completely. "I think it's here. Very old; I only heard about it from my grandmother. Can you get in?"

"Of course." You shift to a massive form like a centaur elephant and give the stone wall a tap. The rocks crack and fall. You peer in through the hole you made, and spot something. Quickly you clear away more stone blocks, shielding the ravens from debris.

There's a statue here made of tarnished silver. Its wings are spread wide in a welcoming gesture, watching over the cliff city. Before the pedestal was bricked over to hide it, the statue would've been lit from those torch-holders beside it and cast silver firelight on the whole area. And there's writing on the pillar. It says:

"Here, Brig'o the Wanderer led the People to victory over evil. May you do likewise in all the worlds that exist."

You lose control over your mighty battle form, and shift to the sleek vixen body you had a long time ago. Leaning against a broken wall, you manage to laugh and cry at the same time.

Kvelda and the fledgeling exchange a glance as though you're crazy. They back away and give you a few minutes to gather your thoughts.

Then the boy taps your fox-tail with a wingtip. You look down at him, smiling weakly. He says, "Look closer."

At the base of the statue, hidden to one side, is a folded costume with hairless tan skin. It's the first human suit you've seen in all your wandering.

The fledgeling startles you out of your fascination with the thing. "You were playing a game. That's what this whole costume thing was about, right? So... did you win?"

You blink, surprised to be reminded of the rules you once fished out of a pocket. The costume game itself is just a means to an end, to you. But you got through it with your mind and spirit intact, and brought some of your favorite things from Earth along. This world's more peaceful and free thanks to you, too, though how that happened is another story. Through your adventures you've worked to sow the best seeds of hundreds of worlds. You've seen things others could hardly believe, from radiant starships to cities built on the backs of crystal dragons. In hindsight, you've probably earned a few statues yourself. And in this place, as in others, you've inspired someone else to go and do likewise. Even for you who's been through so much, there's more to see.

"Yes," you tell him, and hug him close. "This is what winning feels like."

Stripes of Justice

Terry's time at Bakagaijin High School had been going well despite the occasional disaster. The week after his dad got stationed in Japan and brought him along for the senior year, he'd struggled to fit in, but when a giant squid rose from the sea and everyone had to cower in the basement shelter, he'd started making friends.

What turned things around for him, after moving so far away from his old friends in America, was being introduced to the Element Masters card game. Everybody played it, even the teachers. The Student Council used their elite card skills to stay in power and arrange free subway travel for all Bakagaijin students throughout the city, so long as students promised to hand over any ultra-rare cards they found while traveling. It was said that anyone who collected a full set of ultra-rares could unlock the lost vault of the game's genius creator, a collector of Sumerian artifacts rumored to have magical powers.

Terry didn't much care about winning the game, though, so much as getting to spend time after class with his fellow students. There was Mako, the girl who had a complete prosthetic body that gave her superhuman fighting skills and no boyfriend. Ray was usually depressed even though the government kept pulling him out of class to pilot a giant robot. ("I don't even *like* robots.") There was also a long-eared rabbit-girl claiming to be a princess from another star system, a guy with four cute yet vicious pets that taught the school bullies or some criminals a lesson every week or so, and a billionaire lawyer/ninja who'd been turned into a teenager again by a curse a few years ago. The only one who was just a student, it seemed, was Terry.

One Friday, someone challenged the teacher to an Element Masters game that won them a reprieve on Monday's science test. Terry sat around after school eating hamburgers with Ray and Mako and Himura. Terry said, "Himura, can you teach me to fight?"

Himura was well into his fifth burger. He'd spent gym class demonstrating his

Whirlwind Strike Style, and still wore his martial-arts *gi* with its seven black belts. "No. Fighting comes from the heart."

"Oh, come off it," Ray the pilot said. "Everybody tells me it's all about emotion and fighting spirit, but whenever I have to go fight angels the scientists keep arguing about whether being happy or scared makes my robot more powerful. All you have to do is punch or shoot energy beams until you win. I just ignore the scientists when they start going on about biblical prophecies and stuff."

Terry said, "There's got to be something you can teach me. How about you, Ray? Can you teach me the punching part, so I can be a martial artist someday?" It wouldn't be as cool without a robot, but who knew? Maybe he'd randomly find one like that girl in the cross-town school, and end up going to Mars like her.

Ray slumped in his seat. "If I'm allowed. But you really wouldn't want the kind of lessons I get; they're just depressing."

"Maybe I should get a cyber-body like you, Mako. How do you sign up for that?"

Mako wasn't even pretending to eat; she had a power cord plugged into the wall. She held up two fingers. "Two ways: tragic or wacky. In my case, when I was eight, I somehow got the idea I could jump off the roof and fly. I ended up with a broken arm. Since my dad is the security boss for Nakatakimurasana Corp, the company doctors went a little overboard and replaced my *everything*. They wanted to send me off to uncover a global conspiracy with my new cyber-powers, but then they found out it was just a couple of the managers stealing money for a fake charity. They didn't even go to jail or anything."

"That's rough," said Terry.

She shrugged. "The other option was to get this body by almost dying in a car crash that killed my parents or something, so I like wacky better."

Himura tossed aside another burger wrapper and chugged a big frothy mug of root beer. "Oh yeah! Did you hear about that kid who got flattened by a meteor last week? He got better and now he shoots lasers from his hands."

"Cool." Terry couldn't make himself sound enthusiastic about that, though, when it was someone *else* getting superpowers. Since Terry was already nearly done

with high school and didn't have anything cool going for him yet, would he ever? He could end up as just another salary-man corporate guy, and not the kind who jumped into cyberspace to fight hackers. "What about the field trip next month? Did the principal decide yet if we're going to the magical fox shrine in Kyoto?"

Mako grinned. "Nah, we're touring the Museum of Ancient Samurai Relics. Rumor has it that Amaterasu's mirror is going to be on display for once. Why, were you hoping to meet a fox spirit?"

Himura said, "Those are no fun. This one time, before I got into martial arts, a two-tailed fox offered to swap places with me and send me to his world of talking animals for a year."

Terry stared at him. "And you said no!?"

"Well, yeah. Do I look like a furry?"

"I wish that'd happen to me."

"You'd abandon your family just go on a magical adventure?"

Terry threw up his hands. "It'd only be a for a year! And it always works out so that your family is fine with it. I mean, *nobody* at this school has up and vanished without some good explanation."

"What about Ienaga?" said Himura.

"He turned into a suit of living armor and now he's in the Alchemy Tournament League."

"And Satori?"

"She turned into a *spaceship*. Why am I the only normal one!?"

Terry realized he'd stood and rapped his fists on the table while shouting; everyone was staring at him. He blushed and sat back down.

Mako put one plastic hand on his. "That's what this is about? You *want* to get caught up in some mad science thing?"

"Or magic. I don't care."

"How about training really hard at Element Masters?"

Terry was skeptical. "Don't you need the power to make whatever card you need show up right when you need it?"

"That's called 'cheating'."

Himura said, "Unless you have a black-bordered Lotus Evolution card, since that lets you —" He launched into a detailed explanation about designing a powerful deck.

Terry's eyes glazed over. He didn't think he'd ever master the game. Still, there was a chance he could find one of those ultra-rares that created holographic monsters, and try to keep it a secret from the Student Council. Then they'd hunt him down and he'd end up somehow engaged to a girl who was also a sword, or something weird like that. It'd be cool. "You know what? Let's try it. Can we go card-hunting, and play a few games along the way?"

* * *

They boarded the subway, flashing their student IDs to pay only a token "land" card that you got several of in every Element Masters pack. To go card-hunting meant going to the newsstands that sold cards, then sneaking a peek at the nearby garbage bins. Along the way to the nearest suitable station, Terry and friends grabbed the big table in the center of their subway car, so they could play while zooming across the city. The speed made the trip and the game itself seem to go faster. Terry tried to play by instinct, laying out lands and dragons and elemental bursts wherever they'd fit on the board. He got whipped.

Terry groaned. "Is there actually strategy to this game?"

They left the train car to reach a newsstand that was part of Glowing Blue Pearl Station. Around them the walls were glass, showing them the bay. Mako turned invisible and kept watch while Terry and Himura raided the trash bins for over a dozen card packs, and then they retreated to a cafe table.

"All right!" said Terry, rifling through their harvest. As usual, a lot of customers bought cards, checked for ultra-rares, then threw away the rest without checking

them thoroughly. As often happened, somebody had overlooked a rare mixed in with the commons. Terry could now add a Rampaging Naked Giant to his deck along with some ordinary cards he didn't have before.

He rebuilt his main deck (since like most students he carried his in a holster everywhere he went) on the ride to Ultimate Tower Station, which was a mostly vertical trip. The train's gravity generators were a little unreliable, so everyone kept to their seats. The students got out carefully and raided the trash, two hundred stories up. They didn't find anything except a few lame cards and some discarded power crystals from a wrecked spaceship; nobody even collected those anymore. What a boring side trip.

He got back to the school dorm without incident, and spent hours practicing Element Masters. "Don't worry," said Ray the pilot. "You'll get heroically good at it eventually."

Terry wasn't so sure even with his upgraded deck.

* * *

The next month, he muttered curses all the way back from the museum trip. He'd been so *close* to the Mirror of Amaterasu when it picked the teacher right next to him as its chosen bearer! "Why not me?" he said to Mako.

Mako shook her head, motors whirring faintly. "Have you ever thought that maybe your destiny is to *avoid* all the stuff we go through? If a meteor ever crushes Japan, you'll somehow end up right under one of the craters on it and you'll survive."

"A lot of good that'll do if I'm the only one!" Terry said, sulking atop the "hump seat" on their bus.

"But then you'll find some secret government bunker that lets you rebuild civilization. Look, anything can happen. Have you had any strange dreams lately, maybe?"

Terry groaned and slumped lower in his seat. "Yeah, a dream about being behind the counter making sandwiches at a sub shop."

"Then if the card game thing isn't working, maybe what you need is something

more personal. Maybe you can take a day off and just wander the city. Say you're hunting for battle monsters and the school will let you go, no questions asked."

* * *

Terry sat in the principal's office, red-faced. He'd blushed with guilt when he tried lying about having a dream that he was fated to catch a legendary monster.

The principal sighed and folded his hands, staring at Terry over his intimidating shiny glasses. "All right, you can go. Not that I believe you, but the Student Council has firm rules about allowing time off for quests. Just don't make a habit of it, unless you really do manage to tame a dragon or something. Oh, and if you can find me a mutagen canister or a legend flower, let me know; the school labs need both."

A quest! Terry said, "Sure, I'll keep an eye out for them. Uh... is it okay if I end up not finding them, though?"

The principal smiled in sympathy. "In that case, bring me a tuna sandwich for dinner and we'll call it a successful day."

Terry nodded and slinked away, thinking of his sandwich-shop dream. Anything would be better than that.

* * *

He wandered off the school grounds without a real plan. He tried the downtown shopping district first, and was a little breathless as he rounded each corner hoping to find one of those mysterious curio shops run by a wizened old man from a far-off land like Kentucky. Some robots were brawling in the electronics market but none of them asked for his help, or anything like that.

How about the botanical gardens? Terry rode out there and tried challenging the ticket salesman to an Element Masters game to get in for free, but he lost. Grudgingly Terry paid double for admission.

It was a calming trip, anyway. There was a huge set of glass domes and multi-story greenhouses roomy enough to support the occasional kung fu brawl, and productive enough that the farming section fed a good part of the underground district of Tokyo. A nice wolfsbane display and some fragrant garlic grew in the

anti-monster section. Still, nothing unique stood out to him.

He wandered through the indoor gardens, then out to the park area where some college varsity teams were having a tennis tournament. It looked pretty serious. The Nippon Industrial Institute Unicorns were fighting a heavily cyborged team sponsored by an evil mad scientist. The Unicorns' captain was caught up in some kind of love triangle with the cyborgs' fur-bikini-clad cavewoman coach/mechanic. There were more harsh looks, slow dramatic poses, and one-liners getting launched back and forth then actual serves and volleys.

After a while the game got even slower; the players were just standing there shouting and powering up their battle auras. Bits of green grit levitated up from the tennis court around them. Terry started to turn aside and leave. Just then, a stark white helicopter landed right next to the tennis courts, scattering papers in its wind. A dozen men jumped out, wearing scary theater masks with white sweaters and shorts, and brandished tennis rackets at the players.

Terry backed away from the commotion in spite of his vague hope that they'd start flinging magic around or something. The cyborg players and the college guys alike confronted the newcomers, saying, "Shoo! What's the big idea? Who dares challenge us?"

The masked men charged at them, swinging ferociously. A brawl broke out while the few onlookers stared or ran away. One of the watchers tried instead to steal the helicopter, but a tennis-playing goon whacked him so hard he flew into the sky and twinkled in the upper atmosphere. The mighty player said, "You got served!"

Terry shook his head. In another minute the masked men had claimed the area. Their leader, who had the preppiest sweater of all, shouted, "Listen up! We are the new masters of tennis across the land: the invincible gang of Noh Love! First the tennis courts, then the law courts. Does anyone else dare stand in our way?"

Terry wasn't entirely sure how you could take over the legal system through tennis. Something like that had only ever happened with bowling's Final Strike Tournament, and only for a month or so until the Emperor loaned someone the Imperial Jade Ball of Heaven to save Japan. Still... Terry was decent at tennis. Maybe now, he could at least be involved in something important, even if only in a minor role, and not get smashed into the sky so long as he played fairly.

He stepped forward, took a deep breath, and said, "I challenge you! Against me, I'll teach you to Love-All!"

The leader was masked and he still managed to look unimpressed. "You know that only means being tied 0-0, right?"

"Whatever!" Around Terry, the crowd parted. It was awesome. He hadn't even noticed there was a crowd at his sides. "Somebody lend me a racket."

The evil tennis gang sent forth a huge guy called Astynax to face Terry across the court. Bits of greenish clay crunched under their feet as all else went quiet. Terry waggled a borrowed racket in his hands and gave the foe his best intimidating stare.

Astynax's serve actually caught fire on the way to Terry's side. Terry swung wildly but was more concerned about not getting hit with it.

"How about I serve?" said Terry.

"Alternating games only!" The rules were sacred on that point. Astynax's next serve made a little crater.

That game ended quickly, but the Noh Love gang declared best out of three. Terry's cheeks burned with humiliation. He launched the ball this time with his best slicing serve. There were no special effects, but it hit the dirt and bounced with a wicked spin. Astynax lumbered over to it but misjudged the angle. All right! Terry's honor was satisfied; this wouldn't be a shutout.

Terry shifted position and fired off a fast serve that slashed right past the big guy, then another perfect spin. The game's announcer and one of the Noh Love guys kept up a running commentary. "I can't read his technique," the newscaster said of Terry.

Being three points up or at Forty-Love was dangerous, since it made the other guy look like the underdog despite being two feet taller and having a racket made from a shimmering meteor. Terry served cautiously this time. The foe bellowed through his mask and leaped into the air to counter it. Terry charged the net and volleyed — and won the second game. He could actually save the day!

Unfortunately, the tiebreaker game put Astynax back on offense. Terry couldn't just stand there, so he worked up what courage he could and ran to meet the serve. He managed to nick the ball the first time, bounce it back the second time enough to stave off defeat for a few seconds, then the third time get into a cool rapid-fire volley sequence where he could swear dramatic music had kicked in. For him.

But then Astynax did a super serve that involved spinning around three times and shouting half a dozen words of power in the tongue of dragons, and it burned Terry's racket to ashes.

"How can that be legal?" said Terry, dropping what remained before it could do more than singe his hands.

The masked leader strode onto the court; a choir began chanting faintly in Latin somewhere. "All things are legal under the reign of Noh Love." He lifted his arms to the suddenly stormy heavens. "From this day forth, the only laws are our whims! We shall begin with a demonstration: the death of all who dare face us in court. Seize this upstart!"

Terry stood surrounded by the evil tennis gang. With no powers to call on, no secret techniques to deploy, he did the most sensible thing: dive between the nearest players and run away.

He dashed off of the tennis court, kicking up bits of clay as he ran. They were trying to cut him off from the subway station. He'd have to lose them in the greenhouses. He charged at the nearest entrance, where a helpful and stoic butler opened a door for him.

The greenhouse was big enough that Terry had a chance to run or hide. He racked his brain for the best route to the second-closest subway station. If he was lucky the loony gang members would set off an alarm or one of the — wait a minute. Why hadn't the butler done anything to help?

Well, that was obvious. Unlike Terry, the man knew better than to get directly involved with anything weird.

Terry heard sneakers squeaking along glass floors on the upper level. They were chasing him from above! Then something roared. He looked anxiously upward in time to see the bad guys getting attacked by a big carnivorous plant from the

supposedly mythical Isle of Jardin. Good, but one monster wouldn't be enough to stop them all. Terry fled through rows of alien flowers and past the robots guarding the Peaches of Immortality.

An owl hooted as it leaped from a tree and swooped toward him. It said, "You there! Take this!" It clutched something in its talons and dropped it deftly on the edge of a fountain, right in Terry's path. Terry skidded to a stop and froze, though the gangsters were no more than a minute behind.

The owl had put a *wand* there. An elaborate shiny wooden rod wreathed in stylized green vines and tipped with a strawberry design.

"Well?" said the owl, peering at him.

Terry looked back over one shoulder and saw masked men approaching from across a little maze of corn. He could just run and be done with this nonsense, going back to his friends' sympathy.

Instead he snagged the wand and waved it as dramatically as he could, saying, "I'll take what I can get!"

A whirlwind spun him into the air and everything around him got drowned out by sparkles and a cool violin theme. Some kind of magic, finally! He could be a druid or wizard gardener or tree-golem, and finally fit in! The Noh Love gang reached him but paused at a respectful distance, staring up. No doubt they were intimidated by the wind and the scent of... musk?

Terry stopped twirling for a moment, and felt something long, fuzzy and heavy stretch out from the base of his spine. Then his torso pulled longer, too, and he flailed in the air with his hands. No, wait. The limbs in front of him weren't his hands or feet, but a set of black-furred extra legs in between with white fuzzy paws! It was about then that his clothes disintegrated into a mass of colorful ribbons, exposing lots of dark fur spreading across his skin. The ribbons reformed as a green thing that barely came down past his waist, not reaching the new paws. He grabbed at the fabric and at the same time spotted the white fur and claws on his actual hands, and the cute pleated pattern on the new outfit.

A stray ribbon wound itself through his hair and another along the mass of fur behind him, tickling him and making the big thing flick into view. He now had a tail with black fur and white stripes. His nose seemed to be sticking too far out in

front of his eyes. He tried to focus on it and realized he was staring at an animal-like muzzle on his face. Then he glanced down. The top of his new vine-decorated blouse pulled tight as his chest swelled out to fill it.

Terry yelped and flailed in midair. The wind set him down on four fuzzy paws, so that he was bent like an L with a long quadruped body under his surprisingly busty torso.

"A centaur... skunk?" said the nearest gangster, stepping forward like he expected a vicious volley.

The leader yanked him back, saying, "You fool, that's a magical girl! If we attack now she'll crush us like an easy lob. Fall back!"

Terry stumbled on his new paws, shocked. He was still holding the wand. He told himself not to worry about exactly what had happened; the gangsters were getting away. He jabbed the wand in their direction and staggered forward. In a too-high voice he shouted the first mystical attack phrase that came to mind. "Strawberry... Smite!"

Curls of red and green energy swirled around him and lanced toward the fleeing tennis guys, becoming a hail of thousands of strawberries that pelted them and knocked them down on the now-slippery glass floor. Red juice oozed in pools under them.

"We'll have to work on your attacks," said the owl, perching on a nearby statue. "Do something entangling."

"How?" said Terry.

"Same way."

Terry advanced on the gang, walking on four feet without thinking too hard about it, and lifted the wand skyward. "Vines, seize my enemies! Entangling, uh, Justice Strike!"

Obligingly, phantom vines of light erupted from the floor and grabbed the gangsters. It worked for several seconds before the glass floor shattered, cracked by magic roots.

Terry shrieked as he crashed along with the whole crowd into the first floor's giant indoor rice paddy. He stood up and felt heavy, weighed down by a whole lot of soaked monochrome fur. The vines had vanished but the whole tennis crew moaned and struggled to stand.

It was about then that the cops showed up. Not just the regular ones, but a team from the Special Police. There was also a registered B-Rank Vigilante who looked like a samurai pro wrestler, and an agent from the Section 8 Law Division of Underdressed Cyborgs. Terry put his hands up, accidentally raised his new forepaws too, and splashed face-first back into water that tasted like rice and frogs.

The Special Police cop (they had snazzier uniforms than the poor regular kind) took the lead by pulling Terry out of the muck. "Ma'am, did you capture these criminals? There's no record of you."

A helicopter whirred in the distance. "Somebody's getting away!" Terry shouted, seeing a flash of its white blades rising past the greenhouse. The other police were busy handcuffing people.

The cop said, "Tanaka, get them!" The vigilante ran off and out of sight. Presumably he could jump onto the helicopter and take it down. "Have we got witnesses?"

The butler said, "I saw a lot of it, sir. It was an origin story."

"Ah, one of those," said the cop. To Terry he added, "If you're a new magical girl and not just some random idiot, that'd help explain why you're the only one not gashed by broken glass. This must be your animal companion. Has it got a name?"

Terry looked around and spotted the owl. "You! You did this to me!" He wasn't sure whether to be furious or grateful for turning him into this weird fuzzy shape.

The owl flew down to perch on Terry's shoulder. "Nice to meet you. The name is Kayda, and no, I didn't do this."

"No?" Terry's new tail lashed back and forth, stirring the swampy water. "Do you know how hard I wished for a giant robot, a spellbook, a mystical guitar?"

Anything? Now you're going to tell me 'the power was in me all along'?"

The owl shrugged his wings. "Well, no, it was mostly the Wand of Mephit. Partly you, though. These things almost never happen to someone who doesn't *try*."

The cop said, "Are you two just going to stand there hooting and making chirpy skunk noises at each other?"

Terry blushed. "Uh, Officer, he says his name is Kayda. Am I under arrest? This is... I'm kind of in shock right now."

"Understandable. We'll have to take you to the station for processing and some initial testing of your powers, but then you're free to go."

The owl shifted on his talons and turned his head around to stare along Terry's new lower back. "I must say this isn't quite what I expected the wand to do."

Terry stamped the pond, splashing everywhere. "Why me? Am I stuck like this? Why a skunk?!"

The owl rubbed around his eyes with one wingtip as though cleaning a pair of spectacles. "I'll save a full discussion of magical theory for later, but I was empowered as the guardian of a... cast-off artifact from the divine forge. I believe the Wand was intended as a joke or a way of testing unusual powers. I was offered the gift of intelligence in return for accepting a role of working with its owner, and I accepted rather than spend my life eating raw mice. As for changing back, of course you can. You need only to learn the appropriate transformation phrases. Assuming, of course, that you don't immediately reject your bond to the Wand."

Terry held the berry-themed magic wand in both hands, shivering through his fur. "I could throw this thing away, still?"

"If you act quickly, yes. Before it becomes nearly impossible to steal or lose."

The Special Police man tapped one foot while a regular cop ran up with a pile of towels. "Can we save whatever drama you're going through for later, miss? The Martian Lives Matter people are looting downtown again."

Terry looked down at his ridiculous green blouse/skirt thing, his extended body, and the magic wand responsible for both. He sighed.

* * *

He'd gathered Mako and Himura, and Ray showed up after he got done killing some kind of apocalypse seraph rising from the sea. They all grabbed a booth at their favorite restaurant, where Terry paid for a round of burgers and root beer. He sat there with no fur and two legs. His owl companion was busy falling in love with Mako.

Mako looked over from feeding french fries to the owl. "Congratulations, Terry! I heard you had some kind of adventure at last. You've got a scary masked nemesis, even."

"Yeah, and he got away. Of course." Terry was starved; his appetite was apparently sized for his larger form.

Ray said, "I was too busy to hear the details. What kind of powers did you get?"

Blushing over his food, Terry muttered, "Magical girl."

Ray snorted. "Better than nothing."

Terry said, "Yeah. So. I finally belong."

"Don't say that," said Mako. "You were always our friend. Isn't that so, everyone?"

Himura joined in with the reassurance, but he said, "You're right, though, Terry. You were always going to be jealous."

