

S.I.

By Daniel Eliot Boese, aka DataPacRat, aka many other things

\*\*\*

First Book:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AU8o3wSAiufh-Eg1FtL-6656dNvbCFILCi2GbeESsb4/edit>

Previous Book:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pr56pg1KVNdGR9wD27uBP8nNa91k7JUUCsV4Dc4UIA/edit>

Index:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1\\_ZcUba\\_GKVCm\\_i2VeGrfSBBxC8pR6VZC5VBBUVKXxYk/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_ZcUba_GKVCm_i2VeGrfSBBxC8pR6VZC5VBBUVKXxYk/edit)

Next Book:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGL06G89TsvHG0bjWWsFA56vVc5an\\_ZNU36aMynEo6Q/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGL06G89TsvHG0bjWWsFA56vVc5an_ZNU36aMynEo6Q/edit)

\*\*\*

\*Book Nine: Off-\*

\*Chapter One: Off-loading\*

After taking my first dose of the medicine Amy prescribed (ten drops in a glass of water or juice, every four hours, dosage to be adjusted depending on her observations) that evening, I dropped right off to sleep, and stayed that way all night.

Fortunately, Amy had told me that might happen, so I'd made my final preparations beforehand. I was trying to minimize the spread of any information on my itinerary, for the obvious security purposes, so as soon as my other companions for this trip came aboard (Minerva along with Bear Joe, and, as I discovered when I woke up, 'Toby the Dog' the octo-kitty), Munchkin spun a few virtual slot-machines and started on her semi-randomized course.

It was just over a hundred miles from Erie to the "Metropolis of Cleveland", which Munchkin could cover in less than an hour, if the throttle was open. There were all sorts of reasons /not/ to do that, from applying some of Julia's lessons on concealing my vehicle's capabilities, to swinging around to let Munchkin gather some mapping data on the area, to minimizing the risk of Munchkin colliding with something and suffering damage that would take far too long to repair.

Various heliograph messages flashed up and down the line overnight as I dreamlessly dozed, as some people in Metropolis asked for clarifications on my visit for me, or from my personal staff, or from anyone who had an idea what I was doing; but the only responses

they got were from the squiddies' embassies, and the current inhabitants of Lake Erie had no more idea what I was doing than anyone else did. Which was just the way I wanted it.

--

I'd told the squiddies to expect me at their embassy to Metropolis somewhere between nine and noon - so I showed up at eight. Said embassy was on the lakeshore, on part of what had once been an airport, but was too close to the (cooling?) towers that had replaced what had once been downtown Cleveland for any of the city's new population to have been comfortable claiming. The squiddies didn't care - the blank-walled towers were harmless (if foreboding to anyone who wondered what had happened to Cleveland's original population), the old terminal was comfortably close to shore, and the land-dwellers' superstitions made the place cheap to acquire. (According to the reports I'd collected while in Erie, they'd even found a sunken submarine nearby, which they were in the process of refurbishing into an underwater extension of the embassy.)

However, a bit to my chagrin, despite our early arrival, the looming towers, the cloudy skies, and any sort of security precautions, there was a gaggle of people standing around the embassy's entrance as Munchkin came to a halt - maybe around a hundred. Mostly human - both in the sense that most of them looked human, and the rest looked more human than anything else. Some looked official, some had cameras, and most looked like regular people. But from the living car's cracked-open airlock, Alphie, currently hooked up to the tricorder (aka a multi-frequency laser spectrometer), reported no unusual chemistry in the area, and the helmet from Hopper didn't show anything on lidar, imaging radar, thermograph, IR, or audio analysis.

Aiming for security was one thing; cutting myself off from all people who might pose a potential risk was another. Plus, Amy had specifically said, "I want to observe you interacting with people, including strangers." So I added an extra bit of essential royal gear to my already somewhat-modified Windsor undress uniform (already containing enough hidden pockets to make me want to nickname the thing my TARDIS, and topped with mask that was little more than a simple white blindfold with eyeholes): white gloves, so I could press the flesh without too much actual flesh-to-flesh contact.