Terry hadn't done much to earn this fate, but he'd done *something*. He put down his food and stood. "I admit it. I don't *want* to learn the lesson that it's okay to be ordinary. Even if it's ridiculous, I'd rather be out there with you guys, doing cool stuff."

Mako smiled. "I like that attitude. Will you show us the whole transformation sequence and your powers?"

Terry stepped away from the table. "Sure. Stand back." He gestured toward the wand, making it float over to his hand, and waved it with such enthusiasm that he spun around and sparkled even before the magic fully activated. "Power of Mephit, I call upon you! Stripes of Justice!" The whirlwind raised him up and he began changing. He'd only started training with his companion and his new powers, but he'd already decided: they were totally worth it.

* * *

Terry was practicing tennis today, just in case. He played against 10N35, the school's outdated tennis android, after class. Kayda perched on the fence around the court and hooted encouragingly.

The robot shot two volleys at once at Terry, who jumped and tried to whack both back across the net. He got one pretty well but the other pinged off the edge of his racket and went foul.

"Why are you bothering with that bucket of bolts?" asked Kayda.

"Did you see how the Noh Love gang played? If I'm not going to be able to apply dragon magic or something to my game, I basically need to master playing against cheaters."

"Indeed!" boomed a voice from the heavens. A tiny cloud descended, bearing a cross-legged figure who looked like a genie or something. He wore flowing robes, short shorts, permanently angry eyebrows, and a sweatband. A cloud of tennis balls orbited him. "I am Mi-Ken-Ro the God of Tennis, and I have seen your enemies' transgressions against good sportsmanship."

Terry stood there blinking, then turned off the robot. "You know, a few days ago I would have killed to meet you. Right now, I'm a little overwhelmed."

"Be at peace," said Mi-Ken-Ro, and pointed at his chest. "May the advantage be *in*."

Terry had to think about tennis terminology for a moment. "Oh, I get it."

Mi-Ken-Ro sighed. Kayda said, "Sorry, Your Radiance. Terry here has just been caught up in an unrelated sort of magic."

Terry nodded. "Yeah. So if you're here to offer me some kind of Legendary Racket of the Wicked Spin, it's a little redundant." Terry looked down at the concrete court. "There must be other schools nearby where *somebody* is pining for magic of their own. Try looking for them to be your hero."

The god said, "That's just it. The artifact you imagine is really the Racket of the Serene Twins of Venus, and the Noh Love Gang has discovered its location."

"Okay, but again, I have a whole new set of powers to figure out and I'm sure someone else can handle your problem."

The orbiting orbs burst into flame. "I care not for your second-rate powers! If the Racket falls into their hands, the fate of the world is at stake!"

"While we're on the subject," said Terry, "How exactly does being good at tennis allow you to take over the court system?"

"The two are linked by the power of competition. I tell you, young Terry, that your enemies will surely seek you out. Only returning the Racket to its divine case can truly protect you and your friends from this volley of evil."

Terry winced. He didn't care about this new quest, but the gang really had been crazy enough that it might endanger his friends. He turned to Kayda and said, "Might as well listen, right?" The owl shrugged.

Mi-Ken-Ro spun a tale of a divine craftsman forging the Racket in the dawn of time, from a fallen star, to inspire the game sometime thousands of years ago. Supposedly, tennis had existed in ancient China and was once considered the sport of dragons. The Chinese emperor Shi Huangdi had buried a mighty army of terra-cotta tennis golems in case they might ever need to be activated again.

Terry finally interrupted: "I need to consult with my spirit guide. Can you leave us for a minute?"

Mi-Ken-Ro vanished in a puff of yellowish fuzz. "Whew," said Terry. "Kayda, I don't know enough about this magical girl thing to know if I'm doing it right. Should we tell him to buzz off, or accept his quest?"

Kayda flew down to land on the court's net. "Your instincts are probably right. We have no obligation to this god, but he *is* a god and his nonsense is wrapped

up in the business of your current nemesis. Best to take on the quest and then see if someone else wants to take it over for the sake of gaining powers of their own."

Terry nodded, then called for the god. Mi-Ken-Ro reappeared. Terry startled at how close he was. "Right. Well, I've decided to accept your quest."

Mi-Ken-Ro said, "Excellent! As a token of my favor, take this headband." He removed the sweaty thing from his forehead and handed it over. As soon as Terry reluctantly took the thing, the god vanished, with the words, "Seek the Racket where one may best serve for doubles."

Terry asked his owl, "Are gods required to be cryptic?"

"It's part of the job description."

"You know that from being involved with this 'artifacts from the divine forge' business?"

Kayda shrugged. "No, I'm afraid I didn't know much at the time; I'd just become intelligent. But I did meet one or two other gods, and they were... difficult. You know, Terry, if you're fated to get into more tennis games, you really should practice in your transformed shape."

"You're probably right." They hadn't yet had a chance to go over the exact nature of his powers in much detail, but Kayda had started explaining that Terry's new shape had extra strength and speed and so on. Terry patted his pockets to look for the wand, and panicked for a moment when he couldn't find it.

The owl said, "It's always with you in spirit. Just... grab it."

Terry thought back to the dramatic posing he'd done to make the Wand of Mephit work before. He nodded. Then he made sure there was some clear space around him, and whipped his left hand through the air as though to brandish the wand. Suddenly it was there in his hand. "Stripes of Justice!" he called out, and transformed.

Much sparkling and spinning later, he landed lightly on four white-furred paws. "This still feels really weird," he said, practicing picking one hindfoot off the ground and then one forefoot. Not to mention his higher voice, the snout

between his eyes, and the sight of his tight blouse.

"Practice will help you get used to it, I assume."

"Hey, where did my racket go — hmm?" Terry turned in a circle and discovered that the Wand of Mephit was now a tennis racket entwined with vines and strawberry designs. "Convenient. I hope it's not stuck this way; I don't really want to have everything I do revolve around sports now."

While Terry pranced around the court and reactivated the ball-shooting robot, Kayda critiqued his moves. "If I understand correctly, your wand is empathic. You should be able to turn it into whatever weapon you need at the moment. As for this new quest, does this mean you're eager to be a magical girl instead of a sports star?"

Terry hopped back and forth and swatted serves from 10N35. A ball whacked him on his fluffy tail and made him wince. "It wasn't quite what I had in mind, but like I said, I'll take it. What sort of adventures *am* I supposed to be having, anyway?"

"Doing battles with monsters, maybe demons or aliens."

That sounded scary, but fun. "Let's find a way to practice for that. Seems like a higher priority." There'd been reports of a demon running around in the NeoHarajuku District last week, but Terry hadn't paid it much attention. Fighting bad guys had been something that only the cool people could do, after all. Terry bounced around on the court and punched and kicked the air, saying, "Yeah. Let's hit the gym and learn some real fighting skills!"

Before Kayda could answer, a gaggle of girls in aprons and poofy white hats spotted Terry and whooped, heading right for him. "Hey, a new student! Come on, quick!"

Terry twitched his tail, which still felt like it was a mile behind him. "Is anybody in danger?"

"Our salad master is out sick! Come on; we need you to fill in." Two gals began dragging Terry along by the arms.

"Um, have you noticed I'm part skunk?"

"So what?" Unfazed, his fellow students giggled and pulled him into the school's Battle Kitchen. Terry had watched a few matches here from the bleachers, but had never before been under the hot lights that shined down the twin purple and yellow kitchen setups where Bakagaijin students did culinary battle with rival schools. Before Terry knew it he'd been given a frilly white apron and a chef hat and had been coaxed into washing his hands and forepaws. The cooking team was already busy organizing pots and pans and vegetables. The purple side was still empty but spectators had started to gather. Terry felt them staring, and blushed.

"Hold on!" said Terry. "What do you want from me? Just to join in and help you make salads?"

A girl named Angelique Tanaka was on the team, tying her long blue hair back and looking Terry over in a way that made him uncomfortable. "I don't know who you are, new gal, but we've got a very serious match starting any minute and with Minuette the Endive Queen missing, you're drafted. Just follow our lead and don't screw up."

"I *might* not be the ideal choice for this," he said. With his long lower body in the way, he kept bumping into the countertops and cooks had to hop over him or dodge his waving tail. "I'd at least need a hairnet."

Angelique snapped her fingers. "Hairnet for the new salad chef!" Someone grabbed an extra-large mesh thing and slid it onto Terry's tail, startling him enough that the big fluffy thing lifted alarmingly. He whirled around and said, "Do *not* sneak up on me from behind!"

He sighed; surely he was going to need that aspect of his powers at some point. He brushed his tail back down.

The rival cooking team arrived. There were seven cooks for Bakagaijin counting himself, but the newcomers were just five. They called attention to this by leaping into the room one at a time, introducing themselves as the Green Cook! The Yellow Cook! The...

"Oh dear Athena," said Kayda, covering his eyes with one wing. "It's one of those color-coordinated super teams."

Terry spoke to him, aware that to everyone else's ears he was just chirping and

squeaking. "When it rains, it pours. So I have to join the girls' cooking team while I'm supposed to be defending the honor of tennis and probably saving Japan from demons."

"You don't *have* to," said the owl.

Terry looked out at the audience. Ray and Mako were there, waving for attention. Terry waved back with one forepaw, then said to Kayda, "It'll be fun. We do need to get to the magical girl training tonight, though."

"I get the sense," said his companion, "that coping with unusual interruptions is going to be a key part of that training. But yes, very well; let's practice your skills in this sort of arena and see how it goes."

Summoning strawberries and leaves was actually pretty useful for a substitute salad-maker, it turned out. When the rival team started trying ninjitsu dirty tricks to sabotage his side's food, and a brawl broke out, Terry took it in stride and considered it a chance to learn.

He looked ridiculous even beyond being a skunk-girl with too many paws, but there was still a big grin on his muzzle.

Lifepod

Neil woke up with sticky hands and a headache. He focused his eyes enough to see the dried blood on his fingers and feel more of it clotted in his hair. The room was nearly upside-down. Metal, with flashing lights that made his skull throb.

The lifepod!

He cursed, sat up, and blacked out for a moment. He was on the ceiling of a lifepod from the *Titan*, and it was bobbing on the waves of an alien sea.

He'd been briefed on emergency procedures, but had assumed that his role in an emergency would be to stay out of the way. When it came to spaceflight, there wasn't much distance between problems the bridge crew could handle, and those that'd kill everyone. As a junior engineer on a thousand-man ship he'd never expected to survive a disaster and end up... wherever this was.

Dimly, he recalled his short period of space-specific training. He muttered, "What's the first thing that could kill me?"

He poked at his head and hissed in pain, but there was no bright new blood on his fingers. All his limbs were where they ought to be, though he'd been in his pajamas when the alarm sounded and they were a singed, torn mess now. So, he was hurt and maybe he had a concussion, but he wasn't bleeding to death. Neil climbed up to one knee and managed to focus his eyes on the lifepod's computer screen. It said, upside-down:

"Hull Integrity: OK. Life Support: Caution. Production Facility: Caution. Communications: 1 Signal."

Contact! Neil lunged toward the screen to poke the comms button, though it was hardly top priority. Then his heart sank. The lifepod had a signal only from the *Titan*'s emergency beacon, pumping out a mindless distress call. No word from any other survivors. He swore and smacked the wall with his palm. Good

riddance to the captain who'd done this to everyone, but damn, nearly a thousand people were dead! Including him, if he couldn't get rescued. He shook his head and tried to focus on the present.

Neil checked the various padded containers on every surface of the pod. ExoTech Interstellar had supplied it with all kinds of basic survival gear, like a water purifier and flares, but the same lifepod that'd saved him was apparently floating on water. He wasn't going to be able to walk out of here and pitch a tent. And who knew what the local biology would do to human flesh?

So: what was wrong with the life support system? He checked the computer. No urgent problems stood out, and the air outside was breathable. But the pod's batteries were limited, the external solar panel was broken, and he couldn't do much with the pod unless he kept it charged. There wasn't even usable food; a minor chemical spill had ruined the supply in one of the compartments. What about the "production facility"? During training, it'd been described to him as a nearly full-featured 3D printer, a smaller version of the massive omniprinters *Titan* had been carrying. The big versions were meant to help start a whole colony. Omniprinters weren't as fast or efficient as a real factory, but they'd come a long way from their first days as little more than toys that squirted out layers of plastic to build crude objects.

Neil thought about the unknown world outside, and trembled. He needed to know how screwed he was. He tapped the lifepod's computer screen to bring up specifications for the omniprinter and find out just what "nearly full-featured" meant. After a minute of reading, he whistled. The description wasn't just marketing-speak. With the lifepod's machinery, he could build everything from a wrench to a city if he had the right materials and enough time. Trouble was, there was no raw material on hand but a few ingots of plastic and titanium and some vials of the rarer elements needed for fancy electronics. Meanwhile, the pod's batteries were gradually ticking downward.

As for his surroundings, Neil was able to pull up a feed from the one camera still working on the pod's hull. Nothing but upside-down ocean. He unlatched the floor hatch (which was on top) and peeked out for the first time. An alien sun, a little too orange and too big, lit a deceptively familiar blue sky. The air was warm and humid, filling his lungs and making him feel more awake. It was rich in oxygen. Some kind of alien bird flew by. He'd probably have said it was "majestic" and "stirring" if he weren't battered and scared and dressed in ragged

pajamas. He froze in place, wanting very much to shut the hatch and wait until somebody came to help him.

But if he was going to survive, he needed to go swimming. He ducked back into the pod and found that, for some reason, the basic supplies included a towel.

The computer beeped and displayed, "Please provide blood sample." A picture of the medical kit appeared.

It made sense to get himself checked out, but he wasn't eager to have an open wound to expose to the ocean. "Later." For now he used a little survival mirror and the pod's internal camera to check out his bloody skull. The cuts had healed quickly thanks to the minor biomods he'd had since birth. He knew enough first aid to check himself for a concussion. His pupils and everything looked okay.

He climbed down the pod's external ladder and eased himself into the sea. It didn't dissolve his skin, so that was a good start. Through blurry vision he looked around underwater. He'd come down in a shallow area, maybe ten meters deep. The seabed here was sand and something like coral. He looked around suspiciously for anything shark-like. The few fish around here looked pretty harmless judging from their parrot-like beaks and lack of immediate interest in him, but he'd still need to be careful. He took a knife along. Where to begin? He looked up at the processing chute that was built into the pod's exterior, for him to more-or-less shovel stuff into. Time for some samples.

He used a hammer and spade to scoop up some sand and break off a chunk of coral, then fed those into the hopper. He grabbed a stalk of purple seaweed after poking it a few times to make sure it didn't do anything horrible. Then he climbed back into the pod to dry off and see what he'd won.

Silicon in the sand, the computer said. Obviously; sand was basically powdered quartz. The seaweed was carbon, nitrogen, the usual. Machines whirled to life around him to process the stuff. The pod had some ability to break what he'd found into simple chemicals, if not to turn lead into gold. Gauges for various materials filled up to a whopping 0.1%. Encouraged now, Neil flipped through the available blueprints again and saw that a basic solar panel would be within his reach, if he kept foraging. And if the pod's power supply held out. He looked at the battery gauge and murmured, "It's my life meter, for now." He slapped a button to stop the elemental processing, then to turn the lights and life support

down to a bare minimum. The high-tech equipment grew suddenly quiet and dark but for three tiny red bulbs. It was a preview of a future without energy. A good motivator, too.

He shuddered and pulled himself back into the sea to work. He swam all around the lifepod to scout for resources and shovel them in. Okay, he definitely needed silica, so he could turn the materials processor on for that and a few other ingredients. But first, did he want to keep living in an upside-down habitat that might break the machinery if he used it that way? He risked breaking the pod worse if he righted it, but it'd be worse to leave it inverted. Or at least, it'd *feel* worse, like a perpetual emergency.

He climbed back inside and got out a coil of wondrously light spidersilk rope. He'd done some boating back home on Mars, in the mighty canyon city that'd been glassed over and terraformed. The scariest part back then had been when the boat had flipped over, but there'd been a solution to that. He tied the rope to a cleat built into the lifepod's hull, at what was currently the top. Then he braced his feet against the pod, leaned backward, and let his weight slowly flip the whole thing over with a smack against the sea. The pod bobbed and steadied on a set of bright orange floaters.

Progress! He had one thing on this damn world already that wasn't knocked over and ruined! Neil bobbed in the gentle current and found that he had something in his eye. He rubbed away a tear and let the salt mingle with this planet's supply.

Neil clambered back into the lifepod through the now-upper hatch and made sure everything was in order. He hesitated over the Start button for the materials processor, then slapped it. "Go, my robot minions." The pod started burning through its batteries.

He was starved, though. He went back out to the water and wasted time trying to catch the local fish. The pod's computer said it could process pretty much anything organic into Nutrition Bricks (the actual recipe name), but warned that the seaweed was probably going to be less efficient than the animal life. Worse yet, said the initial analysis, it looked like he couldn't directly eat *anything* that grew here! There was a warning, not that it was toxic to touch but that the protein was somehow... mirror-reversed? Inedible in any case. His specialty was the more hard and chunky aspects of engineering, like turning printed rivets and girders into buildings. If he could just get a sample of the fish, he'd have a better

idea of his cooking prospects and whether the protein thing applied to all local life. He'd rather not spend the rest of his days eating bricks and being utterly dependent on one machine.

With the computer mostly tied up in running the whirring, chugging omniprinter, he didn't have much to do. He swam a bit more and gathered more seaweed, careful not to denude the whole area. Who knew how long he'd be here?

He didn't want to think about that, because the answer was "not long" if he forgot anything crucial. Back inside the pod he had the computer screen show him a survival guidebook called *Survive and Thrive*. It began with a statement that he hopefully was reading the thing *before* needing it. Neil muttered, "That ship has sailed."

He got out the medical kit and reluctantly nicked his own finger to let it bleed into a sample vial, then fed it to the machine to scan whenever it was ready. He sealed the cut with some ExoTech QuickClot Foam.

The air was growing muggy and stale with the hatches closed, but he didn't want to waste power. He lay there and skimmed the survival guide.

Finally the machine beeped. It sounded happy. A gleaming black panel made of a tough, flexible plastic slowly whirled out of the printer, complete with wiring for hooking it up. Neil kissed the thing, then anxiously wiped the mark away and headed outside with it. Just then his stomach rumbled; he needed to recharge too. He shook his head. "I can go weeks without food if I have to." Outside, the sun hung low in the sky as further motivation. Neil carefully hung the solar panel like a flag or blanket on the side of the pod to drink what light was left in the day. He ducked in and out of the pod a few times to check the sensor feedback and think about where it'd be best to leave the thing long-term. Maybe right on the water, since it could absorb a little energy from the waves' motion too. No, no, he didn't want to risk having fish nibble on the thing when it was so important. He could play around with his second or third panel. When you have almost nothing, the guidebook said, even the simplest tools are to be guarded like a dragon's hoard.

The pod had a sunny yellow icon on its screen indicating a slight energy income. Neil sat down on the bare metal floor and said, "So the machinery's not about to go down forever. What's the *next* thing that could kill me?"

Water. The ocean's salinity was lower than Earth's but still undrinkable. Neil called for some purified water and put an ExoTech Ultimate Wilderness Container (apparently just a sturdy plastic bottle) under the tap. It filled slowly with pure, lukewarm water. Excellent! Once he'd drunk his fill he patted the machine and said, "Thanks. Now, food?"

The pod responded to a few keypresses and gradually extruded a brown block of "food". Neil made a face at it. Still he took the half-ration and nibbled it. Tasted like soap, but supposedly it was very nutritious.

He opened the hatch to get some fresh air. The sky was dim and red now, and he didn't want to swim at night and risk learning the hard way about local nocturnal predators. He took one last swim to gather interesting shells (full of calcium) and a new species of seaweed. The nimble little fish still eluded him. He dried off inside the pod and settled in to wait through the long dark. If only his fellow crewmen had made it here with him, they could've colonized this place together instead of the world they'd been heading for! Neil sat up on the hard floor with his back against a shelf, using his towel for a pillow and his ruined clothes for a mattress, and took a nap.

The computer roused him. "Biological adaptation analysis complete," it said. "Synthesize adaptation serum? (Estimated battery drain 2%, ingredients listed below.)"

Neil sat up. "What? Adaptation?" He pushed a button and the machine buzzed. He'd opened the wrong menu, and now he couldn't access the right documentation to get a good explanation without confirming or rejecting the offer. It looked like a small "purchase" from the resources he'd gathered, just common elements rearranged cleverly, so he went ahead and confirmed.

In a few minutes a tray opened on one of the omniprinter's smaller ports, revealing a full syringe. Neil stared at it and brought up more info at last. The odd thing was that it read like the *Titan*'s corporate documentation rather than the more practical tech manuals. "Your personalized Adaptation Serum is keyed both to your own stored genetic profile and to an analysis of local life. Before exposing yourself to native pathogens, let your sample retrieval team feed data into the patented ExoTech GeneForge to prepare you for your amazing feats of colonization."

Native pathogens. Neil looked at his bare hands and arms, wondering what horrible microbes might already be taking him apart from the inside. From what he understood of alien life, there shouldn't be a lot of cross-compatibility of diseases, but who knew? The guys who built this pod knew what they were doing. He wiped a patch of his skin clean and injected himself, wincing at the sting.

Almost immediately he got hungry again. He ordered another brick and scarfed it down, then flopped back onto the pod's bare floor. The waves sloshed under him and the world spun for a while.

* * *

When he could think straight again, it was because of something caught under him. He rolled over, groaning, and his tail banged into a cabinet. He did a double-take. He'd grown a fuzzy brown tail! He grabbed the thing and felt the touch, as though he were clutching part of his spine. He was overheated too. He looked himself over again and yelped in surprise. A fuzzy pelt covered his torso and was slowly spreading out to his upper arms and thighs. It felt like he'd put on a partial wetsuit. He stood up, careful not to bang his head against the pod's ceiling. There was a little mirror in the supplies. It showed him his normal human face, but the fur — cream-colored on his front, darker brown on the back — was prickling and creeping upward from his chest to approach his neck.

"Computer! What the hell!"

The screen said, "Unknown command. Elevated voice stress level detected. Would you like to engage the 'Wilson' Survivor Conversation System?"

Instead, Neil tapped buttons on the screen. His medical profile hadn't gotten a full update since his last checkup aboard *Titan*, yet the record had changed greatly. His basic stats of height, weight and colors were all different (especially the last one), and the "Biomods" section had expanded. "Disease Resistance Upgrade, Swimming Enhancement, Metabolic Chirality Adapter" and other entries, none of which explained why he had fur! Or did it, under the "Swimming Enhancement"? He looked himself over with the little mirror again, watching as the fur spread slowly down his limbs and up to his chin. He was actually able to see two layers of individual brown hairs sprouting along his arm. "I look like... an otter?"

In answer to his question, his face began to push forward into a muzzle, and he felt his teeth reshaping subtly in his longer jaws. His ears itched terribly as they migrated higher along his skull, over the course of a few minutes. He tapped the screen's buttons for more information and noticed that his fingers felt stretched out, gummy in between. His palms had become thicker and leathery, with webbing growing in between them. He opened and closed his hands repeatedly and watched little claws forming from what had been his fingernails. It was crazy to give somebody a change like *this* as part of a survival system! Still, it made sense in a roundabout way. He had this high-tech lifepod, but just a little while ago he'd been scared that the batteries would run out and he'd be totally out of options. With this changing body, he should be better equipped to survive with or without tools. Which was good, because right now he was naked.

He spent a while patting at his ottery, whiskered muzzle and his little round ears, and looking the rest of himself over. A subtle fizzy sensation all through his body came and went, maybe the serum finishing its work. He leaned back against the lifepod wall, letting the rocking of the waves calm him. His tail felt cold against the metal.

He opened the floor hatch and gingerly lowered himself into the water, feeling it flow through his fur for the first time. He was floating in a strange way. He ran one webbed hand along the fur of his chest and felt it ripple, full of air and a little water that'd keep close to his skin and absorb his warmth. Built-in wetsuit!

Neil dived. It was easy to hold his breath long enough to explore the shallow seabed. Colorful things drifted past him and caught his attention. By instinct he darted toward them without properly kicking, yet he was moving really fast! He flipped around in a vertical loop and saw his long tail wagging. Here was a new way to swim. He darted after the fish again and saw them more clearly than before even though he was underwater. His eyes must have adapted. Just a little farther... Aha! He snagged one of the big-eyed critters in his webbed hands and held onto it while it thrashed. Victory! He swam back to the pod and whacked the fish hard enough to kill it, then sliced off a chunk of the flesh. He fed it into the machine.

"Processing," it said. Neil tapped one foot impatiently and whipped his tail back and forth. Finally it spat out an analysis showing that it was protein-rich and ought to be edible by anyone with a Metabolic Chirality Adapter. The machine offered to process the fish into a Nutrition Brick.

Neil grinned, tapping buttons. "No, I want this one grilled." He fed the whole fish into the machine to be heated with minimal processing.

It was delicious. Tangy. A chunk of lightly roasted seaweed made a nice side dish.

* * *

Two weeks later, Neil inspected the concrete he'd poured. His new base, a collection of metal cylinders, was on the seabed around eight meters down, to protect it against storms. He'd extended part of it upward until he could add a concrete bunker that broke the surface and was only partly covered. He had a patio! There were solar panels feeding energy to his base's batteries, and he still had the lifepod itself as an emergency backup shelter.

The concrete patio had cured, hardening despite exposure to seawater. Neil grabbed the railing he'd built into it and climbed down a hatch and ladder, into his new home. This was a little world of metal and plastic that hummed with electricity and creaked faintly with the waves.

"Greetings, Neil," said the robotic voice of the base's computer. Neil had given in and activated the Wilson Survivor Conversation System so he'd have a fake personality to talk with and avoid going nuts. It said, "All systems are in good condition. How are you?"

"Hungry!" he said. He hadn't yet figured out how to build a full-body dryer, so he grabbed a fluffy towel and dried off his fur. It was another sunny day on the ocean planet. Down here inside the base he'd installed a big reinforced-glass window. Light streamed and rippled through it in fascinating patterns. His bed was a pile of cushions and blankets he'd manufactured, all synthetic fibers but reasonably comfortable. With his fur he didn't need much warmth inside his insulated house. Even so, he'd installed a ventilation system to make the interior liveable. A storage locker on the wall held some interesting shells and stones he'd collected. The desk had his handheld, waterproof computer and some paper notes. The pod's omniprinter had been just as useful as advertised! All in all, the underwater base was a better house than most humans had ever owned. There wasn't even a mortgage to pay.

"Will you be dining out today?" asked the base. For Neil that meant catching wild fish and eating them raw. He'd only done that once so far for the experience

of being a natural otter. The omniprinter's analysis system had assured him it'd be reasonably safe but he'd decided that cooking was definitely an improvement. The thing was, Neil didn't want to be totally dependent on the computer and his other technology. He'd found a partial solution to that.

He said, "No, thanks. Going to the patio." Neil rummaged, pulled a couple of fish out of the fridge, and climbed back up to the sunlight. The tray of seaweed and wood-like plants he'd gathered had dried out at last. So, it was time for some low technology. He used an electric lighter to get the little pile of fuel blazing, then sat on his porch and grilled fish over the open fire.

"Hey, computer, how is the antenna synthesis going?" Neil was sitting on bare, warm concrete as he roasted his catch on an improvised skewer.

"Main antenna body design is complete. Currently known material sources will be adequate for a tower that greatly extends your communication range. However, the receiver circuitry requires elemental gold."

Gold! Where was he going to find a gold mine on this world? Well, he'd have to do more exploration. That was fine. He'd build the big antenna he had planned and use that to beam out a proper distress signal, so he could get rescued. He was in no hurry at this point. He'd already begun colonizing a planet, if not the one he'd intended to. He had a swimmer's body, an endless supply of tasty fish, and a whole world to wander through. At worst he'd go down in history as the first explorer of this place and send back tons of data about how to live here.

Neil stood up, stretching from head to tail, and looked out to the sunny sea. Maybe after the antenna, he'd start building a cool submarine. There was plenty to see out there!

* * *

It was week four since the crash. One of the nice things about being shipwrecked in the modern age was that the emergency equipment included plenty of computer data storage for the omniprinter's blueprints. As the survival guidebook noted, one of the biggest threats to a stranded traveler was *boredom*. So, the lifepod's designers had set aside a few percent of the data storage system for a partial copy of the famous Archive of Research and Culture. There were hundreds of famous novels, textbooks on a dozen subjects from basic to advanced level, a few hundred recorded songs, and a collection of video games.

Not coincidentally, there was enough material to begin recreating human civilization from scratch... at least the "from scratch" that included computers and omniprinters. Now that he'd established a base, he'd started to delve into the ARC for fun as well as construction advice.

Every day out here on the sea was nice. Usually brilliant and clear, sometimes windy and overcast but pleasant indoors. His ever-expanding set of solar panels drank the sunlight to keep his machinery powered. He'd even begun to set up a lesser omniprinter that could make basic tools, for fear of the day when the larger one might break beyond his ability to repair it.

That was about the same reason he hadn't done much exploring. He'd located a few fragments of titanium plating scattered from the wreck of *Titan* and used them for scrap, but hadn't done a thorough survey more than a few kilometers from base. There was nothing but water and resource-rich shallows in every direction around here... except east, where the seabed fell sharply into a darkness that felt *hungry*. Neil shuddered at the thought of it. The automated distress beacon had gone silent before he'd been able to trace its source.

One of these days, there'd be a terrible storm. He had set up a little weather station and stockpiled parts and an especially sheltered undersea room in preparation, but how could he really know how bad it'd be when it came? Worse yet, sooner or later he was bound to get sick, or bitten by some local venomous critter, or otherwise get badly hurt. He did have medicine, and the ottery biomods gave him advantages over any normal human at sea, but he wasn't invincible.

Seek out other survivors, the guidebook said. But as far as he could tell, there weren't any. He had no gold for that boosted antenna. He had to wait here for rescue or for anyone else to get here. If anyone else really had made it to this planet's surface, they were probably hunkered down and thinking the same thing. They might be just over the horizon and he wouldn't know.

The base's computer said, "Is something wrong, Neil? You've been punching the wall for thirty seconds."

His fist hurt now that he paid attention, and his claws dug into his palm. "I have no way to improve the situation without risking everything. Should I be building a boat and sailing off as far as I can go?"

The machine's voice was smooth and calm as always. "I can't tell you what to do, Neil. I can discuss your options if you like."

Neil fretted at the AI for a while. Eventually he must have set off some useful free-association in its database, because it said, "Have you considered exploration using drones?"

His ears perked up. "That's it!" He didn't need to risk himself directly just to find out what was around him. He went to the base's main wallscreen and spent the rest of the day making plans and ordering up electronics and mechanical parts, sometimes going out to restock particular kinds of rocks and corals that had proven useful.

By the next morning he had his first mini-submarine. He floated at the surface to pat it affectionately and watch it head off to the north, waggling its mechanical tail. (Like his own awesome tail, the propulsion system was more efficient than a propeller.) He watched its progress from the comfort of his home. When the signal started to fade, the sub dropped a tethered repeater buoy so it could keep in touch. Ten kilometers out... and no sign of human life. Not even wreckage, just some unusual rock formations that the computer said were probably copper-rich. He had the drone chip a bit off for sampling.

* * *

The next day he sent the drone exploring west and south. There were a few bits of wreckage out there, great for salvage purposes. He tried not to think much about what had happened when these big chunks of titanium and aluminum and steel ripped free. Since he now had a few signal boosters around his base, he had a chance to pick up radio transmissions in a somewhat broader area even without that tall gold antenna... except to the deep east, where he hadn't dared even to risk his drone. Neil sighed and dithered for a few days before sending the little bot off in that direction, saying "Good luck." He knew he could just build another drone if need be — the parts were simple to make — but the mission still felt like sending a pet off to its death.

Neil stared at the camera view from the comfort of his base. Swiftly, the mini-sub picked up underwater skid marks. Something had gouged the seafloor and snapped off chunks of boulders before coming to rest somewhere deep and dark. Reluctantly, Neil coaxed his drone to descend, turn on its headlights, and stick a

signal booster on the seafloor. Luminescent *things* lurked on the fringes of the sub's vision. There! A rounded section of *Titan* lay there at a crazy angle. It filled his entire view; it was by far the largest piece he'd found. Neil fed images from the broadcast into the base computer, saying, "Can you identify this fragment?"

After exploring a few more angles with the sub, he got his answer. The computer said, "Probable result: It's the embryo bay."

Neil leaned back on his tail. That was a treasure beyond any price. The seeds of ordinary Martian and Earthlife plants, the genetic records of hundreds of species, the equipment even to rapidly stock a new world with human life. If you wanted a colony with a valuable industrial base and plenty of customers for interstellar trade, ExoTech had reasoned, sending a thousand people at a time just wasn't going to produce results quickly enough to turn a good profit. It was better to grow more humans in vats. As the legendary NASA had once put it, a human was the most versatile machine that could be produced by unskilled labor.

The question was whether anything in that wreckage was intact and reachable. Neil brought his drone home, gave it a good cleaning and charging, and let it rest for a day while he worked on upgrades. Eventually he worked out a way to produce a cutting torch that was within his resource budget, along with a robot pack-fish to carry whatever the first drone salvaged.

Neil was giddy to find out what prizes were in store this time. He sent out his minions, watched as they cut into *Titan*'s hull, and shined their headlights into a laboratory that had tumbled but looked more intact than he'd had any right to expect. The north side had apparently burned and been torn to bits, but the south half of this hull fragment was mostly still filled with trapped air. Dark cryo-tubes and countless drawers and sealed crates stood there. The signal kept fuzzing out, making the controls sluggish. Every time they moved and the image jumped around, he imagined monsters lurking just above the waterline.

And then, he smacked his forehead. He had submarine drones, not ones that could *walk* to explore the dry part of the ship. He risked beaching his minions if they went any farther. "Damn it. Come back." He'd have to make some sort of mechanical crab, next. He began looking through possible robot designs.

"If I may make a suggestion?" asked the computer. "It would be a more efficient use of your resources to go to the wreck site in person."

Neil shuddered. "It's dangerous to go alone."

"There seems to be interference with the signal inside the wreck that makes remote operation difficult. Also, there has been no sign of aggressive life. Nothing has attacked your probes."

"They don't look fuzzy and edible like me! And what if something in there explodes? What if I get pinned under shifting rubble and there's no one to save me?"

"I detect elevated stress levels. Please take deep breaths, Neil. Would you like a soothing beverage?"

Neil paced. "Yes. Yes I would."

He had *three* soothing beverages before deciding to swim out there in person. As easy to synthesize as ethyl alcohol was, that was probably unwise.

* * *

He used his scuba gear and powerful tail to swim a few kilometers along the surface, then down, down to where the world was the blue of a cloudless dusk. Then out along the wreckage trail for a few minutes until the chunk of fallen *Titan* loomed ahead like a cave. It was smaller in person than his little drones had made it seem. The robots were waiting down here to chirp in his radio headset that they were ready to help. Meanwhile, the glowing-bodied alien creatures kept their distance. He began to hope he'd make it back alive.

He entered the hole cut by his drones and hauled himself into the dry part of the wreckage. He pulled off his breathing mask and sniffed the air. The oxygen had replenished after the fire. Damp, stale, cold. No scent of life, which was probably better than some overpowering mutant mold infestation. He shuddered. Neil shined a flashlight everywhere, then unlatched several of the crates. Jackpot! Most of the ones in this area were intact and still chilly, fuming with dry-ice vapor when he opened them. He scanned the crate tags with his computer tablet and managed to get a local terminal powered up so he could download an inventory. (The crash had set off a security deactivation protocol called SUE, nicknamed "Screw it, Unlock Everything".) Neil whistled. He really did have treasure here, even some spare omniprinter parts. He carefully eased two sealed, waterproof containers close to the water where they'd be easier to retrieve later,

and lowered another down to the pack robot to send it scooting back home with the cargo.

It was quiet here inside the ship. He'd never been to this part of it before. The remains of a scientist lay at the edge of the ruined section, still clutching a computer. He took it from the body and sat down to rest and read it. The alcohol had begun to wear off, making him less eager to head back into the potentially doomful depths. Besides, he could stay here and supervise a few more trips for his salvage drone.

The tablet he'd found was the personal stash of a biotech expert. In her personal photo she was posing on a rocky beach with a red bikini, wearing a flower in her hair. There was a shy smile on her face. Neil found it entrancing enough to make him go over to the dead body and crouch silently for a moment to touch her. He murmured, "You deserved better." There wasn't a good way to bury her on an ocean world, so what could he do with her?

His robots loaded some valuable equipment and took it home, and some seeds and other material that was in no danger of spoiling quickly. Neil then went back to base, personally carrying the scientist. The sense of duty it gave him helped distract him from the sense of dangerous things looming somewhere just out of sight.

At home, he fed the body into the lifepod's biomass converter. He designated that load of matter as the raw material for the first potting soil that he laid out on a floating greenhouse. In time, once the various algae and bacteria he'd added took root, she'd become part of a new Earthlife ecosystem.

While he worked on that project over a period of weeks, he kept looking at the twist of hair he'd saved from the scientist. That and her personal files were his only links to another human. After all, he'd salvaged a little gold from some of the bio-lab's equipment, built the long-range signal antenna... and detected no other survivors. It was possible that there was nobody out there at all, not on the planet, not even for light-years in any direction. Sure, he could power up his signal equipment a little more and beam out a distress call once a month. In theory, that signal could reach inhabited space, years from now. He could hope that someone cared enough to look, or that a second expedition came along the same route *Titan* took.

He had to face it: he was alone, and would stay that way for a long time at best.

Though nothing terrible had happened to him on this planet, yet, there was a frightening storm that lasted for days and damaged the above-water part of his base. He'd been right to keep most of it submerged. He was lucky, he kept telling himself, but that only reminded him his luck could run out. He needed help! He checked the computer. "Can I build a humanoid robot to perform medical care?"

"Do you require medical help, Neil?"

"No. I mean, I will someday."

The machine thought. "There are blueprints for a general-purpose work robot, and for a surgical pod."

"I should build both, then, for whatever your genetic infusions can't handle. I just wish there were *people* around. No offense."

"The bio-lab inventory contains embryos of several sapient species."

"We discussed this. There's no rubidium except in the omniprinter, and I'm *not* cannibalizing that just to get a gestation tank working." He'd had a nightmare about pulling out the crucial parts with their hard-to-find elements, then being unable to reinstall them in the printer.

Again, something he'd said triggered a new response from the conversation system. The computer said, "You could install a biological gestation system."

"Huh?"

The main screen flashed a medical schematic of himself, listing his biomods... and showing a proposed modification. The new Neil was still ottery, but rounder-looking, marked as female.

Neil said, "You can't be serious."

"Rephrase?"

"You already changed my species. You want me to turn into a girl, too, just so I can produce more humans?"

"No," the machine patiently explained. "You will be able to give birth to any compatible species."

He didn't need to be completely alone and at the mercy of the lifepod AI to save him in a crisis. He could... he could raise kids who could care for him one day. The thought stunned him into silence. Eventually he said, "How? Run proposal details."

The AI offered a whole suite of options for getting this done. Neil told himself he wasn't at all serious, only morbidly curious. The more he saw, though, the more he knew it was the closest thing to a practical option. The thought of changing again scared him, but so did the always-present threat of his machines failing, his body breaking. What really sold him on the idea, though, was when he looked at the researcher's hair sample and worked out a way to use its DNA. He'd need a second X chromosome, after all, and it could be healthy to add some genetic diversity to his own cells instead of duplicating his existing X. The lock of hair trembled in his hand.

"Do it," he said to the computer, and gave the hair to its analysis tools. "Use this, and make me her — her daughter."

* * *

The post-injection effects weren't as severe as the ones that had ottered him. He was feverish for the first day as the serum began changing his cells from the genes up, and ravenously hungry after that, but he'd prepared. He rode it out in his undersea living room where there were seaweed salads, fish and three flavors of Nutrition Brick.

The first obvious changes were all low in his belly, giving him cramps and then shifting his mass around, filling out around his hips. Neil listened to calming music for hours as his bones and muscles slowly tugged inward and out and around, all according to plan. What he didn't count on was how distracting it all was for its slowness. He tried to read but kept looking away from the screen, running his webbed hands down along his belly to his increasingly girlish groin, or along his hips to feel how they were gradually swelling wider. For a while he shut his eyes and pressed gently down on his chest to feel his breasts starting to grow. Every few minutes it felt like the pressure against his palms was a little stronger, and that he breathed with a faintly greater bounce.

He got the idea that he should go outside. The sunlight warmed him through his fur, so nice that the full light of this alien day was like being thoroughly fluffed with a towel. Neil arched his back and gasped with surprising pleasure. With his skin so sensitive, it was a perfect time to swim. He climbed down to the waves and swam in great twisting loops around his home to feel the water sliding all over him, tickling his fur, easing the growing warmth under his tail.

When Neil climbed back out of the water and into the patio to bask in the sun again, *she* was well on the way to being soft and curvy and convinced that this body was a great trade.

* * *

Wanting to get used to the new form, Neil ordered up a swimsuit like the one her new genetic "mother" had been wearing in the photo. Everything felt unfamiliar as she stood there nude and struggled to figure out how to dress. She lay on a towel and basked in the sunlight, reading the dead woman's journal. It felt like a way to be in contact with someone without it being filtered through ExoTech corporate-speak or an AI.

She turned on her computer pad's camera and used it like a mirror, then laughed nervously. She'd never expected to look this good in a bikini, or to have an enforced vacation on an ocean planet. But hey, she was alive, and she'd even have company soon. Oh wow, she was not eager to think about that part yet. It could wait.

When she got hungry again, Neil stretched and headed back underwater. The main computer beeped. "Greetings, Neil. I hope your changes are proceeding smoothly. It's recommended that you provide a blood sample."

Neil took out the blood testing kit and after a minute's squeamishness, nicked one finger. Somehow, shedding a few drops of blood on purpose was tougher than getting major body parts transformed. She wiggled her webbed hands and said, "Tell me, doc; will I be able to play the piano?"

"Resources are available to produce a basic synthetic music keyboard."

"Never mind."

The computer whirled. "Initial tests complete. You appear to be in good health,

Neil. Congratulations as well on your pregnancy."

Neil chuckled. "I'm going to put it off for a little while."

"You have approximately three months given your current gestation rate."

Neil's muzzle fell open. "Do you mean it's already started!? This was supposed to just set me up so I could have kids later!"

The digital piano schematics that had appeared onscreen vanished, replaced by medical charts. There were elevated hormone levels marked as indicating that more had happened to him than becoming an ottergal. The computer said, "There was a slight genetic irregularity. The most likely cause was that in editing your chromosomes, the serum created a new zygote based on your discarded Y."

Neil pressed one hand against her lower belly, trying not to panic. "Already? And... I'm going to have a son? Genetically mine, even, not just pulled from the ship's frozen colonist supply?"

"Most likely."

She shivered and her fur prickled all over. There was hardly time to get used to being female! She'd arranged for the accelerated gestation for safety's sake, rather than spend the next nine months increasingly helpless, but to start right away was overwhelming. "There's so much to do," she said.

"I can prepare a to-do list," said the ever-helpful computer. "Would you prefer to discuss next steps or receive emotional counseling?"

Neil's mind spun. She was going to be a mother, something she'd planned for in an academic sense but never intimately grasped. Now, well, she was going to learn all about it, ready or not. The next few months, and then the years after them, were going to be frightening and dangerous. All for the sake of her plan to stop being alone, to have company that could one day protect her. She was going to be the one doing most of the protection for a long time!

Still, it beat the alternative of waiting for something to kill her. Neil cleared her throat and said, "Let's start preparing."

* * *

Two months later, the renamed Neila roamed the main greenhouse of her undersea base. It was just beneath the waves, rippling with light and full of life. She hummed to herself as she walked between the rows of vegetables. They were growing as quickly as her. Already she carried a heavy belly that was a frequent if wonderful distraction from her work. Sometimes she spent whole days lazing around eating fish and reading romance novels from the biologist's personal file stash.

The maintenance robot was crawling along the ceiling glass, checking for cracks. She'd named this one Claire to distinguish it from Wilson, the main computer. "Any trouble?" she asked the machine.

"No, ma'am. But Wilson reports a possible incoming storm detected at the northern outpost."

"We can handle it." The most vital equipment was deep in the safest areas. She giggled and patted her middle. "Including my first crewmember."

"Ma'am?" asked the robot.

"Nothing. Just having fun. Carry on."

There was no shortage of raw materials to support herself, the machines, and what she imagined would one day be a large family setting out to explore the whole world. Maybe they'd all be rescued someday, but at this point what did it matter? So, with her bounty of resources, she'd told Wilson to once a month print up a random gift for her. Last time it was a plush planet pillow that looked like a flat Earth and now adorned her bed. Today was time for another.

She came back to the living room and found a box waiting for her. She opened it and pulled out a t-shirt. ExoTech's starship logo was on it along with the company motto: "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained".

Neila sat down heavily on her cot, clutching the shirt. A lot of people had died aboard *Titan* trying to push the frontier outward and build a new life on a new world. They'd gambled and lost... but humanity had still won, so far. She owed it to them to make good use of this planet. If someone came by here again, and eventually they probably would, there'd be people and equipment waiting to greet the visitors. Maybe a whole town of her descendants!

She pulled the shirt on, though it was too tight and didn't cover her stomach.
"Thank you, Wilson. It's a good gift."

Safari Swap

It wasn't exactly a spam e-mail. "Pen Pals," it read. "International English learners looking for people to write to! No cost! Hear from exotic locales!"

Tom nearly deleted the message, but was bored enough to investigate. It was December, which made the daily commute to the sawmill cold and dark. Even just reading about someplace warmer than Montana would be a welcome change. So he looked up the mail's sender online and found it seemed like a legitimate social club. He shrugged and signed up.

The next week he got an actual letter, on paper. He was impressed that people still did that. Cooler yet, the sender was someone from Africa!

"Hello. Am learning in special school. Very strange place but good food, and safe. My speaking good? Got lots to learn. Telling me about foreign places please."

Tom thought about the letter all day at work; it helped him ignore the drone of buzzsaws. The next day he wrote back, trying to encourage the writer and use simple words. Part of what he wrote was, "Your letter is typed. Do you use a computer? What kind? What's your name?"

They kept up the correspondence for several months. His pen pal's name was Sala, and she'd grown up "in the big grass" only to have a lot of her family shot by bad men. Now she'd been taken in by some special teachers from the United States, who gave her a computer so she could talk with lots of people. Tom felt kind of disappointed that he was just one friend among many, but really that wasn't bad for either of them. Besides, Sala said she mostly spent time with her classmates and didn't know much about "the big computer net thing." The writing quality went up gradually. He wrote to her about snow and mountains, forests and Niagara Falls, and about wanting to vacation someplace warm. She wrote back about the savanna, the blazing sun, scary lions, and scarier armies. She sent him a lock of stiff black hair, and asked him for some hair in return.

That was a bit of a weird request, but he mailed a blond clipping of his own.

By late January, he'd made a habit of hurrying out through the cold to the mailbox almost every day. The letters were a source of warmth. One day, the latest from Sala came with an invitation.

"Am hearing teachers bringing you to see me! Am leaving Africa for time and meeting new people for school swap thing." With the letter came a more formal note from "Central Education Exchange Developments." Tom puzzled over this one. It looked like the pen-pal organization was affiliated with some well-funded company doing fancy education experiments. Whatever they were doing, involved mailing him a free plane ticket! The ticket wasn't for Africa at all, but for Las Vegas. This weekend. He stared at the thing, wondering what he'd done to deserve a vacation.

He managed to get time off to fly there. When he arrived, there was an escort that he barely spotted among banks of dazzling slot machines. She had spiky blond hair (so it wasn't Sala) and a sign that read "Tom". He waved to her.

She grinned and shook his hand. "The name's Erin. There was a bit of a pest control mishap at the company, so I'm your escort."

Erin took him to her car, which had a plush porcupine in the back window. Tom enjoyed the warm desert scenery and the bizarre skyline of casinos, each one meant to catch the eye in a different way. "Where exactly are we going?" he asked.

"Pretty far out. The company's near the border, but there's housing, so we can put you up while you're here."