When I finally opened the airlock to look outside with my own eyes (to whatever degree they could be called 'mine'), there was a shuffling among the crowd, and I hesitated, wary of both snipers and mob violence. But instead of simple violence, I was greeted with, well, auditory violence: drums and pipes. Specifically, the Regal Salute - a few bars of 'God Save the Queen' and a few of 'O Canada'. Recalling bits of protocol from here and there (including 'Stranger in a Strange Land'), I stood in place for the duration, then nodded to acknowledge the salute. As I took the few steps down to ground level, the mismatched crowd continued playing, with spot-on rhythm of a few of the bagpipe classics. I couldn't help but smile; as much as some people might complain about the droning, I was usually able to enjoy anything from dubstep electroswing to polkas, and what this band might have lacked in standardized uniforms they'd more than made up for with practice. (I made a mental note to go for the Scottish variant of formal dress, if the occasion arose while I was here.)

A handful of people, not carrying any instruments, stepped across the pavement towards me (and, behind me, Amy and Minerva peeking out the airlock). In front was a young woman in a colourful striped poncho with bright blue feathers instead of hair, and a handkerchief tied over her nose and mouth cowboy-style, which matched the description the squiddies had forwarded me of my local guide, yclept Blue. "Your Majesty," she nodded to me, projecting her voice to be heard over the music, "please allow me to introduce the... candidates for representative from the city's Executive Council. I am told that you are arriving so soon after informing them that the Council are still debating who to pick, so all the liaisons agreed to come together."

"Farbeit for me to cause any problems," I tried to politely hedge. "I'm sure whatever your system selects will be more than adequate to the task."

Blue raised a downy eyebrow, then shrugged, glanced at the quartet of people behind her, then turned back to me with an elfin grin. "To cut down on any arguments on precedence, I will introduce them to you in an order of my choosing, which I am sure they will spend many hours trying to reverse-engineer." That sounded like there was a certain amount of history going on that I was unaware of, but I had to work a bit to keep my return smile from encouraging too much mischievousness.

"First up is Ida Moore," Blue waved at a woman shaped less like a human than a slender wyrm on two legs, who I only avoided mentally labelling a 'dragon' due to her fur and a rather prominent bulge at her middle. Much of her form was hidden in a business suit whose tailoring I was in no position to criticize, given the troubles I'd had getting clothes that were comfortable over my fur before I'd gotten my clothes-printer, and her muzzle was concealed by a dust-mask with filters on each cheek. "Who was nominated by the First Responders Union."

"Ma'am," Ida nodded a bit jerkily, clutching a purse tighter.

Blue moved on, "Albert Yoder, who absolutely /loves/ being called 'Al'." The second figure harrumphed, but I gave him a closer look than I did Ida, for he was an anthropomorphic rabbit, like me. Well, not much like me; while he wore a vaguely military outfit, with fringed epaulets on his shoulders and a monocle on top of his domino mask, his brown-furred body was shaped a lot more like a rabbit blown up to human-size than a human with rabbity bits. "Sponsored by the Civil Service."

"Your Majesty," he half-bowed, and I found myself nodding back, before having to drag my eyes away as Blue started her next introduction.

"Ethel Williams," who looked to be some sort of near-human primate, maybe a chimpanzee, maybe an australopithecine, maybe something novel; from the way her overalls hung, I was pretty sure she was as furry as a bonobo. I couldn't tell much about her head, which was covered by a Batman-like cowl (minus the pointy ears). "Member in good standing of the local Communist Party."

"A pleasure," Ethel nodded, neatly avoiding using any of my titles.

"And last, and by her own estimation absolutely not the least, Nia Washington." Nia was the only one of the group who looked to be completely human, and wore an obviously carefully-tailored skirt-suit and a carefully-bejeweled and be-feathered Carnival-like mask. "She's been put forward by a group of concerned wealthy citizens, who don't have an official name, but who I happen to have overheard when they thought they were alone call themselves the 'Right People'."

Nia glared at Blue, sniffed, then turned back to me, giving me at least as much of a once-over as I had Al. "Welcome to Metropolis, Your Majesty."