They left the city far behind, driving into empty land with scraggly sagebrush. He noticed the facility out of the corner of his eye: a bunch of dusty greenhouses with an office complex. It worried him. "What's this place have to do with education in Africa?"

Erin hesitated before answering, pulling the car into an underground garage. "Well, some company officials have been working with the Mormon Conspiracy to Conquer Africa (LLC), and they expressed interest in your ancestry and genetics. I talked them into just getting some samples from you for their zebra project."

"Zebra? What?"

"It's easier to show you." Erin opened the door and gave him a badge with a green leaf icon. According to the badge, the company that ran this place wasn't the education one, but "Genetech".

* * *

"Now, don't touch anything or accept any offers of chocolate." Erin led him into a corporate lobby where the halls seemed to shift from perfectly normal to confusing. He wasn't sure if there were just embedded video screens with changing scenery, or whether someone was actually moving walls around, but he could've sworn he took four left turns in a row and ended up someplace different. Within a few minutes' walk he heard someone cackling from behind a door, and passed a desert terrarium where some jackrabbits were banging rocks together with their forepaws. A motivational poster showed the Earth from space and bore the words, "Soon the World Will Be Ours."

"What kind of place *is* this?" he said.

"Mad science," said Erin.

"Ah." Tom walked in silence for a little while, starting to think about running away. "So, what's this about zebras?"

"Right in here," said Erin, motioning him through a door. She didn't follow.

He'd walked into a stable, a high-tech one kept clean with rubbery floors and antiseptic white walls. There was indeed a zebra here! It stood barely taller than his head, sniffing at him from behind a low wall. Tom had seen plenty of horses back on his family's farm, but it was surreal to see one with such stark black-and-white markings like a living bar code.

"Tom!" said a computer voice.

"Huh?" There was some elaborate computer hardware here, even a gratuitous sparking Jacob's ladder.

The zebra nodded its head, and the speakers said, "It's me, Sala! I know your hair scent."

"Never mind her," said a lab-coated man with long whiskers. More than that: he also had huge, fuzzy ears and... a rat's tail? That or a lifelike pink rope tied to his back. "I take it you're here on purpose. Have a seat and I'll be right with you."

Tom sank into a chair, and stared at the zebra, stunned. "Sala?"

"Yes. Hi!"

"So... how's the savanna?"

"Boring! I was glad to get here."

"And you're a zebra."

Sala turned her head and looked herself over, stripes and all. "You didn't know that?"

Before Tom could answer, he was distracted by the guy with the lab coat. "Hold still." There was a touch of a cotton swab, and then something jabbing him in the left arm! He saw the needle only after it was too late. The guy said, "There. Now within a day or two we should be able to proceed."

"Am I vaccinated against mouse-pox now?" said Tom, glaring at the man.

"What? No, that was the calibration nanites."

"...Nanites."

The doctor, if that was what he was, looked frustrated. "Yes, yes. You've got your Visitor badge, so get going and come back late tomorrow." He started shoving Tom out the door.

"Hey, come on! What'd you do?" But he felt too wobbly to resist, and was back in the hall with the door shutting on him before he could react. He banged on the door but no one answered. After a minute he steadied himself and went looking for someone who might make more sense.

That led him to the cafeteria, a place called the Genghis Galley. At first it seemed like something from a hospital or college, but usually a lunchlady didn't have cyborg limbs. Scientists sat around eating while a group of assorted dogs

sat at a low table, playing "Dungeons & Dragons." Tom stared at them while he approached the counter and started picking out whatever food wasn't moving or glowing. He took a seat across from a lab-coated man and said, "What's up with the dogs over there?"

The scientist shook his head sadly. "We should never have had them switch to fifth-edition rules. Who are you, anyway?"

Tom poked suspiciously at a sandwich, then started eating. "A visitor. I got invited to help with some kind of zebra project."

"That's Bill Foyle's. He's working with herbivores for some reason, partnered with the Cybernetics department. You're a new assistant, then?"

"I'm not sure." Tom tried to explain about the letters from Sala.

The scientist's eyes went wide. "Oh! That would explain the, uh..." He waved one hand vaguely just above his head.

Puzzled, Tom put one hand to his own head and felt a brush or something stuck in it. No, his hair felt stiff in a sort of mohawk pattern, straight back down his scalp. It was right about then that he got dizzy, too, and passed out in the cafeteria.

* * *

Tom woke up in a comfortable glass tube. It was like a Japanese "coffin hotel" room, a padded tube lying horizontally and lit murkily from outside. Feeling feverish, he struggled out from under a sheet, and had trouble because of some kind of glove on his left hand. Then he saw his arm. No glove. There were only three fingers on his hand, each of them ended in a hard black nail, and his skin was covered in alternating dark and light hairs. Stripes. Pairs of his fingers had stuck together and seemed to fuse so that he couldn't begin to pull them apart. His right hand was unchanged.

Tom sat up sharply and banged his head, including the mohawk hair. He looked around for his clothes. Someone had left them neatly stacked beside him in the tube... no, these weren't his. There was a set of black sweatpants and a referee shirt. He put them on anyway for decency, but looked himself over in the process. The change to his hand had spread out from the nick in his arm where

he'd been injected, leaving the skin weirdly prickly and sore all the way up to his armpit and the back of his head. "Hello?" he called out, turning to knock on the near end of the tube.

It gave a soda-can hiss and slid open to reveal that rodent-eared guy again. Foyle. "Finally," the scientist said. They were in a chilly lab full of dozens of other glass tanks.

"What's this about?" said Tom, showing off his changed arm. "You brought me all the way here to give me hoof-fingers?"

Foyle took his arm and pulled. Tom was surprised at the move and let himself be helped out of the tube. Foyle said, "Of course not. We just needed to reconfigure your cells for the transplant, so that the samples we get from you will be suitable for our zebra test subject. The side effects are just a bit excessive. But you knew that when you signed up, so what are you complaining about?"

Tom stood barefoot on a cold tile floor, looking around at the other giant tubes. "Signed up for *what*? I'm here to meet Sala, that's all."

Foyle's ears drooped. "Oh, dear. The company didn't bother informing you, did they?" He sighed and headed for the door, waving for Tom to follow him. "You're at least making a contribution to science. Let's get this over with."

"Hey, come on! What's going on?" Tom had no choice but to follow him to get some answers. Foyle hustled down twisty little passageways until they were back in the zebra room with Sala. It was all Tom could do to keep up, what with the fever he still felt.

Foyle produced another needle and said, "All right then; hold still."

Tom was about ready to punch the guy. "Not until you tell me what I'm missing here."

The mouse-man sighed theatrically. "Fine then. I just need a blood sample from you now, so that I can finish the process of changing Sala here. She was the most promising candidate of all the African wildlife the company picked up. The most likely to survive being changed without going insane."

Sala looked up from watching "Mister Ed" reruns on a black-and-white

television. "Oh, hey, you're back. Can you get me one of those 'pizza' things?"

"Well-adapted to human life, as I said," Foyle boasted.

"You mean the point was to change Sala into... what, again?"

"A humanoid, of course. For science. Will you let me do my job now?"

Tom hesitated. It sounded as though what they were trying to do here was for Sala's benefit (or at least science's), and would probably help her. "Uh, all right. Go ahead."

Foyle drew blood from Tom's changed arm. Tom winced and adjusted his shirt. By now his arm was feeling all right, but the whole side of his chest itched and ached, growing striped hair too. "It's getting worse. Can you undo this?"

The scientist ignored him, focusing instead on Sala. He was just as inconsiderate to her. He delivered Tom's blood to a machine, waited for it to dispense some sort of new serum, and injected that right away into the zebra. "Soon my creation will be complete!"

"Yeah, that's great," said Tom, waving his reshaped hand. "How about an antidote over here?"

"Antidote? We haven't really budgeted for that. See, the reconfiguration we need is already done, so any gross morphological changes in you are just harmless side effects. You're still alive, aren't you?"

Tom clacked his thumb against the other two fingers. "Side effects! I've lost two fingers already. How far is this going to go?"

"No farther than anthro — humanoid, I mean. It's not my department," said Foyle. "Take it up with Technical Support."

Tom fumed. So, he was going to become permanently part zebra, and the company barely cared? At least he'd keep his thumbs. He went over to Sala's stall and said, "How long have you had to put up with this?"

"Since I got here," she said through the speakers, turning a dark eye in his direction. "It's okay though. I'm gonna have hands and everything, thanks to

you! And there's free food and housing while I'm here. They gave me a Test Subject badge."

Tom peered at the badge hanging nearby, with a leaf icon on it, and then down at the one he was wearing. Not a Visitor badge after all.

Foyle said, "You're free to go, seriously. We don't need you anymore."

"If I've been mixed up with your experiments, then am I entitled to stay here for free while this 'reconfiguration' thing happens?"

Sala said, "Yeah! Why don't you go running with me? We can be herdmates!"

Foyle grimaced, tilting his ears backward. He read the number on Tom's badge and tapped it into a computer. "Fine. You're free to stay while the experiment goes on, and there're various facilities you can access. I suppose I can't keep you out of here, but quit complaining, will you?"

"Complaining? You think this is a minor thing?" He sighed and ran his hoofy hand through his mane. "Whatever. It's a free vacation, at least."

* * *

By the time he got back from the cafeteria, carrying a free pizza, Sala was supposedly able to digest it. "How come she got her whole digestive system rearranged without passing out like me?"

Sala nickered and reached her muzzle over to poke Tom's chest. "You got this without much trouble. Weird that it's way up there."

He felt something squish and looked down. There on the left side of his chest was a heavy swell of flesh, soft and sensitive. He could see through his shirt that the stripe pattern on his arm had spread across it and was slowly heading for his right side, which was also starting to feel puffy.

Tom sputtered. The nanite transfer thing was going in both directions, it seemed, and from a zebra *mare* to him! "Hey!"

Foyle was busy on the far side of the room and paying him little attention. "Hay? If you're hungry for that already, there's plenty in the stalls."

Tom pulled up his shirt and looked in the mirror. The stiff bristles of his mohawk, or mane, were growing down his neck. Striped hide marked part of his back already and was reaching toward his stomach. His whole left arm had changed, and he had a left breast and the beginning of a right. He shivered and felt the hairs stand on end. Even as he watched, another white hair sprouted from his skin. Probably, he should panic.

Sala nuzzled him. "Can we eat yet?"

Tom laughed, trying to calm down. Running around in a blind panic wasn't going to do anything. He needed fresh air, though. "Let's take this outside," he said.

* * *

They spent a while enjoying the Genetech facility. Much of the place was off limits to test subjects, but there were gardens of exotic plants (some of them invented on-site) and a comfortable suite for Tom to stay in. The desert outside was blazingly hot during the day but nice for a run in the evening. By that first night Tom had a hefty set of breasts on a fully changed, striped chest, and the fuzzy new hide was starting to reach his right arm. His shoulders felt like they'd been pulled a little inward, and the new weight in front threw his balance off. "So," he said during their jog, bouncing with each step. "Mare."

Sala was still obviously an animal running alongside him on four hooves that kicked up the sand. "It's not so bad, is it?"

It wasn't, so far, but Tom was still trying to wrap his mind around the thought of becoming one. Foyle, and other people he'd talked to, had said he'd stay bipedal and humanoid, so there was no danger of becoming a wild animal... supposedly. The company didn't exactly give him a strong impression of safety and trustworthiness. Tom wasn't sure which part of the change was the most startling. "How am I ever going to get back to my normal life?"

"I hear they have little disguise gadgets you can wear, to look human."

That was something, anyway. After they went inside and had a drink at the cafeteria (turning some heads when Sala trotted in and knocked over a table), Tom bugged the Customer Support department. It turned out to have a cyborg on duty tonight who promised him help with "corrected documentation" and if

necessary, "discreet relocation services".

That night Tom woke up from a dream of running across the savanna to discover that the nanite-induced alterations were flowing around his hips, nudging them wider, and that he was rapidly becoming a complete mare. He stared in fascination at his changing body until sleep took him again and he dreamed of stallions.

* * *

He woke up, stretched, bounced, and went wide awake. He staggered up to his feet and noticed he was standing tiptoe. The striped hair only reached down to his thighs but it was getting tough to lay his feet flat on the floor already. Hooves were on the way, it seemed.

A box was sitting just outside Tom's room when the door whooshed open. In it was a black jogging bra and a note from Sala, saying, "I hear these are comfortable when gals exercise. Looking forward to seeing you again!"

Tom blushed as he figured out how to put the thing on under his shirt. It really was helpful not to feel himself jiggle with each step. He supposed he'd end up as a near-twin of Sala once they'd both finished changing. Herdmates, she'd said. Sounded like fun.

For someone who'd spent her whole life as a wild animal before becoming a test subject, Sala was fun to be around. She was a quick learner who'd demanded a bunch of science books as part of Tom's attempt to lean on the company for compensation, and they'd already had a long conversation yesterday about genetics. It was going to be a shame to be done with this unintentional volunteer period and part ways, leaving Sala to do whatever it was the company had planned for her.

They met up for lunch. Sala was grumbling and bandaged from going through several medical tests. "Can you understand me?" she said. The computer she wore to translate her grunts into speech was turned off.

Tom ruffled the zebra's ears with his hoof-fingers. "You're making progress! Still sounding rough though."

"They said I'll improve." Sala's throat hadn't fully changed, so she was still half

nickering and snorting when she spoke. "And look!" She reared up on her hindlegs, showing off how her forelegs could now waggle to either side like arms. Each one ended in a hoof that had split into the beginnings of fingers. Sala lost her balance after a few seconds and fell back over onto all fours, making the floor ring with the impact.

"It's just getting to your hips, I guess, to give you an upright stance."

Sala nodded. "Can't quite walk like you, yet. Ooh, you're getting hooves?" She peered down at Tom's feet. He'd given up on wearing shoes and was going around in socks, standing on his toes. They were starting to click with each step and his toenails felt bigger.

He said, "Soon. What do you want to do today?" Something flicked at the base of Tom's spine; his tail was starting to grow in.

"Science!"

"Science," Tom said. "Well, there's a lab building educational products on the third floor."

It turned out to be one of Genetech's better ideas: an elaborate virtual reality theater where they could do all kinds of practice experiments from baking-soda volcanoes to smashing asteroids into planets. Since Sala didn't have proper hands yet, Tom had to use some of the controls for her, and had to learn for himself how to work with fewer fingers. They spent hours together talking about stars and atoms and Genetech's desert colonization work. (The projects in that sub-department ranged from building more efficient irrigation systems, to turning people into lizardmen.) The two of them were doing the company a favor by testing the theater out before its commercial release.

By the end of their session Tom had trouble wearing the VR goggles. Sala had her own custom set but Tom's were made for a human face, and he was starting to grow a long equine muzzle. Even his teeth felt different, gradually smoothing out into flat grindy things. "I need a cheeseburger while I'm still confident I can eat it," he said.

Sala grinned. "Don't worry about your stomach. I tried one already and it was great. But let's go get some burgers anyway."

* * *

That evening once the researchers were done messing with Sala for the day, Tom and Sala met up for a run. They were outside the complex on a fine dry track, just two zebra-folk trying to help each other walk on two legs.

Sala was *gorgeous* tonight. The hot wind blew through her mane and tail. She leaned against a greenhouse wall, obviously still having some trouble on two hooves, and smiled at Tom. "You look stunned." Her voice had gotten smother too, a nice deep tone. She'd even started wearing shorts, which he supposed were all Sala needed in public until her chest finished changing.

Tom stammered an apology. When had he started thinking of Sala as a person instead of just a clever animal? Really, the answer was, before they even met. "Want to run?"

They did. Or staggered, anyway. Tom's coordination was shot, what with walking on what amounted to one big toe per foot. He soon gave up on the socks and set his hooves free to thud along the sand. His tail blew straight backward with his two-legged galloping and tickled him whenever he stopped for breath. Sala needed a lot of help too, since she was still trying to master standing up.

"Whoa!" said Sala, wobbling and flailing her arms in a way no wild zebra could.

Tom hurried to her side to steady her. Sala was still pretty brawny for a human of her height, but the stripes helped disguise that. Tom had kept a lot of muscle on his own new female frame, maybe thanks to the equine genes. He flicked his big ears and balanced carefully. "These long legs are like stilts."

"Yeah. Having four was easier. Hey, check out the moon!"

A big full moon was on the horizon, white on the black sky. After staring at it for a while, Tom noticed he was standing comfortably, at last. His ropy little tail was idle instead of trying futilely to help him balance. Slowly he let his arms drop and leaned against Sala.

"It's like this on the savanna, some nights."

"Same way north in Montana." He looked into Sala's big, dark eyes. It felt like he was looking slightly upward what with the muzzle in the middle of his vision.

"Are you going back to Africa?"

"I don't know. I should stay here a while, and get used to living like a human. The researchers are saying we might both be worth keeping around as employees."

Tom twitched his tail, thinking about the possibility. It'd certainly be warmer here than back home, and the company had plenty of exciting (and/or terrifying) things to work on. It'd also help with fitting in among humans, although it sounded like Genetech was about to make a lot of strange technology public so that people like him wouldn't be too shocking. He could be part of that life and have Sala around for it. "Thanks for making contact with me. The zebra thing isn't too bad."

"You're thanking me? I owe you my hands, my voice, my —" She gave a nickering laugh and a snort.

"What?"

Sala grinned and balanced her hooves carefully on the sand, then wrapped her arms around him in a powerful hug. "I think that cell sample you provided had a few side effects. Try out that big nose of yours, former human guy."

Tom sniffed the other zebra, and got a whiff of a powerful earthy scent, registering somehow as deep, strong, manly... His gaze drifted down toward Sala's shorts.

Sala saw his expression and gave him an equine slurp on the nose, and a quick human kiss. "Yep."

"Huh? When did — you didn't tell me —" Sala had let go of him and started running away, stumbling and laughing while Tom sputtered. "Get back here and explain, stallion! I'm telling your doctor!"

Sala led him in a chase all around the Genetech complex. A herd of two galloped through the desert by moonlight, starting out their life together.

Doom Of the Pun-Mage

Eamon wandered in search of adventure, but right now his quest was for beer and a bed. He deserved a break after slaying a third-rate dragon for a sackful of copper. A smell of kelp and fish led him to a peaceful seaside town — a welcome change from Chamberpot City's air! Still, Eamon's backpack hurt his shoulders, and swords and potion-bottles clattered on his belt. No inns in sight. Two buildings stood out from the huts: a giant clamshell with doors, and an overgrown sandcastle.

The castle wasn't nearly large enough to be a real fortress; it was more of a mansion. He walked around its walls of sand and glass, admiring the intricate knotwork sculpted into the columns. How had it been built? The front doorway's glass-bead curtain clacked in the seabreeze.

"Hello?" Eamon called out, and stepped inside. The room's main light was a gleaming coil of silver inside a fountain. Water bubbled and splashed from inside the spiral, coming from nowhere. There had to be enchantment involved.

"Do you like it?" asked a voice from upstairs. "I was tired of fetching water last winter, so I used this spring to prepare a light refreshment."

Eamon's brow furrowed with the feeling that something was wrong about this place. He looked up and found a pale man coming down to greet him. The castle's owner wore a vest of many pockets over his tunic, which held a quill and a blue leather notebook.

"Is this the inn?" asked Eamon. His traveling gear was crushing his shoulders.

"An inn? No, this is a magic shop." With a wave he indicated shelves of odd toys and a counter covered with gadgets. Then he leaned forward to peer at Eamon. "Hey, you're one of those wandering adventurers!"

Eamon nodded. It was only afternoon, but bed or no bed, he was about five

minutes from collapsing.

"Well, we're into April, so let me show you..." The man ran off in mid-sentence to fetch a piece of fruit from a pantry. To Eamon's surprise, he hurled it towards a corner of the room! The fruit splattered, but the fragments swirled and stretched until there was a big rectangular shape lying there instead, with sheets and a pillow.

Eamon stared. "Nice spell! But what sort of wizard attaches an instant shelter effect to food?"

The spell-dealer smiled. "It's not an ordinary shelter spell. It's a very specific one. An April-cot."

"Not your standard, useful chromatic magic then."

At this the man reared his head back and tugged officiously at his vest, looking offended. "Sir, my enchantments are useful. You've come to the shop of none other than Klamath the Pun-Mage!"

Eamon only blinked, unimpressed. "Huh," said the wizard. "I thought I was better-known."

Eamon yawned and looked away, vaguely embarrassed for him. "That's nice, O wizard. I notice that I have coins, and you have a cot."

The mage nodded. "For an adventurer, of course I do! I can even warp the cot upstairs if you'd like. This is a harbor village, so a tele-port effect works well. Don't try stealing anything though."

Eamon shoved his adventuring gear beneath the cot and flopped onto it, mumbling, "I'm not that dumb." Not after the time he had to spend a week as a rabbit.

* * *

When he woke he was in a different room, one cluttered with burlap sacks of grain and dried flowers. He stood up worriedly and found his possessions where he'd left them, beneath the soft mattress. A bead-curtain clacked against his hand. Beyond it he saw the main castle room with its fountain.

He yawned, tugged at his wrinkled tunic, and froze. Klamath was talking to — something. There were two figures in front of him. Flowery shirts worn by shapes that seemed made of crashing water in human form. Elementals? Eamon reached for his dagger in case there was trouble.

It was hard to hear what was going on, over the burble of the fountain and the sloshing of the water-men. Eamon waited a moment. Soon he saw the creatures turn and leave through the sandcastle's front entrance. He put his knife away, approached Klamath, and asked, "What were those?"

Klamath shrugged. "They collect ingredients for me along the beach, and help me run the castle's sand-bar. I made them from the tide."

Eamon said, "So you're a water-mage as well as a fruit-mage?"

"Pun-mage, I said. Mine is a versatile field, ripe with possibilities." He tilted his head, thinking. "Especially when produce is involved."

Eamon's eyes narrowed. "I've never heard of this. How did you create those water-men if you're not a water specialist?"

Klamath said, "I said, they're made of tide. They're my serfs."

At least Eamon had gotten a good — he looked outside and saw it was early morning — sixteen hours' sleep before having to listen to this man again. "I could use a drink and you mentioned a bar. Have you got anything... normal?"

Klamath went behind a counter that was made entirely of compressed sand, and brought out a crudely-made glass bottle. "Try this one on the house." It bounced several times to jump over toward Eamon.

Eamon muttered, "Hops," and drank. It was decent beer, and cold, and that was all he could ask for right now. "Thanks. So, you do this stuff all the time on purpose?"

"Of course!" said the wizard. "Wordplay is my main source of power."

Eamon folded his arms. "That's just nonsense. Wizards use crystals, talismans, maybe corpses. Things like that."

"But why not words?" asked Klamath. "Here, look." He tossed Eamon a couple of little blue cubes.

Eamon looked at the things and saw dots on them. "Dice?" He rolled one on the nearby countertop, got a five, and suddenly felt a chill in the air.

"D'ice," said Klamath. "Handy to have with you — that's now set to five degrees of cooling, for five hours. A n'ice thing to have when exploring a volcano, yes?"

"Hmm. That could actually be useful." And he did have coins to spare.

Klamath was already rummaging through the shop's drawers to show off other things. "Or how about this, in the same vein — a V'hat, the headgear that holds ten gallons of hot soup without burning your head? Or a Mane-Gauche, a dagger hidden invisibly in your hair? Or this stylish red Capable, tripling your odds against stampeding ungulates?"

Eamon said, "Those sound... weak."

Klamath paused in the middle of his sales pitch, looking deflated. "Well, yes. The power of the enchantment depends on how complex the underlying wordplay is. I could explain the full origin of this sandcastle, but then you'd have to kill me."

Now Eamon couldn't help trying to figure it out. "There are knot designs on the outside, on the columns..." Klamath raised an eyebrow encouragingly, and Eamon said with a scowl, "It's supported... by the tied?"

"That's a key part of it. Excellent! You can appreciate the potential of my skills, then."

"So, what — you just come up with the words, and the enchantment suddenly works?"

Klamath shook his head. "My technique is a supplement to traditional magery, not a replacement. The pun itself is only a trigger, usually setting off long hours of preparation by more normal wizardly methods. Sometimes by accident."

"I see. And you make your living this way."

"Yes. I have some investments" — he tugged at his vest — "or hedge funds, from working as the local hedge-wizard. That is, a solver of problems in needlessly complicated ways. But it doesn't pay as well as you'd think, and I'm still fending off loans from my education."

Eamon looked skeptically at him. "Someone taught you to do this?"

"Not exactly," Klamath said with a sheepish downcast look. "I was studying a traditional set of wizard skills when I stumbled across the punnish arts, and was thrown out after writing a hex improperly."

"What, was the school that strict?"

"Strictness wasn't the problem. You see, it was destiny that I would be hex-spelled."

Eamon groaned.

Klamath reminisced. "Then I transferred to Roak Island Thaumaturgy, but repeated my mistake and accidentally hexed the whole landmass. I was hex-isled."

"Stop that."

"After that, I tried teaching at Midgard University. I was banished for trying to breed big, rideable versions of some flightless birds that lived there."

Eamon held up a hand. "No, don't tell me."

"I was formally ostrich-sized."

"No, really, stop it!"

Klamath sighed. "I'm sorry; I get carried away. I've suffered for my art, you see."

As did everyone else, thought Eamon. He went back to the storeroom and found his bag of cash. Maybe buying something would distract the wizard from any more truly bad explanations. "Listen. Your work is obviously... powerful, and I could use some extra enchantments in my travels."

Klamath's eyes lit up. "You want me to come with you?"

"Oh. Well." Eamon scratched his head, looking aside. "See, I'd love to bring you along, but I'm meeting up with three others in a tavern next week and you can only have four in a group. Union rules."

Klamath straightened and tried to look mighty. He might pass as a lion among accountants. "Where are you going? Maybe I could tag along for a spell."

"I don't quite know yet, but it's bound to be dangerous. High-level stuff. Nasty creatures."

"Oh, I can do creature-control work! Just last winter there was an invasion of furious sea otters. I threw my own name at them in a way that multiplied a feast of clams, piscifying their ottrage, and then got them to help the fishermen with their boats. I schooled them in anchor management."

Eamon stood there with his jaw hanging slightly open. "That must've been a mighty enchantment."

Klamath shrugged modestly. "Underwater work tends to leave me feeling down and under pressure."

"Right. Is there someone else I might talk to in this village about buying equipment? For the things you don't sell, I mean. How about that big shell building up on the hill?"

"That place? Aah, that's the local Penta-Coastal Church. Our Mother of Pearl. It draws people from all around so it's grown rather pretentious. The priests call it the Holy See, which even I think is weak. I've been working a little with them for the money."

"Sounds like you fit in here."

"We get along," said Klamath. "I suggested that they try a sermon to hook the souls of sea travelers — 'Sin Bad: the Sailor' — but they didn't bite. Instead they hired me to try developing equipment for their little order of paladins. They're interested in having enchantment on their side for once."

Now Eamon was more interested. "You develop weapons and the like?"

"Not very much weaponry. After all, the pun is mightier than the sword. Instead I've focused on armor and scouting devices." Klamath gestured toward a workbench where all sorts of junk was strewn about. There were toys, a shelf of books, bits of machinery, feathers, and an alarming array of color swatches from some city's paint-seller. Eamon supposed that with all the different names of shades there were many possibilities.

"How exactly does all this magic work?" asked Eamon, looking over the experiments. Klamath had apparently bought a set of mechanical seagulls from the dragons' Steam City across the mountains. He'd made clumsy modifications to them.

Klamath's eyes lit up like a child's. "It's a matter of creative misinterpretation! I learned to look at a thing and lose my assumptions about what it is, which let me see aspects of it that I had dismissed as unimportant. Two things that might seem unrelated in terms of their ordinary use and nature, can actually be closely related in terms of the arbitrary words applied to them. Utilizing that sort of arcane slippage between concepts is the way to abuse various aspects of reality. Which is how I found myself a gull-finned." He held up what had once been a sleek brass seagull. The machine had been bedecked with fins from a mutilated plush fish. There were several of the clunky fish-bird things.

Eamon looked back and forth between the toy fish and the finned gulls. "How does ripping the fins off a cat toy help the Church upgrade its knights?" He braced himself, already sorry he'd asked.

But the reply was a letdown: "It's an ongoing experiment. Or set of experiments. There are countless avenues to pursue."

Eamon eyed the scattered junk and the way Klamath fiddled with it in his presence: possessive yet embarrassed, like a boy caught at a hobby. "You don't know what you're doing, do you?"

"Not as such." The pun-mage tried to seem productive, leafing through a book of notes, and only succeeded in looking lost. He looked up and said, "The Holy See imagines having its paladins riding the waves, battling mermen heretics, and so on. So they wanted me to invent a device that could operate in and out of the water. Serving as a messenger or scout." He played with a mech-bird, making it swoop across the table. "Dragon steamtech is excellent for flight, but doesn't do

very well with water. So while the devices were a good starting point, they need upgrading. I don't yet have a suitable trigger to go with the various waterproofing, speed and intelligence spells I've cobbled together."

"All you've got is 'gull-finned'?"

"Yes, and the results have been unspectacular. Too tangential to the effect. I'll come up with something before long, though; I've been working hard."

Klamath seemed already lost in thought again. He was tinkering with the machines, the set of fish dolls, the various attempts to bludgeon language into doing his bidding. It might be worth paying the wizard to develop some gear after all, if he was able to put his mind to a project as complicated as this. The thought was boggling but intriguing: Waterproof bird gadgets for magic holy warriors — imagine that!

Eamon stepped back, stunned by a realization. A groan flew out of him as though he'd been punched in the stomach. "You — this whole arrangement is a setup!" he said. He could feel the curling, twisting sensation of some awful magic energy at work.

"What?" said Klamath. "Excuse me; I don't feel so good."

Eamon glared at him as the full import of the situation hit home. "You did this deliberately!"

"I don't understand what you're —" Klamath started to say, but was interrupted as his hair fell out, onto the counter. He grabbed the clumps with hands that were suddenly grey and webbed. The rest of his body shimmered, reshaping itself. His clothes faded to reveal grey skin. His vest remained, but it was flowing around him, becoming white and silken, hugging a body that now curved, turning graceful and feminine and wrapped in a shimmering dress! A dolphin's fluked tail flapped out from the wizard's spine and a shiny grey beak extended from his face, full of needle teeth. Even his feet changed into toe-less, sleek slipper-shapes. Klamath squeaked in alarm, looking down at his — no, her! — shapely new cetacean body, wrapped in expensive, delicate fabric. "What happened?"

Eamon smiled weakly. "It's your own damn fault. You porpoisly made yourself a doll-fin gull set for knights of enchantment under the See."

Island Tail

* 1. *

Dane now regretted jumping off *JMS Seal*. By day he'd sweltered under a blazing sun, fending off sharks and thirst with his water magic. By night he'd drifted in eerie silence on his stolen plank. The current was taking him back toward the islands on a stolen plank, but now he heard water churning and frothing ahead, miles from shore. He was approaching a cliff in the sea.

The Luskinsday Islands were famed for three things. Near-tropical weather, and the natives — more otter than human! — and the uncanny holes in the water. In several areas around the islands, part of the seabed was dry and a ship could fall in and crash on bare ground. The sun rose ahead, stinging his salt-caked eyes, and showed him a suspicious white line. A waterfall's edge. After his exhausting trip, he took a while to remember how he'd planned to get past it.

A well-equipped ship like the *Seal* could jump across the water-cliff, if the officers hadn't recently demoted, berated and flogged their magic-wielding "caskman" into deserting. Dane felt the sea dragging him closer, and the ever-present bite of saltwater in the wounds on his back. He muttered a prayer to Janya, patron of travelers, and cursed his former captain.

Dane was getting close to the top of the waterfall. He dived. He had to get deep enough that he'd be safe, falling from only partway up. His lungs burned and forced him to surface again. If only he'd mastered that air-bubble spell! Worse, only the near-surface part of the current pulled him down and inward. Below that it churned upward and away in a great circle because of how the seabed repelled the water. How was he supposed to get down safely? He resolved to study how the current worked later, if his skull was intact.

The white line ahead had become a writhing mass of ocean, seeking to break him. Dane took three quick breaths and plunged back into the dark water, aiming down and inward. He forced himself through the churning chaos. His left arm

broke through the waterfall and pulled at nothing, and then the water forced him back and tried to bring him higher. No! He kicked down against the sea itself and against the instinct demanding that he rise and breathe. Then he crashed sideways into humid air, and tumbled onto the bare rocks. The world flashed white with pain.

He lay on his back, gasping for air, while the ocean roared at him. He was staring up from the bottom of a water-walled canyon. The waterfalls crashed down to either side without more than a few drops touching him. Between these walls was a path of sand and grey stone, stretching in a long arc that curved out of sight ahead and behind him. Dane climbed to his feet, looked around, and let out a pained laugh. After floating all this way and spending a whole day and night soaked, now he was *walking* fifty feet below sea level! He took a few minutes to rest in the chilly canyon. There was still a chance of surviving, though jumping off of an intact ship had been the simpler and saner part of his plan.

The rumor was that the otterfolk natives had a way to turn humans into their kind. A perfect disguise for any Navy man not wanting to be recognized. As for the thought of being changed by magic, it was best not to let himself worry. It had to be better than the gallows that awaited deserters.

Dane concentrated on the Weave of magic, letting his thoughts slip into that frame of mind that makes the world seem to be draped in emerald-green vines ready to be woven or plucked. The sea-cliff was alive with them, highly magically active of course. He carefully reached into one churning waterfall and pulled out a globe of rippling water. It hung there in his hand like a ripe fruit. He flicked his wrist and bent his thoughts, causing the salt to gather and fall. It tickled his fingers as it left. Dane smiled and lowered his head to drink from the orb of pure water that remained, then washed his face and his back with the rest. There were some benefits to being trained as a Navy caskman. He'd learned how to fill the ship's water barrels at sea with the same trick.

Based on the charts he'd seen, and what he remembered of the *Seal's* brief visit, the islands were on the inner side of this arc of natural road. The closest should be near the north edge. The plank he'd been using to float had gotten lost somewhere in his fall, but he was a good enough swimmer to do without it from here. He marveled at the sight of the rising sun through the inner cliff, like roses behind a curtain. With that color on his right he walked north until the magical

canyon ended and there was no choice but to swim out again. Dane took another drink, sat down, and rested. What motivated him to get moving again was anger. How dare the Navy conscript him, an honest and loyal man! He leaped into the eastward cliff and used the outward current to drive himself as far away as possible before surfacing. He caught his breath. The surface was trying to pull him backward for another attempt on his life, so he kept swimming mostly underwater for a few minutes until its drift faded away. At last, land ahead!

Dane washed ashore in time to see early sunlight shining around thatch huts and long cabins. He'd been fortunate to reach the northern part of the island chain. Compared to the one where the *Seal* had docked, it was more nearly surrounded by the water-cliffs and hence more isolated. Safer for him. He splashed onto the beach and flicked most of the water off him. To those who could see the Weave, green sparks chased his hands as he gestured to cast the spell.

He'd seen the natives briefly while the *Seal* was in port. The otter-folk had rowed close in boats full of bananas and oranges, rum and raisins. Dane had stared at their fuzzy faces, their tan and brown bodies with tails, until a lieutenant ordered him back to work at scraping the hull clean. Things had gotten even worse from that moment between Dane and the officers, because they knew men like him weren't serving willingly and were within sight of freedom. *Seal* had sailed off into the drab ocean again, and the regular seamen complained of being fed these exotic foods and deprived of their usual dried peas and salt beef. Once the ship was back out to sea, the officers had relaxed their vigil on the conscripted men a little too much. At least, too much for someone with magic.

Now, he had a closer view of one of the natives. An otter-man with a net over one shoulder had stopped his conversation with a short human who overflowed his uniform.

The human sputtered, "What? A sailor!"

Dane cursed as the two trotted down the beach toward him. He had escaped while still wearing the shorts and shirt of a sailor. He staggered across wet sand, vaguely hoping to escape, but the strength left his legs and he collapsed.

"What happened?" said the otter-man. He paused. Dane lifted his head and saw the native's little ears flick backward. "You fell overboard, right?"

The human laughed. "He may not have his sea-legs, but I recognize the mark of

the lash."

The otter said, "That's common with you lot, isn't it? Newcomer, I'm Arn and this man is the governor's hand. *Stop and think.*"

Dane shuddered and pulled himself upright. He tugged his shirt down to hide his whip-scars. Of all the people to find him, it had to be some dutiful bureaucrat who suspected Dane was a Navy man! "I can't remember what happened," he lied. He'd admit nothing.

The governor's man said, "Then come with me to the mansion. Unless that bothers you somehow?"

Dane looked toward Arn, the native. Did these creatures have compassion for humans facing the noose? Apparently so, but Dane doubted this native would help him fight a royal servant. "Of course." Going along was his best chance.

The official told Arn, "You may go."

"I'm a witness. You know how your master hates 'misunderstandings' between our peoples, ever since the uprising."

The human glowered.

* * *

Governor Connor had a mansion of white limestone, but only seemed to use a fraction of it. The half that Dane saw first had a shoal of chalkboards and tables outside. A room for carriages had been opened up with a tent extending from it to form a colorful hybrid space. Dane wondered at the sound of children from in there.

"The school," explained the governor's man.

He and Arn took him around to the front side and up its stairs. Dane's thoughts raced uselessly as he sought an escape route. The best bet was to hope this ruler would spare him. He was still searching for the right argument when a guard led the three of them into the governor's office.

Governor Connor loomed over them, appraising Dane with startlingly bright

green eyes that contrasted with his flame-red hair and mustache. He wore a lightweight version of a gentleman's vest and trousers with the addition of a wide sash around his waist that dangled behind him. His imported desk looked heavy enough to crush a horse. He listened to his henchman and then said, "What do you have to say for yourself, castaway?"

"Very little, your lordship. I've been adrift without a bed or a meal." In truth Dane felt ready to collapse again, but he kept imagining rope around his neck.

Connor listened to Arn and the bureaucrat, then poured himself a glass of water. He spun and flung it at Dane's face. By instinct Dane raised one hand and magically deflected the water in front of it, to either side. Connor grinned. "Neither of you witnesses commented on how a common sailor got here across the sea-cliff?"

The bureaucrat reddened. "I assumed he'd been swept around it, sir."

Connor said, "Well, sailor, you have magic training. Any ship would be happy to have you refilling their water-casks or drying their sails or saving them from leaks. We have a number of merchant vessels come and go, and the occasional shipwreck. You could be from any of them. Even the *Seal* or the *Halberd*." Connor watched Dane's face; Dane tried to keep his expression blank. Connor sighed. "You've made my life more complicated. I have duties both to uphold His Judicious Majesty's laws, and to keep peace on Hikkoï."

Dane asked, "Hikkoï?"

"The natives prefer not to be renamed based on the day we discovered them. They get upset easily and can't control themselves."

Dane thought he saw an opening. Connor didn't seem eager to kill him and show the natives the King's lethal justice. "Sir, is it true that the natives can change a man into one of their kind?"

Arn had ignored the governor's comment. He said, "Yes. A good fate for someone who's lost their memory, your lordship."

Connor leaned against his desk, then laughed. "You're lucky with numbers. More witnesses and I'd have to arrange a trial. Fewer witnesses, and I wouldn't need to." He poured another drink for himself, of rum this time. "My servant will get

you food, and discreet transport to a ritual chamber. The natives will be eager to recruit you. Don't let me see your face again while I can recognize it, or I won't be able to err on the side of leniency."

Dane felt suddenly lighter, and stopped just short of thanking Connor outright for saving him.

* * *

The shaman in his hut of reeds didn't know the King's language. Dane had noticed that Arn had an accent, influenced by the otterfolk's short muzzles, but had foolishly assumed they'd all learned to speak like humans. Instead the man with swirl-painted fur jabbered too quickly to follow, in meaningless words.

Dane hesitated outside the ritual circle on the floor. "If I'm going to live here, I have to learn. What's this, for instance?" He pointed at the table.

The shaman's ears flattened, and he spoke a word. Dane tried repeating it. The man nodded. Dane pointed to wands, the rug, a feather, a jar, trying to tie the shaman's words to the few he'd overheard. Traces of civilized language hid in this one, making it vaguely familiar.

The shaman looked amused when Dane floated a handful of water up from a bowl outside the ritual area. "You shaman?" he asked.

"Journeyman mage," he said. Or so he'd been before drinking at the wrong tavern and being unwillingly appointed as *Seal's* new caskman.

The native grinned and ushered Dane back to the intricate circle of sand and chalk on the floor. He pressed a glittering green bottle into Dane's hand and spoke, miming "Drink".

He chugged the stuff and gagged. This potion had been made from rum.

Dane tried to understand the spell being woven around him. Emerald light filled the hut and warmed his skin like sunshine through rippling leaves. The magic's tangled, waving aura was much more complex than anything he'd trained with. Dane steadied his breathing. No going back! At last the light faded, leaving Dane warmed but visibly unchanged. "It didn't work?"

The shaman patted him on the shoulder, looking winded. "In days. Slow."

"Days!" said Dane. "What am I supposed to do until then?"

The shaman shrugged.

Dane tried to convey that he needed to hide, but the shaman shooed him out to the blazing sunlight.

The shaman's hut was within sight of the beach. Dane sighed. Getting farther away might protect him from the governor. Dane walked along the shore and approached an otter-man who was lugging a heavily loaded canoe into the waves. "Hi! You... go?" He offered help. The native let Dane haul the canoe with him. Dane used a simple spell to pull the craft the rest of the way and steady it, startling the man. After giving Dane a long appraising look, the native shrugged fluidly and gestured for Dane to ride along.

The sunlight was dazzling, now high overhead and making the shallow water shine in light blue and green. Here in between the Luskinsday — or Hikkoï — Islands there seemed to be a complex set of reefs and shallows that made navigation tricky. Dane's native pilot humored him and taught him a few words, including the name of the island they were headed towards: Ilbri. Dane paid attention to the way the man rowed with alternating strokes of a long paddle in his webbed hands. He tried to help out by using magic to push them along, trailing his hands in the water to create a gentle current. The otter shrugged, asking questions that Dane didn't understand. After an hour or so they reached their destination.

Dane thanked him and waded ashore. Ilbri Island looked familiar... ah! *Seal* had actually anchored somewhere around here. This island was reachable from the open ocean and the docks were probably just out of sight. There was a long, squat building made of bricks in a version of Imperial style; various military sheds and stockpiles, and a two-story inn that the sailors had mentioned. The wooden sign hanging from a carved driftwood post marked the place as "The Crown and Tail". Dane had been denied shore leave, while other people relaxed and escaped from the stench of the ship.

The inn was built in a hybrid style, mostly thatch and intricately linked branches that looked more grown than constructed. It had been extended with brick and stone that gave it some right angles, yet blended in well along one side.

Windows of green-tinged glass looked out to the sea and inland to the forest that the king's men had only begun to strip for lumber. It looked like a good place to ask for information, maybe even to beg for a place to sleep for a day or so.

He'd hardly laid a hand on the door when a wave of fatigue and dizziness hit him. He steadied himself against the wall, stumbled, and then decided he really needed a nap right this second.

* * *

He woke up still dizzy, with something jabbing at the base of his spine. There was a bed, at least. Had he made it to the inn? Dane grunted and rolled over to pry whatever it was off of him. Slowly it dawned on him that the annoying thing was soft and fuzzy, a few inches long, and only painful because he'd been sleeping on it wrong. It was uncomfortable to have your tail wedged the wrong way, it seemed.

The tiny wooden room he was in had only a little mirror, so Dane spun around ridiculously trying to see the thing and nearly passed out from vertigo again. He fought down a bit of bile and panic; he'd signed up for a tail and much more, after all. The new fur growing there and just above it on his back was thick and brown, lighter tan on the underside. His whole spine shivered when he scratched along the thing. "I have a tail," he told himself out loud. "And this is perfectly normal." He hoped that falling unconscious outdoors was less typical.

He peeked out of the room, having to lean against his bed just to make space to get the door open. A portly otter woman was passing by, humming to herself, and stopped with a smile when she spotted Dane. "There you are! You gave Kirani a scare yesterday when you dropped yourself off like a sack of clams. You had run on your breath, so I'd have had you thrown out as a drunk, but she said you're probably a new immigrant. Is that so?"

Dane nodded. "Thanks for taking me in."

"You're welcome. This is the Crown and Tail."

Dane blushed. The matronly otter or one of the others must have hauled him upstairs. This one wore a long skirt made from woven palm fronds and an apron of imported cloth. He said, "You speak our language?"

"Of course I do. I take your king's money, so I need to know how to ask for it."

"My name is Dane. I was hoping for a place to stay, or just advice on finding one. I suppose I also need work."

She put her hands on her hips. "Well, why didn't you say so instead of fainting dramatically at my doorstep? Come on down. I'll have you wash dishes or cook. Can't have you waiting tables for now."

"I could probably do that too if you wanted." He'd never been one for idle conversation, but how hard could it be to carry plates and mugs? Might be a good way to meet locals too.

The otter gave him an odd look. "Because, we only have waitresses. It's part of the appeal. Tourists, you know. Or maybe you don't. To be fair, the townsfolk seem to like us too, but that's mostly Jules' cooking. And our rum. And the clean floors, so get that tiny tail of yours downstairs and start in with a broom. We don't open for half an hour and I don't want you wasting time."

Dane was still dizzy and a little overwhelmed. "If I work for you today, can I get room and board?"

"If you work hard, at least. We're slack now that the sailors are mostly gone."

Dane learned his way around the inn by cleaning it. Four otters, all women, darted around rearranging stools and going outside to unfurl umbrellas at patio tables. It was afternoon already, with bright sunlight streaming through the windows and making it all look cheerful. The legally-required portrait of the king over the bar was completely overrun by a display of nautical salvage, nets, oars, and splintered wood. The walls were painted in a native style of whorls and wave patterns. Dane swept, feeling his tail twitch whenever he shifted his weight. It felt a little longer already. He looked back and forth between the shipyard scraps and the local-style paintings of fish and abstract designs.

"Glad to see you're up and about!" said one of the waitresses. She wore a grass skirt and nothing else. "I'm Kirani. It'll be fun having you around as you get used to everything!"

Dane nodded stupidly, forcing himself to look her in the eyes. "Thank you. I've got a lot to get used to." That was as articulate as he could get, and he couldn't

hide his blush or his other reactions with her standing right there. Come on, he told himself; you knew to expect this!

Kirani took Dane's hand and giggled. "We're used to it. We get great tips; you'll see! For now the boss says to go to the kitchen." One of the other waitresses opened the front door, revealing a few humans and an otter waiting already.

Dane might not have been familiar with the culture, but dishes were dishes. He spent hours washing them, and watching the Crown and Tail's other employees darting in and out. Once he managed to quit fumbling whatever he was holding every time one of the waitresses sashayed past his sink, he started to study the otters more closely. They varied much like humans, which made them seem more like people once he started picking out their different voices, builds, and so on. It was easy to spot the women from those curves he kept staring at whenever they turned around, but also from more subtle cues like the slight curl in how they held their tails. The population seemed skewed toward men, especially among the human explorers and tourists. Come to think of it, most of the otterfolk he'd seen even outside the inn had been men, too. Maybe the women were off on other islands to keep them away from the navy.

That evening the boss let him sleep again in the tiny upstairs room. He needed it more than he'd thought; fatigue from the work shift and his gradual changes hit him quickly once he was upstairs. He sat on the bed and looked himself over, fidgeting. He didn't feel quite right. His body was incomplete, alien, tingly. For the dozenth time he thought about leaping onto the next ship and going in search of a "cure" so he could get back to his old life, as ridiculous as that was after coming here. "Being an otter won't be so bad," he murmured. "I did sign up for this." By now his tail felt like some sort of warm, fuzzy pillow, one that shivered when he ran a hand along it. The thick fur on it had spread out from the base of his tail, making him look a bit puffy. There was no hiding the thing now. Dane flopped sideways under the covers, winced when he landed on his tail wrong, then found a better angle and fell asleep a minute later.

* 2. *

His third day on the island started early. Dane sat up and stretched his arms, legs, tail... oh, right, that. He stood and surveyed himself. Knee-length tail, nearly full

grown. Fur had wrapped around his waist, giving him a preview of what his pelt would look like.