I took a breath, and relaxed it, trying to fix the names and faces in a new memory palace. "While I'm enjoying the music," I said, to Blue to avoid getting in the middle of whatever political squabbling had saddled me with four governmental liaisons instead of one (or, even better, zero), "perhaps we should retire to somewhere a little quieter for whatever discussions are necessary before I can start relaxing. Should I offer my compliments to your band?"

Blue tilted her head, a touch bird-like. "What band, ma'am?"

"Er - the one currently in the middle of 'Scotland the Brave'?"

Blue looked behind herself, blinked, then seemed to brighten and turn back. "Oh, that's not a band, ma'am. They're just sightseers and so on - people who've got the morning off."

It was my turn to blink, and work on puzzling out the ramifications of that. "Oh... kay," I delayed for a moment. "Well, they're certainly well-practiced, at least."

Blue coughed, and the four liaisons looked away in various directions, and I suddenly had the feeling that I'd just complimented someone's home cooking by praising their slave. "Anyway," Blue said, looking like she was trying to cut short an extremely awkward moment, "my time is yours - anywhere you'd like to go, I'll get you there as best I can."

Al harrumphed again. "There are a /few/ matters that need to be cleared up first," he said to Blue. I hm'ed curiously, and he turned to me, pointing near my waist. "According to the local laws on decency, I am afraid that your tail is unacceptably naked."

I looked down, curling my metre-long furry snake-tail around so Waggoner could look back up at me. Then I looked over at Ida, whose own furry tail was poking out the back of her suit without anyone seeming to be concerned about it. I shifted my shoulders, telling my arm-bots to shrug, and suggested, "I could get my pants tailored to add a sleeve."

"That will be unnecessary," Al said, "you merely need to cover a sufficient part of its head with a suitable mask."

"No she doesn't!" Ethel immediately objected. "She's already /wearing/ a mask, which is more than sufficient to pass even the letter of your needless sumptuary laws!"

Ida crossed her arms, then uncrossed them, and asked, "Is her tail head even a person? It looks like it's too small to have much of a brain."

Al remained unmoved. "The letter of the law is that all heads on any body containing a sapient entity need to be suitably masked, in order to comply with the local taboos."

Nia took a step away from the trio, and almost as an aside, commented to me, "If you prefer your current outfit, I am confident that the legal subcommittee can be persuaded to issue a preliminary exception for you, while a more permanent revision to the law gets passed through the system."

Ethel swung her attention from Al to Nia, "And isn't that just like your clique, manipulating the system in your favour when it suits you, while ignoring the needs of everyone else!"

As they quartet started talking over top of each other, I looked at Blue. She looked at me, and shrugged. I grumbled, "Maybe I should go back to bed," and started turning around to see if Amy or Minnie had any suggestions.

Halfway into my turn, I stopped. And squinted, as I was facing mostly east, into the day's early sun.

"Blue," I said, rolling my shoulder a bit, and my arm waved her over to me. I pointed at the distant speck I saw, gliding through the air between some of the more distant cooling towers. "Could you tell me what I'm looking at?"

"Oh, that's a good omen," Blue said, brightly. "Maybe he wants to make sure nothing goes wrong with your visit here."

"He'?"

Blue nodded, and smiled, and waved upwards. "Hi, Superman!"

The blue and red, humanoid figure I'd spotted, impossibly floating through the air with the greatest of ease, waved in return.

I couldn't muster enough coherent thought to do anything but wave back up at him, and watch the sight until he disappeared behind the towers.

--

One thought floating through the void where I usually kept my mind finally managed to knock me back to proper awareness again - the herd of singing jackalopes (currently in Munchkin's

cargo carriage) had implied mind-control shenanigans in the city. So, which should I believe, my understanding of reality or my lying eyes?

Ignoring the still-bickering liaisons and the still-piping crowd and Blue's curious look, I stepped back to Munchkin's airlock, shoving between Amy and Minnie. Unfortunately, the airlock was facing north and the towers were to the south of us, so neither Alphie nor Hopper's helm had gotten a line-of-sight; so I started tapping on Munchkin's digital walls. In a few seconds, I called up footage from Munchkin's external cameras - and they did, indeed, show a flying man. Either there really had been something up there, or I was experiencing a rather larger and more coherent hallucination than seemed reasonably likely.