Someone knocked. Dane tugged his shorts on as well as he could, which was pretty poorly considering the fluffy fur and his tail, and opened the door. Kirani stood there on the inn's second-floor walkway, peering around the door at him. "Good morning!" she said.

"Could I borrow a pair of scissors?"

Kirani giggled. "We'll have to go shopping for you once we know what sizes you need. Are you comfortable? With... everything?"

Dane shifted to one side, feeling like he was missing something here. Downstairs, the tavern had begun to stir with preparations for opening. Kirani was only watching him curiously, watching his gaze drift down from her wide, blunt muzzle to her chest. He was being a blockhead. He said, "Uh, ma'am? I don't know much about your people yet, and I need to learn. For one thing, am I being improper? Do you have a hus — a family?"

"My parents are off on Ilek Island, so it's just me here. Why do you ask?" Judging from her toothy grin, she knew the reason and liked it.

Why feel guilty about being attracted to a cute native? Though the other waitresses were friendly, only Kirani had taken more than a casual interest in him. Back in the Empire's genteel cities there was a lot of protocol to follow when courting someone. He'd been stupid enough to visit a dockside tavern just as the press gang showed up to "recruit", and the people in that district had much looser ideas about how a gentleman should behave. The human visitors he'd seen in the inn yesterday flirted and ogled the staff, who returned the attention without actually selling themselves. Dane got flustered again from the clash between his upbringing as a respectable merchant's son and this outpost of civilization. "I don't know how this place *works*," he said.

"You might be the only outsider who doesn't think he's figured us out," Kirani said.

Dane steeled himself. "Is there a good place to get breakfast away from here? Other than catching our own."

"Come on. I know where."

Kirani bounded along the beach, chattering with him about life beyond the islands. She'd never left the otters' lands. Dane saw a hut standing by itself on a little pier with several odd clam-like wooden boxes tied to the supports. "This place serves food?" he said. Something seemed off about the surrounding water... "Magic!"

"You can tell from here?" said Kirani, looking back over her shoulder.

Dane pointed. "We call that a thaumic field. This water probably glows at night, I bet. There's some sort of enchantment in that hut." Now that he was studying it more closely, the walls too were strange. Instead of the usual wicker-like structures, this one was slathered with shiny white plaster that glittered, maybe full of tiny bits of glass.

Kirani nodded. "This is Rapanui's place. She's the best healer around, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Also, the best cook." She ignored the dock, splashed into knee-deep water, waded until she was under the hut, then climbed a ladder and knocked on the floor above her. She called out, "Raar! Hungry shark!"

Dane heard someone rattling around in there, and a muffled, "Kirani?" The door opened after more banging around, and an otter-lady with long brown hair leaned out. She said something Dane didn't understand.

Kirani answered, "This is Dane, a new immigrant. Dane, Rapanui personally stopped a plague a few years back, and she earned those shark teeth she wears. So don't mess with her."

Dane went in with the otters. Rapanui's fur was styled with elaborate painted spirals like the way a spell looked to the magic-sense, and the markings were barely hidden by her simple cloth shirt and skirt. She was a whirlwind in her cluttered hut, slicing a few dried fish up and tossing spices into a cookpan while trying to keep Dane from blundering into anything fragile. Every surface of the mostly spherical room was full of drawers, shelves of potted plants and unusual stones and carved wooden trinkets. Much of the clutter radiated magic, though Dane couldn't make much sense of the whorls and auras his trained eyes could detect.

Rapanui dished out three wooden bowls of fish and vegetables that smelled dauntingly spicy. "You'll get used to it," Kirani said. "Some people come here and they don't even like fish! What are they thinking?"

Dane tried the food and managed to keep it down, once someone handed him a jug of water. "Whew! Uh. I hope the change affects my tongue." Realizing he might've just insulted Rapanui and that the shaman was looking at him with narrowed eyes and ears laid flat, he said, "The flavor's fine, just the heat."

"Ha!" said the cook, perking back up. She asked a rapid-fire set of questions but Dane caught only a few words.

Dane said, "'What are you'... I don't follow."

Kirani translated: "She says, What are you planning to do once you're settled in? Keep working at the Crown and Tail?"

"I kind of collapsed on their doorstep, so I owe them some work. It's been free room and board too. I wasn't thinking of being a waiter forever, though. I have some magic training."

Kirani piped up. "He could see that healing waters spell under this place."

"Is that what it is?"

Rapanui looked thoughtful, despite the fishbone sticking out of her mouth. She pointed at a talisman made of topaz and mangrove on a necklace chain. She spoke slowly and loudly in Dane's language: "Say what is?"

Dane took a drink and stood, reaching for the wooden amulet. He turned the bumpy surface over in his hands and let his mind slip into magic-sense, spotting the bubble-like glow around it. "This affects air in a tiny area. Maybe lets you breathe underwater?"

Through Kirani as translator, Rapanui said, "Close. It keeps an air bubble around your head, enough for a few breaths. Your skull's probably full of Imperial magic textbooks, right?"

"Only a few. I didn't get far in my studies before getting forced into the navy."

Rapanui spoke, and Kirani said, "She's not surprised the Empire would order mages around. Would you be willing to demonstrate what you know? She might want an assistant."

Rapanui added on her own, "Too many folk not listen. You listen?"

Did he have the humility to take orders from a shaman who wasn't even human? Dane nodded, adding what he was pretty sure was the word for "yes".

"He's been washing dishes," said Kirani.

"Fine."

* * *

Dane couldn't fling clouds of razor-sharp arrows with his mind, or do anything else impressive, but back home he'd learned a few spells. He could create magelight to brighten a room, or scribe messages that only someone else with the magic-sense could see. He could make ink flow along paper to copy a written page, which was a useful enough skill that it could have landed him a job as a clerk or scrivener. Then of course there were his water-related spells. "I want to learn more," he said. "It'd be better to start over and become a proper mage than to cast the same spell all day forever." A warm and sunny island seemed like a good place to learn, too.

They chattered about magic on the beach. Rapanui was satisfied enough with him to offer at least temporary work. She nodded and pointed at one of the odd wooden boxes Dane saw earlier moored in the water by the shaman's house.

"What'd she say?"

Kirani frowned. "She's letting you use the blue clam-hut once she cleans it out. Come when you're ready. But Dane, are you going to be able to handle this if you can't understand each other?"

Dane sighed. "I'll make it work. I know a few words already."

He was sitting cross-legged on the sand. He stood up, feeling strange after the rambling conversation and demonstration. Besides the fizzing in his mind from working with spellcraft so intently, he felt like he'd been sitting on a pillow for

the last hour instead of the hot sand. This furry backside of his was going to take getting used to. He started back toward the Crown and Tail so he could take a nap before the evening work shift.

He kept wiggling with each step. Dane glanced back accusingly at his tail, which swung like a metronome. His tailtip kept doing that little curl, apparently a habit he'd picked up from the ottergirls he'd been hanging around with. He brushed the sand out of the tan fur that had formed a wide and growing belt around his waist. In a way he was eager for the change to hurry up so that he'd quit looking like a human with an odd fraction of a costume.

Dane wondered about the "clam-huts", which must have been places to live. He needed to get back to work; he could investigate later.

When he got to his room at the Crown and Tail and opened the door, he found Kirani laying on the bed and smiling up at him.

"Huh?"

Kirani looked up at him. "Come on; shut the door."

Dane wriggled around the door, knocked his tail into it and winced, then closed it behind him. "We don't really know each other," he protested. A gentleman didn't bed a near-stranger. He'd been hoping to get to know her better.

Kirani sat up with her head on her hands, looking concerned. "This could be your last day, depending on how quick the change is. Maybe you could hold off until tonight after work, but we'll both be tired."

"My last day? You mean, before I go to work for Rapanui?"

Kirani looked as puzzled as Dane felt. "You know I'm not interested in girls, right? I do still want to be friends, you know, after... Please tell me you know what I'm talking about. No?!" She stood in one fluid motion, and since there was hardly any space in the room she ended up very close to him, where he could feel her warm fishy breath. "Did nobody tell you to expect to be an otter-woman?"

Dane's fur prickled. The island's otter population was skewed, with too many men, and the shaman who'd cast the transformation spell hadn't asked for any

payment. "What exactly did the spell do? There must be some mistake!" He told himself that, but didn't believe it.

"It's not a bad thing," Kirani said, sheepishly scratching one ear. "It probably would've been better if you'd known what you were getting into, but you were open to changing species and this is a smaller change. Nothing to worry about."

Dane gestured toward the door. "I... I've got to get them to reverse this."

"I've never seen a major transformation undone, even for the humans who immigrated and panicked and wanted to change back. Also, why?"

Why? "I'm a man!"

"At the moment, yeah." She put her fuzzy hands on his waist and slid them down, making him feel for the first time how his body already flared slightly out at the hips and curved softly under his tail. "Not for long. Want to take advantage of things while they last?"

Feeling afraid and conflicted — the proper roles of gentlemen and ladies were taught much more often than the roles of humans and otters, when he was growing up — Dane hesitated before giving in. Kirani was probably right; he'd not heard of any antidote. He was doomed in that sense. So, there was some urgency to the few hours before work.

Dane spent them well.

* * *

He woke up with Kirani nuzzling his ear. Dane vaguely recalled wild dreams of waves and fur... then noticed that she was curled up with him in bed. He could feel her purring warmly against him. The sight and musky scent of the ottergirl helped him keep from worrying about what lay ahead.

She was waking up too. "It's going to be strange having you around as a friend once you're done."

"I hope we still can spend time together." Dane ran a hand up along Kirani's front to the underside of her breasts, feeling the soft fuzz there.

She squirmed and giggled. "Hey, get your own!" She saw a twinge of fear in Dane and nosed at him. "You'll be fine. I'm around to handle any questions you've got. I need to get to work, though; are you still going to show up?"

Dane reluctantly let her untangle herself from him. She pulled on her grass skirt, swaying playfully next to the bed. Dane tickled her tail and she looked back over one shoulder, grinning. "Oh, you like that? Get used to seeing it." Though there wasn't much room, she leaned close and gave him a kiss. "Come on down when you're ready."

Dane reluctantly looked himself over. Still male, but with fur hiding any obvious sign of that now... and with less to hide. He whimpered. It was silly of him to care much about this part of his changes, even if it wasn't expected. Just another thing to get used to. He stood and tried doing the same cute over-the-shoulder pose that Kirani had done. It was disturbingly easy to imitate.

He went downstairs and noticed halfway down that he was walking with that same wiggle she had, without meaning to. That was just how his tail and hips were built now, apparently.

* * *

All afternoon and evening, he worked in the kitchen as before. He glanced over the counter into the bustling tavern. It looked like a bunch of the locals had swarmed in today. Dishes clanked and empty mugs practically swam back. The otters had rigged up a spell to bring water up from the shore to the kitchen (and marvelously, the outhouses), making his washing as convenient as could be. He hummed and wiggled his tail while trying not to get in the cooks' way. At one point, though, he had to say something. "Wait! You didn't cook that one!"

The chef, a burly otter with the whiskers on one side of his face missing, had just served up some raw fish. "So? That was the order."

Dane made a face. "Who would eat their fish uncooked?"

The chef stared at him in disbelief. "You've never had the spicy raw swordfish? You're missing out! Heh, you'll probably learn to appreciate it better once you've got your muzzle."

Dane ran his tongue over his teeth and felt his flat face with one hand,

wondering how much truth there was to that.

That evening there was some idle time, so he watched people. A tailtip caught his eye, twitching like a snake behind a patron who was leaning over a table. Dane's gaze slipped up the fuzzy thing to admire her... Which turned out to be "him", actually. Dane startled and went back to his cleaning work. He grabbed a mop and ran it across the floor, trying to calm his thoughts. It was understandable that the change was working on his mind as well as his body. He'd be happier if his instincts adjusted in every way to match the new form, including what he liked to eat or... anything else. A little scary, but if he thought of the change the right way, it should be fun. He resolved to make it fun.

When he got the chance, he looked out at the customers. His eyes wandered over the women, but there was something to be said for the men usually going bare-chested too. Kind of nice to see the fuzz and the muscles moving under it. They were more angular, rougher, but still mostly lean and athletic. Dane found himself wondering how much of his attention was envy for them being in better shape than him, and how much was attraction.

Eventually, Kirani hopped back into the kitchen. "Things are slowing down for the night. How are you doing?" She wiggled her whiskers in what he'd come to recognize as concern.

"I'm all right. Calmer about this than I'd feared." The head chef was nearby, one ear cocked toward him, making Dane blush.

Kirani said, "I got permission to take you away for the night, if you're willing to finish off the washing later in the evening. Helps that you're staying for the night anyway. So, if you want do do anything while you have the chance...?"

Dane blushed worse. She was looking pointedly down between his legs. "You have a point. Er, I'd like that."

She led him back upstairs, where her presence made the tiny room warm. "Still male?" she murmured.

It had been hours since he'd had any chance to check. Dane let her shut the door, and he slipped out of his clothes. Sure enough, he was still technically a man, despite his wide new hips covered with fur and the telltale pulling sensation starting to tug inward on him, a little stronger now that he noticed it. "If you're

willing," he said.

Kirani very much was. They were hasty this time, knowing Dane's life was about to change. Dane still loved the feeling of being in bed with her, climbing onto her, pressing his lips to her muzzle and his hands everywhere. She'd given him a gift of this last night, to feel and appreciate what he was losing. "Remember this," she kept saying, sometimes loudly and sometimes whispered in his ear.

* * *

He woke up to silence, except for the purr of Kirani beside him. Dane shifted and rolled back onto his back to see.

Only a sliver of moonlight through a chink in the walls lit the room. It fell on one of Dane's breasts, where warm cream-colored fur prickled and didn't quite hide a large, dark nipple. He... she stared at it and watched her chest rise and fall with her shallow breaths. A single touch there made her shiver. Dane whimpered. She sat up to see past her own breasts. There was just enough light to show fur outlining her lap and down her thighs, fading out around each knee. She raised one hand, still bare-skinned and human, and touched her face to find that it hadn't changed either.

Kirani stirred and opened one eye. "Mmm."

Dane cuddled her automatically. There'd never be another chance to do this with her, if she wasn't interested in Dane now. "Thank you." Her voice was still deep and unlike the otterfolk's faintly muzzle-slurred sounds.

Kirani slowly untangled herself from the former human and perched over her, then leaned down for a kiss. "My pleasure. Want to get downstairs and finish the dishes? We should probably go for a swim first."

Dane accepted Kirani's hand and they staggered out to the inn's upper hallway, overlooking the restaurant area. "Clothes!" said Dane.

Kirani grinned. She slipped past him into the room and pulled on her skirt. She offered Dane the tattered sailor shorts she'd been wearing.

Dane struggled to put them on. They hugged her curves alarmingly tightly, enough that she feared the fabric would tear. She tied the cord around her waist

with some trouble.

"Are you all right?" Kirani asked. She patted Dane high on the back, right where the fur ended and bare skin began.

Dane was breathing shallowly, feeling confined both by the shorts and by the layer of fur, which ended just above her breasts. "I feel like I'm wearing a fuzzy dress."

Kirani rubbed Dane's shoulders. "Want this too?" She handed over the shirt. That fit badly too, even though Dane felt like her shoulders were beginning to cramp up and pull narrower. Kirani said, "Come on. You'll feel better in the water."

They went downstairs. Dane kept quiet and avoided the gaze of the few people hanging around at this late hour. Outside at the beach, Kirani led her into the waves. Dane stood stiffly with water up to her waist.

"Well?" asked Kirani, and tugged Dane forward to splash into the sea.

The water shocked Dane, chilling her, then gradually warmed. She floated there and the ocean flowed through her new fur, murmuring and tickling her with its foam. Dane's tail flicked and helped her flip around faster than she'd thought possible.

The native brushed her hands through her own fur, getting clean. "Swimming will get easier once you get proper hands and feet. Come to think of it, even our whiskers help for sensing the current."

"I'm a freak," Dane said, looking over her mismatched body. Seeing Kirani there rubbing through her fur was alluring, but already less so than it had been just this evening.

"You look a little strange now, but wait another day. So far it looks like you'll be pretty cute."

"Cute." It wasn't the kind of disguise Dane had been hoping for.

Kirani suddenly glared at him. "Quit it. You knew perfectly well you were going to become one of us, and I *know* you had no problem enjoying an otter body. Now come on back and we'll finish our work for the night."

Dane didn't protest. Back in the Crown and Tail, they washed dishes and pots for a while. Only the ripple of water and the clanking of dishware broke the quiet. Dane's clothes were still soaked.

"Go back to sleep," Kirani said. "You can start working with Rapanui in the morning."

Dane crawled back into bed alone and slept.

* 3. *

When she woke, Dane groaned. The good news was that her changes had nearly finished; her face had started to reshape into the snout of a native, and fur now reached down to her elbows. Her jaws ached as they slowly ground against each other. Her tail had gotten wedged under her again; how did the islanders avoid that? Dane crawled back out of bed and tried to dress, but if anything her clothes felt like they'd shrunk despite her losing a few inches of height. "Oh, come on! I got bigger?" Maybe that shaman had controlled what the final result would be. The bastard hadn't warned her!

Dane sighed. She'd chosen this path, and it was better than the alternatives. She trudged downstairs and found the otter innkeeper at work behind the bar, pouring from a keg. She spotted Dane and beckoned.

The innkeeper looked Dane up and down. "Well, you've certainly filled out."

"I really don't want to think about that right now. Could I get some breakfast, please?"

"It's on the house today since I hear you're starting your new work, but after that I'm going to start charging you." She brought Dane some bread and cheese. "I have some goat's milk too, if you can still drink that."

"If... what?"

"We mostly use it for cheese, but the humans can drink milk directly. If you can, might as well have it now before you lose the ability."

Not that Dane had had any fresh milk lately in the navy, but she'd liked the stuff. Great, just another loss. She nodded. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Unne," she said, like a grunt. She set down a mug and a small fish.

"Fish for breakfast?" said Dane, taking a drink.

"Where do you think you live?" She grinned at Dane. "Anyway, that might be your last milk till you start making your own."

Dane coughed and sputtered.

"Seriously, it's not too early to start thinking about who you'll marry. I can make some introductions."

Dane focused on her food. Her teeth felt different this morning, sharper and set in a face that had started to lengthen. "I need time."

"You have a responsibility, young lady. There aren't enough of us around for us to be holdouts. You also need to learn our language. I notice you've picked up a few words already, so that's good."

"So there really are too many men?"

Unne frowned. "Especially when the Imperials come, yes. A lot of us islanders changed to fight them, when they first tried to take over."

Dane tried to process that. "You mean the islander women turned into men, as part of that uprising I heard about? Why?"

"Because women aren't fighters or sailors. That's men's work, obviously. Even your people, even the humans, have figured that out. So in a rush to drive off the invaders, we panicked. Many good women turned into men and went off to war. Some of them didn't come back, but even so, there are too few of us womenfolk left for them."

Dane had imagined that the imbalance was due to being in a port district, or coincidence, but apparently there'd been a self-inflicted wound across the whole society of the Luskinsday... the Hikkoi Islands. "They can't just turn back to female?"

Unne shook her head. "Changing your body so drastically is quite a spell. We've never found out a way to do it twice to the same person. Maybe your... maybe the humans could figure out a way, but why would they care about our problem?"

"Then the next generation is in trouble," Dane said.

Unne's voice lowered. "Making sure there is a next generation is our little war. I'll not have the islands wiped clean of us by the humans." The door opened and a little bell chimed. Unne spun and was all smiles to greet the two uniformed human men who'd arrived. "Come in, come in!"

One of the humans double-taked at Dane. "What's wrong with your face?"

Dane glared at him and said, "What's wrong with yours?"

Unne said, "She's a new recruit. Not quite done changing yet."

"Ha!" said the other man. "Let's have some food, please." He looked at Dane.

"Well?" asked Unne.

Dane hurried back into the kitchen, glad to be away from them. They weren't naval men who might recognize her, probably agents of the governor instead. Still, she busied herself for a minute back there to fetch a similar breakfast for the guests.

Unne took the two plates out and returned to the kitchen. "Thanks. Are you all right?"

"I think I just need to keep moving."

"Fair enough. I might be able to use your help some nights, but with no ships around here, business will be slow for a while. Check back in a week."

Dane sighed. "Thanks for your patience. Miss Unne, I never asked: Is Kirani your daughter?"

Unne stared at her, then guffawed. "You really don't know us! We don't look anything alike. Kirani is a special girl, but no, we're not related. I have my own

grown children. I keep telling her it's time to settle down, but she has a fondness for humans."

"I noticed. Where is she?"

"Running errands. As for *you*, it's time to get to work. Don't keep Rapanui waiting."

* * *

The sunlight dazzled Dane and soaked into her fur. She stood just outside the inn and let the warmth calm her for a while. There was a lot to do, from earning money to mastering a new language, to simply learning how to tell everyone apart. "This is my life now," she muttered, walking along the beach back toward Rapanui's dock hut.

The shaman greeted Dane from the shaded water beneath the hut. Rapanui was in the middle of casting a spell that made the gentle waves swirl around her. Dane stopped to watch her artistry.

To ordinary vision she was dancing in the shallows, but to magic-sense she was weaving emerald light like strips of seaweed. When the spell completed, the water fled from something in her hands. She raised up a rod made of coral, which acted like a spoon that stirred the water and kept it away. Or like the sea-cliffs surrounding the islands.

Dane said, "You know how the repulsion works!"

The shaman tilted her head and beckoned Dane into the water. "Look. Learn." She began to explain how the spell worked, but most of her words were nonsense to Dane. There seemed to be a question in there somewhere and when Dane had no idea how to answer, Rapanui repeated it like the newcomer was a slow student.

"I'm sorry; I don't understand. What's the word for, say, a first-order node?" She pointed to a bit of the spell that was still visible, coiled tightly around the water-repelling wand Rapanui had just made.

"Wand," said the shaman, pointing to the rod. She added a word in the natives' language. So that was just the word for "wand", maybe.

"I mean the node. This part."

They went back and forth, trying to work out a shared vocabulary, but Dane was coming not just from a different language but from a whole different teaching tradition. Magic was magic, despite vague rumors Dane had heard of the otters having unique powers. The way it was defined and explained was totally different. Dane only picked up a few words, and wasn't sure even of those, before the shaman lashed her tail in the water and retreated up into her hut. Dane followed.

Rapanui handed Dane a bundle of herbs, then a different batch, so that she stood awkwardly clutching a pile of leaves that tickled her chest. "Here. Do these." She mimed crumbling the leaves and dumping them into the nearby pot.

Dane did as told, hopefully, but Rapanui had moved on to continue working on her own project. While Dane worked she looked over the shaman's shoulders to try to understand what was going on. "These plants are for some sort of potion?"

The shaman answered confusingly, but Dane made out the word "soup". Oh, it was that same spicy stuff from the other day. Great; Dane was learning at the most basic apprentice level, doing chores. Next she'd probably be told to sweep the floor.

Rapanui let Dane watch her continue to work on the coral wand, but over the next few hours most of what Dane did was just more chores. She tried to bear with it and learn whatever she could. The soup was still far too spicy. Around noon, the shaman led Dane back down into the water and shooed her off. Maybe this was supposed to be a lunch break.

Dane looked around the shore and saw the blue "clam-hut" she'd been told could be her new home. The thing was anchored by a rope to the little pier of Rapanui's place. It was maybe ten feet across, made of wood and reeds, like a thick disc that could be pried open on one side. Dane fiddled with it and found that really, it could be opened all around and propped up on a set of cleverly jointed rods. Inside was a bare wooden floor with sandbags for ballast, and some built-in nets for storage, and a threadbare blanket. Dane stared into the "hut" and decided it was a little better than a coffin.

She kicked at the sand, then realized she'd been going around barefoot all morning. The stuff tickled the webbing between her clawed toes. Dane lowered

herself into the hut and squashed her tail under her again, then winced. The hut wasn't terrible; it was shaded and its gentle bobbing in the waves was calming. The stinking, rat-infested hold of the *Seal* had been worse. This one smelled of saltwater like nearly everything else around here, and... she sniffed. Otter. The musky scent was vaguely pleasant, and surprisingly strong. Dane patted her face and discovered whiskers starting to grow out near her oddly rounded nose.