Blue leaned her head in the outer door. "Something the matter, Your Majesty?"

I practically growled, "I am /not/ going to say that what I just saw was impossible. I /am/ going to say that I have very good reason to believe that that was /not/, in fact, Superman."

Blue considered that briefly, then asked, "If that was an evil clone or something, where'd you see the real one, then?"

I grimaced, but before I could figure out which answer to use, Amy rested a webbed paw on my back. "Bunny, remember, you're here to relax, not get worked up."

I was looking at a wall, and thought aloud, "I wonder how... whatever that was... would react if I broke out a PPG and met them up there."

Blue asked, "PPG?" while Minnie asked "Can I come with you?" while Ida leaned her head in next to Blue's to ask "What's going on?", until Amy finally interrupted everything by bellowing, "Hold it!"

Everyone stopped and looked at her. She pointed at me. "Bunny. What's so important about looking into this?"

I tried to fold my answer down into something concise. "I don't understand what I just saw. It could be as much of a threat as an unknown zone."

Ida started asking, "Superman/ a threa-?" but Amy gave a 'pst!' and cut her off, then turned back to me.

"You're on medical leave. Outside of immediate life-threatening circumstances, you're here to recover, not keep working and investigating. Capiche?"

My arm-bots figured out that crossing themselves matched the rest of my unhappy body language. "I want to argue about that 'immediate'," I grumbled. "But overall, I capiche."

Blue cleared her throat and lifted a hand for Amy's attention. "Yes?"

"I want to see if I get this straight. Your boss, the queen, wants to investigate the big blue guy, but you want her to stay off her feet?"

Amy nodded her head hard enough to set her whiskers bobbing. "Yes," she declared firmly.

"In that case - I know a guy."

Ida looked at Blue suspiciously. "A 'guy'?"

Blue shrugged. "A private investigator, handles a lot of the weird cases. You can hire him, and he can do the work while the queen gets her vacation. Everyone wins. Sound good?"

Amy and I looked at each other. I shrugged, and reluctantly admitted, "Better than me going crazy by watching a flying guy and not doing anything to figure it out. As long as this investigator is at least moderately competent."

Blue nodded, offering, "I can introduce you."

Ida seemed a touch suspicious, and asked Blue, "Who is your 'guy'?"

Blue seemed to ignore her, and continued, "His office is eight miles west of here - we can go now if you want to take your own whatever-this-is, or I can arrange local transport."

Ida seemed rather unhappy. "Ma'am - I don't think you want to start your vacation with a trip to Story Town."

Ethel's head suddenly joined the crowd. "You want to go to Story Town?"

Minnie asked what I was about to, "What's Story Town?"

Ida said, "Where a lot of Changed live."

Blue said, "The Executive Council, in its infinite wisdom, decided to keep a couple of zones intact, for 'research'. The one on the Rocky River doesn't kill anyone, and it seems to keep to a theme, so it's still running."

Ethel contributed, "Naturally, the people who live there are a lot poorer than the people elsewhere, with all the social issues arising from deliberate governmental neglect and outright oppression."

Nia couldn't get quite as close to the airlock as Ethel and Blue, but from behind them added, "I don't think we need to distract our guest with our internal politics. If she wishes a private investigator, I know of a couple with much higher qualifications - or, if she prefers a Changed one, we can send a messenger to collect him, so she doesn't have to travel to a high-crime area."

Al mused, "There is certain precedent for arranging for an escort of Peace Officers for officials traveling to questionable locations, which could be extendable to foreign dignitaries..."

It looked like just about everyone was about to break into a new argument, so I pre-empted it by projecting my voice with an "Ahem!". Once everyone was looking at me, I announced, "Munchkin will be departing for Story Town in a few minutes. Anyone who wishes to accompany me may board now - as long as you accept that I will eject anyone who raises their voice, or otherwise makes a nuisance of themselves."

With various looks at each other and mixed expressions, the five Metropolitans clambered aboard. I gave the pipe-and-drum gang a wave, and they transitioned into a version of Mendelssohn's recessional. Which made just about as much sense as anything, at the time.