"At least it's almost done." She leaned out of the hut to look down at her reflection. The muzzle that looked back wasn't quite fully transformed yet, but was no longer human. Dane's own family probably wouldn't have recognized this otterfolk girl with the badly-fitting clothes and the bewildered expression. Dane touched her cheek with one webbed hand.

She was hungry, too, and had no money. What was she supposed to do for cash? There was no quartermaster to hand over the King's money to obedient sailors; she'd worked only for room and board at the inn; and she hadn't even known how to discuss pay with the shaman. Dane was totally cut off from any clear way to make a living. She slapped the water in frustration. It wasn't just her transformation that was a problem, but the entire bigger picture of how to live now that there was no immediate threat of dying!

Maybe Dane could at least catch lunch? That ought to be easy. She struggled to climb out of the floating hut and ended up spilling directly onto the beach. From there she staggered into deeper water until she could float and duck her head under the waves.

* * *

Down there, the world was quiet and cool. The ocean flowed along her fur, making it ripple with trapped bubbles. Her ears felt like they'd plugged up and her vision was almost as clear as it had been on land. Instinctively she wriggled her whole body, head to tail, and darted forward from the beach. The sea seemed to move aside for her so that she sliced right through, turning easily and flipping around in a flexible coil. Something moved in the corner of Dane's vision and she whipped around to snag it, then realized it was her own tailtip. A little fish stood out in the distant water too. Dane surged after it but the creature darted away.

Dane kept going. If she could just catch some lunch on her own, she could feed

herself and then, well, figure the rest out later. She had this fancy tail and everything, built for the sea. She surfaced to breathe, just sticking her mouth and nose out of the waves, then ducked back under without thinking about how she'd moved so easily. The fish was just out of reach, glittering with scales like copper. Dane crashed into a sandbar that reached nearly to the surface, spat out sand, and wriggled as hard as she could after her quarry. It kept out of her reach until the moment when she finally got a chance to snag it in her webbed paws — and then it whipped right out of them and changed direction, throwing Dane off balance.

She surfaced again on the sandbar and breathed, then coughed and cursed. "Why is this so hard? I'm an *otter*!"

"Really?" said a fuzzy man in a little boat. He had the oars; the other otter with him held a spear.

"A nice one at that," the spearman said. "What's your name?"

Dane looked around. She was alarmingly far out to sea, and only the distant beach and a few native boats were in sight. The spear fisher looked familiar. "Arn?" she said.

His ears perked up. "Wait a minute; you're... ah, the one I met the other day?"

Dane nodded.

The rower said something Dane didn't understand, and the otters laughed. Arn answered in the same tongue, then asked Dane, "How have you been?"

"Alive. Thank you, for what you did."

Arn smiled. "It was a poke in the eye to the Empire. Don't go around boasting about what you were, though."

Dane should never even admit to being born human, while there was any chance of being identified. The safest thing was to claim to be a native, but she'd be the least articulate, most ignorant one around. The alternative was to invent a false story about being a shipwrecked merchant or otter-obsessed tourist, and Dane hadn't had much chance to come up with such a tale. She didn't *fit*. Dane sat there on the sand, submerged up to her chest, and sighed. "Teach me to fish."

Arn looked confused. "Swimming around snagging snacks? Catching *one* fish is just a game, or child's play. If you want a steady *supply* of fish, you call on a fisherman." He held up a dripping net full of fish. Dane's eyes widened at how strong he had to be to lift the thing one-handed.

Dane said, "Well then, maybe I should be a fisher."

"Aren't you a shaman, or whatever you call it?"

"I'm studying with Rapanui, and I barely understand her. I don't know if she's even going to pay me. I have a *box* for a house." Dane slapped the water with her hands. "If you could show me how to gather fish, I can be sure of eating, at least."

Arn spoke to the other native, who joined him in looking uncomfortable. Arn said, "Running a fishing boat is men's work. It's not for you, not now."

"Oh, come on! I heard some of you men used to have these yourself!" Dane hefted her breasts.

Arn's friend elbowed him, and he blushed. "Look... What name are you using now, anyway?"

Dane paused, open-mouthed. Keeping her name was a bad idea, but she hadn't picked another. Was there *anything* she didn't have to throw away? "I don't know. The same one for now."

"Miss Same-One, you're not going to be a fisher. But if you like, I could teach you hunting the old way, just hands and teeth versus a fish."

That would be a useful skill, anyway. She nodded.

Arn stepped off of the boat and spun in the water, wearing little more than his scruffy fur. He circled around Dane, deftly avoiding the sandbar, then surfaced and grinned. "Hey, toss one!" he called at the boat. The other fisher threw one of their dead, caught fish at his face. Arn parried it and laughed. "Well, Same-One? Let's see your style. Grab it!"

Dane swam toward the still target and snagged the fish in her claws. Arn said, "Use the whole hand. The webbing." He threw the fish farther off. Dane went

through this a few more times. Arn said, "Better, but you're kicking your feet like a human half the time. Swim right." He demonstrated, first with the awkward paddling Dane was used to, then suddenly becoming a smooth wave slicing through the water. Fur and muscle coiled powerfully back and forth.

Dane tried to imitate that, feeling the water flowing smoothly along her. When a silvery fish glinted nearby, Arn pointed and Dane dashed toward it. The otter-man swam faster in a loop that cut off the prey's retreat, driving it back toward Dane. Dane flailed, snatched, got slapped in the nose by a fin, and after a few seconds yanked the fish up from the water and held it out in triumph. Arn was grinning at her, swimming back over to rub her shoulder and say, "Nice." Yes, it was. Dane gave a rumbling purr.

They swam toward the boat again. Arn's companion called out something that made Arn's ear linings redden. He barked something back.

"What?" said Dane.

"He's jealous, that's what. Look..." He reached into the boat and pulled out a few copper coins. "This should get your fish gutted and cooked for you at the Crown and Tail, and another decent meal besides. I don't have much, and I need to get back to work, but if you want to meet late tomorrow that'd be... I'd like that."

Dane stared at the money, then up at Arn's face. The offer of help meant potentially much more. Had this man been hoping all along to get Dane transformed, then to get into her pants? No, that wasn't fair. He had his own motives, including yanking the Empire's tail by rescuing a deserter, and maybe just plain helping someone in need.

Arn saw Dane's hesitation. His ears flicked and his whiskers drooped.

Dane took the coins, unable to bear that expression. "Thank you. I'm living next to Rapanui's house."

* 4. *

Kirani was on duty at the Crown and Tail. "Caught it yourself? Give me that; I'll cook it for free."

"I had some help," Dane said, and mentioned the lesson.

They stood together in the kitchen. Dane insisted on cleaning some dishes while Kirani chopped fish. Kirani smiled. "So that's twice he's rescued you, eh? That's a good start. But don't sell yourself cheaply."

"Excuse me!" said Dane, reddening.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply anything. He was just trying to be friendly, I bet. I meant, there's no shortage of men around."

"Unne says she's mentioned this to you," Dane said.

"Don't get me started. Maybe I don't want to get busy making kits just because there're a lot of lonely males. The uprising wrecked everything."

The sliced fish sizzled on the grill along with some onions and breadfruit, making savory smells. Outside the kitchen, customers of two species mingled and drank. Dane said, "It's not that bad here, is it?"

Kirani sighed. "No. But we went from thinking we ruled the world, to learning our 'world' is just a backwater in somebody else's Empire. I guess that's not quite true; there was a shipwreck from somewhere near your lands over a century ago. That's where the transformation spell came from and why your language isn't total gibberish to us." She dished out the fish and added some of the other stuff for Dane. "What do you think makes humans better than us?"

"Better?" Dane took the plate but hesitated to answer. "I feel dumber, less competent. But that's probably because I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Makes sense."

"Besides that, I don't know. Maybe your people got a late start somehow, or didn't think to explore like my people did."

Kirani shrugged. "There's a school, at least. We can learn to be like humans, for whatever that's worth."

Dane said, "What am I supposed to do for a living? I can't live on catching a fish here and there, and I'm not allowed to be a sailor or fisher."

"What about Rapanui? Just be patient at learning the language. You've got the talent. Shouldn't you be going back to work?"

"Probably." Dane scarfed down the hot fish, coughed on it and fanned her muzzle. Kirani smacked her on the back. "Thanks. It's really good."

"Then that's something we do best: appreciate fish. Now go work at spellcraft."

* * *

A few days passed. Dane had changed fully by now, but trying to master the shaman's language and learn local magic at the same time was more taxing than the last physical changes to her ears and muzzle. Dane and Rapanui fumbled through their conversations, trying to find the right words, and Dane took every chance to ask Kirani or Unne for what some obscure term meant. Dane still wasn't making money, though. Until Dane could make herself more useful she was just treading water, living on whatever fish she could catch or leftovers from Rapanui's cooking or the inn. As for Arn, he'd visited and they'd shared an awkward swim along the coast, talking about the islands and practicing native speech. He went home after dinner, leaving Dane wondering if her future ought to include him.

The next morning, Dane discovered a shirt tucked into one of the connecting rods of her clam-like hut. There was a scrap of paper with her name crudely printed on it, too. A gift! It was just a naval standard-issue long white shirt, in a large size and good condition. Arn must've bought it so that she'd have something to wear besides the battered, dirty remains of her uniform. Imported clothes, even something as simple as this, were a significant investment. An investment in *her*, on an island chain where women were in demand.

Dane stomped the sand. Why did everything have to revolve around this new body? She sighed; that was her interpretation. She could treat the fisherman as another friend, like Kirani had become. Not that Arn was expecting just friendship; he was courting her and they both knew it. Dane hadn't even bought Kirani any gifts before getting to share a bed with her. Dane flopped back down into her bare-walled hut and clutched the shirt. Arn had been thoughtful enough to get a loose size that she could wear without feeling like she was about to burst out of it (or maybe that was the only size available), and he'd gotten an Imperial style rather than pushing her to start dressing like Kirani in a grass skirt and

nothing else. The fact that he wasn't pushing her was... nice.

Rapanui called out from the hut nearby. "Come work!"

Dane threw on the new shirt over the old and hurried to earn her keep for the day.

* * *

That sunset, Dane was sitting in her hut, idly practicing a bit of spellcraft that sent a ball of water bouncing back and forth. Her fur was matted; she'd have to ask someone how she was supposed to take care of it. Dane dropped the spell and rolled over limply, looking down into her unfamiliar reflection. She'd unwillingly given up a potential career in wizardry in the Empire, but that was a world away now. She was stuck in a country she didn't understand, that was divided by race, where every meal and tool and spell had some exotic aspect to remind her she wasn't home.

Ugh. "Exotic". She'd heard that word at the Crown and Tail, being used by a human traveler his friend called Rudyard. From what Dane had overheard, some of the humans figured the natives were "half devil and half child", needing guidance by the Empire for their own good. Preferably *sexy* guidance. Dane blushed at the fact that she'd managed to bed one of the natives so quickly, since the foreigner was telling his friend that all the native women and some of the men were eager for that. Kirani smiled and flirted with the humans just the same as if they'd been respectful.

"How do you do it, Kirani?" Dane asked when they both had a free minute.

"I just think of the money we're making off them. The Crown and Tail is a place for cooperation, Dane. If we get to know each other well enough, maybe they'll quit being idiots about us."

"I guess I was an idiot, huh?" Dane said.

Kirani grinned. "You've gotten better. Why, you haven't even stared at my breasts lately."

"Don't remind me."

"How about we catch two fish with one spear? I'll go boating with one of Unne's lineup of lonely fishers and invite along you and that Arn guy. Will that make you feel better?"

Dane wasn't sure what to make of that. It'd feel... safer, touring the islands in a foursome rather than just being with one man. Less of a commitment.

Before she could answer, there was a commotion outside. Kirani and Dane ran to the door and called out to somebody running by. That native told them, "Shipwreck! Big ship west at the Ilara sea-cliff!"

Dane pictured a hull cracking in half and dumping men to the bottom of the sea, or onto bare rocks. "We've got to help," she told Kirani. Some of the inn's customers peeked over their shoulders or pushed past them.

"Isn't it too late if they're over there?"

"Only one way to find out."

Kirani pulled Dane back into the inn, where Unne was napping. "Unne! Shipwreck!"

The older otter snapped awake. "What? One of *theirs*?"

"Sounded like it," said Dane. "Is there a boat I can borrow?"

Unne stared at Dane, then laughed bitterly. "You want to go help? Swim there."

Kirani looked puzzled too. "Why would you want one? It's not like you're carrying anything."

Otters. "Fine. I'm going."

Kirani said, "I'll come along."

Unne grabbed her by the tail. "I need you here."

Dane watched a silent argument play out in the two natives' expressions. She despaired of ever figuring out what these people really wanted. But why would she assume that "the people" agreed on the best future for their islands?

That didn't matter right now. Dane hurried outside alone.

A party of humans were dragging a beached rowboat into the sea. Some looked drunk, others frightened. The low sun gave the water a bloody look. Dane went up to them to push, but couldn't contribute much force.

"This is our business," one of the men said.

"I'm a mage."

The humans, too, squabbled over how to react. "Fine," one of them said. "We're wasting time. Get in."

* * *

Dane wasn't sure the rowboat was any faster than she could've swam back to Ilara Island where she'd first washed ashore, but at least the trip wasn't tiring for her. They passed the Governor's mansion and came into sight of this island's main dock. A mile or so away, one of the King's ships lay at a terrifying angle. The rowers shouted and cursed. Dane wasn't pulling oars; she had her hands in the water, creating a current to push them along. The water glowed faint green at her use of magic. The sea beneath the ship shined too, to Dane's magic-sense. It had gotten caught up in the sea-cliff's power, probably by a navigation error or a careless officer.

She wasn't completely sure the mighty three-masted ship had nearly crashed off a cliff by accident.

Theirs wasn't the only boatload of humans approaching. There were already vessels outside the ring of water, straining with ropes and oars to haul the ship away from danger. Some looked like the ship's own boats and crew, but there were men in all states of dress and undress, and a fancy trading ship was weighing anchor to join the more quick-starting rowboats. What Dane *didn't* see were natives rushing to help. There was, on second glance, one other fuzzy head visible in the distance, but otherwise the locals weren't lifting a claw.

There'd been no question in Dane's mind that she had to rush to the navy ship's aid. She questioned that now. Still, the rowboat she was riding was close enough now that she saw the ship tilted crazily far over the frothing waterfall, roughly bow-first. Crew smashed open a hole in their own hull with axes and shoved a

cannon out. It fell through open air and crashed far below, along with a screaming man. Men bellowed orders inside; it sounded like their own little hell. The rowers with Dane tried to get their attention and set up another towing rope, but confusion reigned.

Dane jumped overboard. She'd been to the sea-cliff before, with merely human swimming ability. Now the bright water seemed to welcome her. The upper current was starting to pull her toward the waterfall even at this long range, so she tried diving and found she could easily get down to the point where the roiling water turned and started driving her backward. She surfaced to conserve her strength, then darted low again, easily breaking through to the bare seabed. She fell a short distance and rolled on the rocks. Dane stood, slightly battered, then stared up at the ship that hung halfway over the western cliff. What remained of the sunlight filtered through the water, turning it deep red.

Dane wasn't an expert mage, but she was a former navy caskman and she'd trained with the natives. Between the two, she had an idea. Dane planted her feet firmly, took a deep breath, and with thoughts and gestures began to pull water over the east cliff, down at her head. The current there ran toward the cliff anyway, so it was easy to draw several tons of water over the edge. The entire sky blotted out as though she'd just sealed the roof of a cave. Dane felt vertigo as though she were falling upward into the sea. She cried out, but kept pulling water down... until the moment when it began to sprinkle her face. Then she let go of her spell.

The water-repelling seabed took over. Tons of water that had been falling right toward the point of strongest effect were suddenly bouncing back up like a slingshot, spraying up along the stricken ship's hull, forming a short-lived support beneath it and shoving the wood up and outward. Men on the ship gaped down at Dane, flailed for balance, then cheered as their ship finally got just enough purchase to pull upright and begin getting hauled away from danger.

Dane sank to her knees, drained. As the hull above moved away, a sliver of moonlight shined down on the seabed, outlining her fur in silver. Dane heard distant cheers, but all she wanted to do was rest for a moment. Her magic-sense showed the Weave wobbling crazily from the disruption. Finally, she stood up and vanished into the eastern cliff to swim back to shore.

* * *

Governor Connor paced in his office. "Thank you for your service to the Empire."

Dane had been hauled in for a meeting before she even finished drying off. Her fur still dripped on the governor's floor. "I did what I could."

"It was enough. What's your name?"

"I... would rather not say."

The governor poured himself a glass of water. Dane flinched. Connor grinned. "I thought so. I won't demand to know outright, but let me tell you: I'm authorized to grant pardons for those who save the lives of Imperial personnel. We had some important officials on that ship. If you *were* the 'castaway' I met not long ago, and if you admitted it, I would grant you a full reprieve for 'accidentally' leaving naval service without permission."

Dane gulped. "A pardon?"

Connor leaned against his heavy desk. "You'd be able to go home. I don't know if it's possible to undo this curse that's been laid on you, as our officials call it, but I'd send along a letter requesting that you be turned back if at all possible. Maybe you'd be the test case."

"Would I be sent back to the navy?"

"Eh. I'm sure there are civilian positions we can arrange for. If they already had you jump ship once, what captain will want you aboard?"

Dane's mind whirled. She could go back and undo the life she'd started to build here. There could be a proper house in her future, a respectable career in a civilized land, a wife, her old face in the mirror. Back in the seaside town where she'd been forced into service, she could visit her old haunts, meet her human friends again, and be among people she understood. The only price was to give up what little she'd accomplished here.

"Is it really a hard decision?" Connor said.

"Governor, why did *you* accept a job here?"

"Stupidity. I thought it would be an easy posting where I could lord over a bunch of fuzzy idiots and make money for sitting around in tropical shade, watching other people work. As it turns out, the Hikkoi Islands are rather more complicated. They're potentially a great asset to the Empire, including the people."

Dane nodded, looking around at the mix of imported finery and local crafts that adorned the governor's office. "I... I think I'm starting to understand this place," Dane said. "This is a new life for me, but it's not a bad one. Maybe I can be useful here."

The governor smiled and offered his hand. "Well, then, I'll need to reward you some other way. Money, I suppose. I may call on you again to keep me informed about goings-on among the natives, too. You're one of the few bridges between the cultures, and we should both make the best of that."

Dane shook his hand like a human, then bowed in the way he'd seen some of the locals do.

* * *

The next afternoon, Kirani met Dane by her beachside hut. With her were an otter-man Dane didn't recognize, and Arn the fisher.

Arn said, "Congratulations on being a hero!"

Dane hugged him. The fisher was warm and musky, and eagerly held onto her for a little while. "Let's get going. I have money to burn." She hefted a jingling pouch of coins, a first installment from the governor. "Dinner's on me, and I want to do some shopping."

Kirani teased her, "So you're finally going to quit dressing like a shipwrecked sailor?"

"It's about time, yes. There's a lot to think about later, but for now, let's have some fun."

The four of them strolled along the beach together, talking and swaying their tails, then swam in search of a pleasant evening.

The Doe Festival

Beside her in the warm shop, Liren said, "Really, you look fine. Ready to change back?"

The girl Chie Ai stood on all fours in the shape of a tan buck with golden brown fur. She turned her long face sideways to get a look in the iron mirror that hung on the workshop's wall. She frowned at her reflection, from the delicate hooves that had replaced her hands to the pointy, bony little antlers pressing down between her ears. She nodded. Liren tapped her with a lump of iron.

Chie's sight sharpened, gaining colors she had forgotten how to see as a deer. The intense earthy smell of the hearth faded from her weaker nose. Her shifting senses helped distract her from the pain of her bones and muscles reshaping, a slow and jerky process whenever she'd tried out this terrible choice of species. At last it was done and she was able to stand up again on human feet. Liren handed back her pale green robe. Though she was finally an adult and trusted to fish like her parents and their parents, Chie was still scrawny, and often got mocked for having callused hands.

"I can't go to the hunt like that. Everyone will laugh." Chie pulled the robe back on and stared at the creaky wooden floor.

Liren said, "It's no fault of yours for being born in a Horse month."

Sure, Chie couldn't be blamed for being born on exactly the opposite side of the zodiac from the Deer month, making it especially tough to turn into a deer, but it was humiliating. Why couldn't the village have a rat or ringtail party instead? She could become either of those more easily, and without the side effect of also ending up the opposite sex.

Chie scowled at her friend. "Didn't you skip it when you were my age?"

She smiled back. "Not for the same reason. I was sick that day, and not because

of a particular hunter I was hoping to avoid." She'd ended up marrying him last year.

"I just won't go, that's all. Do you have more of that tea?"

Liren poured a hot, steaming cup for her, and Chie passed it back and forth between her hands. It was nice not to have hooves. Liren said, "The Festival is for everyone's enjoyment, not just you and the gentlemen. How would your family look if you played sick or left some boy without a catch?"

"There must be some way to save face. I've got the rest of today to think."

"Don't give up, all right? You'll have a good time even if you stand out a bit."

Easy for her to say. Liren wouldn't be the one "standing out". Chie left her friend's shop at a jog, kicking up sand with her toes. The endless tide nearby, where she'd spent too many hours playing sneakily with the family fishing nets and scaling knives before being formally trained with them, calmed her frustration. She turned toward the water to feel the wind on her face and look away from the forest.

A shrill voice argued inside Kan Ma's house, a stone's throw from Chie's home. Chie gritted her teeth. Kan had a visitor. Chie tiptoed over to the slit in the paper-covered window and peeked through to see Wuling seated on a straw mat with him. The girl was stuffing her rouge-doused face with rice while telling a long, unfunny joke between mouthfuls. Chie grinned at how Kan sat rigid and obviously wanting to flee. He saw her and shrugged helplessly.

Wuling stopped in mid-bite. "Who's there?"

Chie hurried around a corner and heard the girl clomp outside to search.

"It's nothing, just a bird outside," said Kan.

"A bird isn't 'nothing.'" Wuling rounded the corner and found Chie hidden beneath the house's wooden supports. "Aha! Come out, mud-lark. Why are you spying?"

Chie came out grumbling. "None of your business."

Kan said, "She wasn't spying, just stopping by. Chie, can we —"

Wuling got between them. "Kan, your father promised you'd come with *me* for a walk after lunch." She took Kan's arm as sweetly as possible and stuck her tongue out at Chie, adding, "Forget it, fish-gutter. It's destiny."

Kan was red-faced and obviously about to object, but he bowed hastily to Chie and went with Wuling.

Chie stomped back towards the shore, where her house and a dozen others perched on wooden legs. She tripped and got sandy soil all over her robe. Damn it! She picked herself up, marched to the waterline where waves lapped her sandals, and stuck her scraped hands into the stinging saltwater. She mumbled a prayer to the water spirits and sat on the wet sand.

If she showed up for the festival, she'd be a buck instead of a doe, and then everyone would laugh and no one would bother trying to chase her. Worse, Kan Ma happened to be a fellow Horse-month, making him perfectly auspicious for Wuling (a Deer-month) and perfectly wrong for Chie. So there was a betrothal already. Ugh!

A hand landed lightly on Chie's shoulder. Chie looked up and saw Liren through blurry eyes. "What can I do?"

"About the festival?"

"I already said I won't go. I mean, what can I do about Kan and Wuling?"

"Your parents will find you someone. And if you go tomorrow, someone will still catch you." She gave a Fox-month grin. "Every year my brother would use his festival-wish to demand a free meal from whoever he caught. You can cook, right?"

"Fish and rice and vegetables." Her parents had demanded that she learn, and she'd been too dutiful to object to taking lessons in something so dull but useful. Chie frowned and stood, making sand shift underfoot. "Is Kan's father in the woods today?"

"Yes. Why?"

Chie was already jogging away. "I need to tell him the truth."

* * *

Trees owned the northern shore. Tangled mangroves in the water gave way to beeches that sent shadows rippling all along the ground. The woods, on this last day of winter, rang with hand-bells and wooden clappers. She followed the noise and found the village men scaring off demons. One of them was in the shape of a bear, in case any monsters proved to be more tangible than the kinds that amulets and holy noise-makers kept away.

The dark and powerful bear was Kan's father. Chie approached him, feeling her heart beat faster from getting within range of those massive claws and teeth. She said, "May I speak with you?"

The bear grunted and nodded his head, then walked away. The other men kept up their noise-making except for one who went with him to bring him some clothes. A little while later, Kan's father returned as a man with hands and feet like the anvil he worked on most days. "Miss Ai! Hello."

Chie fell to her knees and kowtowed. "Sir! I can't stand keeping silent about this any longer. Your son doesn't love Wuling. He's so honorable that he's afraid to complain. Please don't force them to marry."

The big man blinked. "Don't grovel to a poor man like me. I don't put much stock in the stars when it comes to marriage, but I'm told Kan and Wuling are matched. And Miss Wuling's uncle is a rich clerk. I want my boy to have a dowry."

Chie stayed kneeling. "Sir, I can't promise you silver and gold, but I'll work for you. I'll be your horse and carry wood for you, or a wolf to help you hunt."

"Kan and I are the horses when we need them. You mustn't debase yourself. Anyway, I made a promise to Wuling's family. I'm sorry."

Everything in the world was against her. She wanted to hit something, but that would be pointless too. Instead she went running. She'd have done it as a horse, if there were a way to bring her clothes. She jogged in sandals with her robe pulled tight, pounding the dirt beneath her. The wind whipped by her as it did through her mane on longer runs, on happier days.

And since today was horrible, of course she ran into Wuling, hard, before even noticing her. Wuling staggered and put a hand against her back, feigning injury. "You scrawny crayfish!"

"I didn't see you."

Kan hurried over to make sure Wuling was all right, frowning at her moans.

Wuling said, "She hit me! Kan, why won't you stand up for me?" She got in Chie's face and they were about to hit each other.

Chie felt Kan's hand clamp her arm, and he pulled her and Wuling apart. "Stop it, both of you!" He stared with big brown eyes at Chie, unnerving her, and at Wuling, driving her half a step back.

Wuling's voice faltered. "She should just accept it. She used to be so friendly... and your family needs our help, Kan."

Chie didn't know what to say. It had to be more manipulation by that girl; she hadn't stopped taunting Chie about the engagement since it happened. Not outright, but by always being around Kan, always laughing. Chie gritted her teeth and said, "Kan doesn't like you. At all."

"Shut up!"

"Whether I do," said Kan, restraining the girls, "doesn't matter. I've got an obligation. Please, both of you, just go home and let me think. I'll see you tomorrow."

Chie grimaced at the mention of the festival, but then an idea came to her. Kan seemed to read her sudden grin; a shocked look crossed his face for a moment. He released them and the three of them scattered, lost in thought.

* * *

That evening, Chie entered Liren's house. The woman sat playing one of the blood-lutes her family sold to distant noblemen. Under Liren's strumming the sound came out repetitive and tense. Chie said, "I need a hunting bow."

The music kept going as Liren saw her. "You can't be serious."

"Whoever catches a girl gets to make one demand, right? The rules don't explicitly say that the hunters must be the boys. All I have to do is force Wuling to break off her engagement."

"That's a cruel wish! Besides, you'd have to sneak into the forest so people won't ask questions —"

"I can do that."

"And find Wuling?"

"I'll just look for the fattest, meanest deer."

Liren fox-grinned, quickly hiding it. "Chie, you're serious about this? It's likely to end in tears, whether or not anyone thinks Wuling is bound to honor your wish."

Chie nodded resolutely.

Liren sighed, then vanished into a storeroom. She returned with a bow and padded, round-tipped arrows. "These are my brother's."

Chie hefted the smooth, light wood and the quiver. "Thank you! Will you watch the hunt tomorrow?"

"Of course."

* * *

That night Chie crept out of the house without transforming. No one was watching at this hour anyway. She walked into the woods carrying the bow and arrows, stirring chilly mist with every step. Only crickets and frogs broke the silence here. If the forest was ever safe it ought to be tonight, right after the ritual cleansing, but she still held the bow tightly. She imagined that firing it would be like the tug of a weighted net. She made a note of how she'd reached this spot, picked out a tree, and stashed two sets of clothes at its base. One would be for her quarry. While she was here she made a few tentative practice shots with the blunt arrows. She blushed at how terrible her aim was, and how hard it was to pull the string back, but at least she'd made her first few mistakes in private. She took a deep breath and tried again until she could hit a tree at close range and

without having the bowstring whip painfully across her chest. At last, she hid her weapon with the clothing and a piece of iron, and crept back home.

She entered quietly and went to bed with no risk of falling asleep. In her head she practiced archery and the striking of pesky deer. Each time she rose to check the sky it seemed no closer to dawn. When she could stand the waiting no longer, she found the door in the darkness, and slid it open. It was technically the first day of spring now, but chilly wind still flowed through her robes and made her skin prickle.

Throughout the village there were colorful streamers hanging between the houses. No one was about at this hour, of course. Chie crept under the raised floor of her home, closed her eyes, and began the prayer of the fox. A blur of minutes passed by in which her body reshaped smoothly and painlessly, making the world seem to grow around her. She felt the salty wind tickle long whiskers on her snout. Her fox shape was much like Liren's if not quite as pretty, and it was good for sneaking.

Trees loomed high above her in eerie silence. The last patchy snow chilled her paws. She blundered into what seemed to be the right clearing, sniffed around the base of each tree for her own human scent, and found the one she'd stashed the supplies in last night. She sat back on her hindlegs, awkwardly clutched the metal between her forepaws, and tapped her chest with it.

Her body rippled and grew until she was human again. She dressed in her robe and sandals, picked up her bow and quiver, and dusted herself off. Sunlight was just starting to flow into the world and chase away the darkness. It was time.

After a little while she heard footsteps crunching on snow. The hunt had begun! Chie slipped behind a tree in time to hide from a running boy. The sound faded, leaving only the clean snow scent. She jogged, searching for Wuling. A fresh cloven hoofprint in a bit of muddy ground gave her a clue and guided her steps.

A doe thundered across her path. Chie's hand flew to her quiver, just like she'd practiced, but then she knocked it off of her shoulder. Arrows spilled all over. She cursed and hurried to collect them again. The deer gaped at her, sniffed, and ran away. At least it probably wasn't Wuling.

Chie climbed a gentle hill. There was no bedding-place to find, not for deer who were usually villagers. All around and below were the shouts of hunters at play,

giving chase to prey who wanted to be caught by anyone clever enough to find them.

The hunters were noisy. As a village girl, it was Chie's job to be sneaky and quiet on this festival day, elusive until someone came along to find her. But today she was a huntress, and it seemed wrong to be silent. She gave a shout that echoed through the wilderness.

As she explored the wooded slopes, the son of Big Beer Pijiu the innkeeper found her. The young man lowered his bow. "Chie! What are you doing?"

She shrugged. "Hunting Wuling."

Pijiu's son laughed. "I see. She's a fine doe, very light and speckled."

"Where is she?"

"I think I saw her near the shore over there, but she bounded away too quickly for me. You'd better hurry before she's caught."

"Thank you!" she said, and started running downhill. The soil softened near the coast.

Something rustled in the bushes. Chie grabbed an arrow, more carefully this time, and nocked it. Everything went quiet, but then she spotted a flicker of movement. She pulled back the string, let go, and flubbed the shot completely, stinging her fingers. She hopped and hissed, clutching her hand. Meanwhile the padded arrow bounced off a branch. A boy ducked and yelped in surprise.

He said, "Watch where you're... huh?" He recognized Chie, frowned, then got distracted by another sound. Both hunters spotted the source: a beautiful doe with pale speckled hide. The boy drew his bow.

"She's mine!" Chie shouted, drawing another arrow.

"Fine! Whatever." The boy ran in search of another target.

The deer panicked and bounded straight at Chie. She dodged. Her hands trembled with the bowstring's tension and her arrow wobbled in midair — but the deer dodged the wrong way and got hit sidelong! Soot from the rounded

arrowhead left a mark. Chie's prey staggered and stopped to look at her.

"Got you, Wuling!" Chie marched up to the deer and faced her down. "My wish is for you to call off your engagement! You've got to promise or you'll be cursed by the spirit of the hunt."

The deer stared at her and nodded, with an expression Chie couldn't read. Chie took out the spare robe she carried and dropped it, then struck the doe with her piece of iron. She did it a bit harder than necessary.

The deer's body reshaped in fits and starts that looked painful to watch. She grew gradually bulkier, somehow wrong for Wuling's natural build. Chie stared at her prey, held one hand to her mouth, and then turned aside in embarrassment as the animal became a naked Kan Ma.

Kan snatched the spare robe and struggled to cover himself as soon as he had thumbs again. "Ow! You almost got me caught by Che-u!"

"W-what are you doing here like this?"

"I saw that look. You were going hunting, I knew it! I didn't want Wuling's family to lose face by breaking the marriage contract." He stood. "But now I have an obligation to call it off." He smiled. "Honoring this festival-wish of yours makes for a good excuse."

Chie stammered, "Then... then you really do... prefer me?"

Kan shrugged. "I didn't say that. I was hoping to hunt today, catch whatever young lady I can find, and demand a home-cooked meal."

She tried to read his expression, but he could be as stoic as his father. If she was going to catch him after all, she would need to be captured in turn. Blushing, she set down her iron and her bow and quiver, then retreated behind a tree for privacy. She began the prayer of the deer, the least suited to her by destiny, and let it reshape her into an antlered buck. Before she lost her voice to the change she called out, "You make a nice doe!" For a moment a thought flickered across her mind that the two of them could play together in the forest, both transformed, and be well matched for each other.

A call came back, "I'll get you for that!"

The chase didn't last long. She dodged and taunted Kan up and down the forest, leaping at the fun of outwitting him each time. Twice someone else came near but she ducked their shots and continued, until she came to a place where boulders blocked her escape route. An arrow struck her in the leg, fired with an easy grace. Chie stuck out her tongue at Kan, and bowed her head in defeat.

Once she'd accepted his demand for a meal, he tapped her with the iron. Kan watched her body slowly returning to human and his gaze lingered for longer than was proper before he turned away. Chie didn't much mind.

While they sat together on a log, making fun of each other, a sleek black bear padded into the clearing with Wuling on its back. Wuling stared at them. "But I thought she wouldn't go!"

Chie shrugged. "You should just accept fate." That looked like the bear form of Pijiu's son. So, he had been the one to capture Wuling? Chie looked at him and said, "Did you direct me to the wrong target on purpose?"

The bear only gave her a sharp-toothed grin.

Wuling tried to copy Chie's nonchalance. "At least Kan will see how badly you cook."

"Actually," said Chie, "I caught him first."

Wuling slid down from the bear's back. "What? Kan, what did this mudskipper do?"

"I'll have to explain later," Kan said, since Chie was laughing and pulling him by the arm. "Sorry!" Together the two Horse-month friends ran. On the way home they became horses and charged along the shore, back to the village.

* * *

Hooves tapped at Liren's door. She opened it and blinked at the two horses. She found an iron and tapped both, then went inside to fetch clothes for them. "I heard," she said. "So, is there another betrothal coming?"

Kan sat stiffly and cross-legged, very close to Chie. "My father would practically sell me to another rich girl, for the dowry."

"I don't blame him for wanting to do that," said Chie, "but I can't give him treasure if that's what he most wants."

Liren said, "Destiny is against you, then."

Kan said, "We'll make our own. We'll run away if we have to."

Liren pressed a cup of tea into Chie's hands and another into Kan's. "There may be troubles you haven't seen. Are you sure?"

They stared into their tea for a while, worrying. Eventually they looked up, silently exchanged cups, and drank.

Turning Back

Alice smiled up at me from the waterbed, inviting me to share it once more. She was dressed only in a one-piece swimsuit that blended in with her grey pelt, creating the appealing illusion that she was nude while being "safe for work", as she put it. People who worked for themselves could wear whatever they wanted, and people who lived in modern Cuba could *be* whatever they wanted. Her big rabbitry incisors and long fuzzy ears made her grin contagious. She said, "What brings you here, Miguel? Decided to take me up on my offer to move in, after all?"

I set down my suitcase and looked around her home. It didn't take long, since it consisted of a single cargo container cleverly divided into bedroom, bathroom and kitchen/office yet made to look like the cabin of a luxury yacht. These days living in a small space was mostly an affectation left over from the lean times, right after the US secession crisis, when the world had turned upside down. Meanwhile I'd seen this land, my home country of Cuba, become free after the reign of the Castros.

I said, "I've been thinking about how we got here."

The rabbit-girl rolled over onto her belly, making the bed ripple. She sat with her hands under her fuzzy chin and twitched her whiskers. "I'd rather not, *amigo*. Those days are over."

I sighed, because that was exactly why I'd come. "For you they are, but not for everyone. What if you could help people in another country to get the kind of life you have?"

"I do that already. My designs already feed people in every place they're legal."

Alice was an industrial biotech engineer, or Food Alchemist according to her business card. She made the wondrous vertical farms and desert plantations that fed so many people, merging modified plants and fish and machinery into a

harmonious system. Not that she or I had done anything Nobel-worthy. We'd just worked hard, gotten in early on helping to invent the latest wave of biotech, and been paid in stock. Alice and I had lived together (platonically) for the first, poorest years.

Cuba was creating the future! My homeland, of all places, now had free markets and the rule of law and a willingness to embrace the latest, most "unnatural" technology. We'd done well here, in an age when most of the world was sinking into the same central planning my people had abandoned. Now, we had to lead. I wanted to wave our flag to the whole world, saying, Come and see, and join us!

I said, "There's a trade show coming up in the United States. A chance to demonstrate some of your work. Not that they'll let you bring the gengineered stuff, but you can show off the machine side."

Alice waved one clawed hand dismissively. "If the Americans want to know what I do, they can watch my education videos or, y'know, give in and buy our inventions. What good is a demo in a country that bans the really cool tech?"

I sat on the bed beside her and stroked my fingers through the ruff of fur just beneath her neck, making her shiver. I wasn't sure she really understood what drove the new Cuba and the other self-proclaimed "Free States" in contrast to her old country. "The people back in your homeland are good people; they just have different goals. There's a chance to go visit for educational purposes... and to do some unadvertised work on the side."

The bunny's ears perked up. "You're talking about spy stuff."

"Officially no. We'd just be there to boast about farming and biofuels and to make business contacts. If we *just happen* to whisper in person to a few promising youngsters about how to leave the country without permission, that'd be a total coincidence."

My people were opportunists and proud of it. As soon as people like Alice figured out how to grow fur, someone was there to sell them fancy shampoo. As soon as it got tough to leave the US if you were a doctor or engineer — just like it once was in Cuba! — we invented ways to "expedite the emigration process".

"That sounds *muy* illegal, Miguel."

"Just a little." That was the nice thing about being born in a country bound with red tape: knowing how to work around it.

"And they wouldn't be Free States citizens."

"I'd buy them citizenship. Maybe even get a percentage of their future earnings and turn a profit off the whole deal." The Free States loved calling talented legal immigrants "refugees" to taunt the US with the implication that theirs was a country to run from.

Alice said, "And you know I can't go there at all. Why can't you relax? We have sun and waves and scenery here." She snuck her hands closer to undo a few of my shirt buttons.

I couldn't let myself accept what she was offering right now. "Do you remember when you left the US? You were the hotshot engineer, the wonderboy with the patents —"

"I was *never* a boy!" Alice said, flicking her ears back. "Not in my heart. Don't remind me of what I used to look like."

I pressed on. "That'll always be true, right? Just like how you're still human even though you're gengineered and part rabbit and part cybernetic and you might never die of old age. You'll still be *you* even if you have to, say, look like something else for a while."

Now she sat up, eyes wide. "What's in the suitcase?"

I nodded, keeping my eyes locked on her cute little black nose. "It's what you think. I need you to go back."

"No, no, that's crazy! Wait. Do you mean back to the mainland, or back to being an ugly naked ape? They won't even let me in; I'm an abomination to them."

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Because they see video of someone with cute bunny ears and a tail and they shout, Freak! How dare she!"

"How dare she *what*?"

Alice flopped backward and made a sort of snow angel with the waterbed's covers. "Geez, I don't know. Exist. Be what she wants to be. Use the latest tech to be *better*. Because it's evil to buy nice things for yourself while anybody is in need, no matter how much good your work does." She whapped her head backwards against a pillow and hissed.

"We can help people on this trip." I opened the briefcase and let her see the glittering syringe full of our latest medical nanites. She would need to change back into her old human male self. Between the anti-biotech laws and the paperwork, she really was a walking felony back in the US. To go there, she'd more-or-less need to undo all the things she'd done to her body since leaving. "I need your help, Alice. I wouldn't ask if your skills weren't important to the plan."

Alice said, "Why in dog's name would I let you change me back? Don't you know what I went through? I went from stupid intolerant parents and classmates who beat me up, to 'friends' who were so supportive until they found out I wasn't totally on board with their politics. And then they called me a 'self-hating Nazi trannie'. Ugh! I'm so *done* with both sides of that garbage. Nobody but me should care what I am, physically!"

"You can never totally get away from that kind of stupidity. Even here."

I reached out to scratch her long ears. I very much did like what she'd become, physically; her being called a freak by less open-minded people was the other side of the coin. If you get a new body, it ought to come with a thick skin.

Alice twitched and moved away, crossing her arms. Her eyes were a startled rabbit's, as though she were unsure whether to freeze or bolt. I sighed. "I had my own problems during the revolution. I don't feel a burning obligation to spend *all* my time and money helping the needy, but we really should make an effort. We can do some, ah, software and social engineering on this trip."

Flatly she said, "You want me to show off my tech as cover for hacking and forgery or something, to sneak people out of the country and bring them here."

"Something like that. It worked for you, didn't it?"

Alice seemed to shrink into the bed as she crouched, burying her head in her hands and shaking it *no, no*. "You smuggled me out, sure, but if it hadn't been for your promise about getting a new body, I wouldn't have gone. And now you

want me to give it up, to turn back!"

Her words made me feel tired and heavy, with a little more of the world's weight falling on my shoulders. "We talked, that night before we took you away. About freedom."

"And I got it!" said Alice. "I got to be what I always wanted to be, with nobody to call me sick or evil."

"Yeah, but..." She'd heard plenty of Free States propaganda over the years, so if she still didn't understand our cause, would she ever? I took a deep breath and said, "Your goal was to transform, to become something physically new and experience all the differences in how you think and feel, and what you can do. *What about other people's dreams?* There are geniuses and other creative folks out there who have some vision as crazy as yours, that they can't do because it'll be regulated to death. We can give a few of those people a chance to escape to a land where they can try."

She still cowered on the sheets and I wanted her to open up, to smile at me again. "My own problems screwed up my life. I had ideas, but everything got overshadowed by feeling like I wasn't in the right body."

That feeling had been a big part of why she got into biotech in the first place. When we first met, she said she felt like she was *evil*, like she deserved to be shunned. Brilliant mind, caged ego. I said, "My point is that other people are hurting too, feeling like they can't live out whatever they want to do, because they're not free." I crouched beside her, afraid to touch her. "I'm asking as a friend. I'm not going to hurt you."

Alice said, "You're not gonna jab me with that needle and force me to go back?" The syringe glittered in its case nearby.

"No!" I said, startled. "What makes you think I'd do that?"

"Because you're not gonna take no for an answer!"

"I would." I struggled for what to say. "Why didn't you tear my clothes off when I came in, anyway? You've got enhanced reflexes and everything."

Alice blinked, with her ears hinting at a hidden smile. "Do you want me to?"

"I mean, why didn't you?"

She said, "It wouldn't have been any fun. Not if I'd been forcing you."

"Like rape."

Alice's ears flattened. "Yeah."

"In most of the world that's like what *everyone* is dealing with. Every aspect of their lives is monitored and regulated to conform to the standards of whoever's in power today. When I visit, it's like I'm on a leash."

"You're doing politics again. I never liked this abstract stuff. I just wanna live here in peace."

"So do I."

Her warm hands were on my shirt, this time clutching it and holding me close. Her little muzzle bumped my nose, and her eyes were as pleading as her voice. "Then stay! Don't risk getting arrested or worse back there. You've got no obligation to keep visiting, let alone to make this trip extra dangerous. You're letting *their* rules about gengineering hold you back from turning into something better than human. Doesn't everybody here talk about how it's great to be selfish?"

"I don't talk like that," I said, avoiding her eyes. "Looking after yourself first, and fighting people who want to control you, isn't the same thing as not caring about others. For me, being free means doing what *I* think is right, not what someone orders me to do. What does your own conscience tell you? To keep your nose down, work on your inventions, and ignore the outside world?"

Alice's cold nose slid past mine, as she looked down. "I'm afraid we won't come back if we go."

"Nobody's forcing us. We can refuse to help others. But will we be good people?"

"I don't wanna make this choice." She sighed. "But no matter what I do, it's a choice, right?"

"Yeah. Can't get away from that."

"I'm not a bad person, am I?"

"No. Even if you decide not to go. The important thing is that *you* decide. Don't let me push you around."

Alice hesitated, then hauled me right next to her and pressed my face to her breasts. I didn't mind the view, but she sniffled and her arm trembled. "I'd be the same inside, right?"

"You're a wonderful person, with the right to decide things yourself. Gorgeous, too."

"Can't hear ya," she said, stroking the back of my neck. "C'mon, now's the time to get the politics out of your system." I only mumbled.

I seemed to sink farther against her. The plan for another trip to the mainland scared me too, though I'd feel more confident with Alice beside me. Alice seemed to want nothing more right now than to share warmth with me, by mutual consent. It was a nice way to live.

Alice coughed and sniffled, so I held her tighter. I noticed that the fur tickling my fingers felt thinner. Surprised, I lifted my head and met her eyes. "Did you...?"

Her eyes shined and her nose twitched. "I had to." The needle lay empty in its case.

"No, you didn't have to." My hands were exploring her, finding a body still soft and fragrant. The full reversion, to something like her original human form, would take hours. Plenty of time.

She said, "It's the right thing to do. I need to — I mean, I'm choosing to help. If I have to hide my real self away for a little while, it doesn't matter what other people think, right? They don't get to define me."

I smiled. "When we return, you can come roaring right back to what you want to be."

Alice's whiskers retracted to nothing and her fuzzy ears were losing their near-comical size, but she was my friend no matter what she looked like. She nosed my own ear and gave a husky little roar that made me shiver. "So that's what you mean by being free? Having a bunny-girl wrestle you to the pillows?"

"Fringe benefit." I pulled aside a blanket. "For me it's having someone choose to do that."

Alice smiled and let go of me. She slipped away, climbed off of the bed and posed for me, with a luxurious stretch. I'd never told her, but it was her eyes that caught me the most. The intelligence and the drive that showed when she willed them to be there. When she was most alive. She looked me over and said, "There's work to do, eh, *amigo*?"

I nodded.

"Since you need me for this trip, you owe me big time." She was giving up external beauty, slowly fading into a dream deferred, all so that she could help bring others here. Maybe Alice was just doing this for my sake, not understanding what my work meant to me — but maybe on some level she did understand. After all, she'd chosen this change by her own hand, and hoped to accomplish something by it. There was courage in her.

Alice looked me over as though I were her payment. She seemed to like what she saw, despite all my faults. Despite my holding back from changing into something wild and fun like her... for now. She made her decision to collect, and pounced me.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed this book, please consider giving a rating on Amazon so others can find out about it!

If you like the combination of a breakaway island nation with advanced tech and bunnygirls, check out Phil Geusz' "Freedom City" books. Liked the castaway on an ocean planet? See the game "Subnautica", which inspired it. "Safari Swap"'s loony corporation? My online gallery has a story called "The Seeds of Doom" which started that little setting.

As for "Island Tail", I'd like to create an interactive story/"visual novel" following that premise. Let me know if it's something that might interest you.

See next page for more works by the author.

About the Author

Kris Schnee has been a parrot trainer, an MIT graduate, a zoo intern, a lawyer, a game designer, and most recently a software developer. He lives in Florida.

Galleries:

<http://www.amazon.com/Kris-Schnee/e/B00IY1HDDY/>

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<http://kschnee.deviantart.com>

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Interested in hearing about new books by the author, and commentary on writing and world-building? Sign up for a mailing list at <http://eepurl.com/cRvqWH>.

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Anthologies containing Schnee's work include "Different Worlds, Different Skins", "Roar #6", and "Gods With Fur".