--

Story Town's inhabitants were... more varied than I'd gotten used to. There were ogres and elves, wolves and pigs on their hind legs, sphinxes with quadrupedal bodies and human heads, and all sorts of generic fuzzy things with nearly random arrangements of limbs. Almost all of them had simple pieces of cloth hiding some or all of their faces.

Leaving the liaisons under the watchful eyes of Bear Joe, Minerva, and Toby the Dog, I discreetly activated Munchkin's self-defense systems to keep any of the locals from doing more to the land-train than be curious about it, while Blue led Amy and I into a staircase between a hole-in-the-wall grocery store and a hole-in-the-wall whorehouse, past a handmade sign with a classic magnifying glass and the label "PI Bear".

Amy quietly asked, "Are you sure you want to go in here?"

Climbing, I turned my head just far enough to be able to see where I was putting my feet and said, "I'm holding judgement in reserve. If I don't like what I see here, one of the local government, hm, flunkies, for lack of a more polite word, said something about other investigators who can be hired."

From in front of me, Blue said, "Bear's a good guy. Kind of grumpy, but good at his job."

Amy asked around me, "If he's so good, why doesn't he rent a better office?"

"He's good, but if you haven't noticed, the people around here don't have much cash to spare to pay him with."

Amy's "So why-?" cut off as Blue opened a door and ushered us into a small reception area. A couple of chairs, a desk with lots of papers, and a child-sized, adult-shaped secretary wearing two masks - a small domino mask over top of one that looked like a ceramic doll's head with a few cracks interrupting the delicate porcelain.

"Heya, Dollface," Blue cheerily asked, "Is the boss-man in?"

"He was out late last night, and nobody has an appointment, so he's still asleep. But he'll be glad to see you again. Who are your friends?"

"From out of town, got a job with lots of billable hours if he impresses."

"I'll make sure he puts on a clean tie." 'Dollface' stood, and with a stiff-limbed gait, went through a door into the recesses of the building. In short order she returned and retook her seat, followed by... well, there's no way to describe him other than as a classic teddy bear, button eyes and all. Trying to work out how his apparently plush anatomy worked almost distracted me from noticing his had-to-be-custom-tailored trenchcoat and fedora, and pulp-hero mask.

"Gooo-ood morning, everyone!" he cheerfully half-sang, and pulled himself up Dollface's chair to give her a peck on the cheek. "And particularly you, who got me going this fine bright day!"

"Careful, cuz," Dollface primly responded, "or our guests will start wondering if you have an incestuous streak."

"Right, right," he dropped back to the floor and gave at least my belly a once-over (it was hard to tell if he noticed the rest of me) waving us to follow him through a different door. We moved into a larger office, with slightly more comfortable-looking chairs and even more paperwork on the desk. Hopping up onto a chair, he poured himself a glass of something that smelled rather terrible and vinegary, downed it, shuddered, then set the bottle aside without offering us any, for which I was thankful. Putting his paws together, he looked up and down at both me and Amy, making me wonder whether his eyesight was as weird as mine or Brenda's. "I'm going to hazard a guess," he said, much more business-like than a moment ago, "that you want me to run some background research on a local person you're interested in hiring."

"Reasonably close," I agreed, "though I hadn't actually thought about the possibility of hiring him until you just mentioned it. How did you guess?"

"It wasn't hard. You're new to the city, which makes infidelity unlikely. You're coming to me instead of a human, so you're not interested in building a court case or dealing with high finance. Dollface said something about 'lots of hours', so you're probably not hoping I can find someone you lost. I was about three-quarters sure it was background work, and one-quarter sure you wanted to find some object, so went with the odds."

"Reasonable," I agreed, the fairly ordinary conversation letting me get try to used to the fact that he appeared to be made of cloth. "Um. How can I put this."

"Blue didn't tell you I was a plushie, and now you're wondering if I'm up to the job."

"I'm not even entirely sure what 'plushie' means, in this context, and I'm not sure what questions I can ask without being insulting."

"Forty clams a day, plus expenses, and I'll give the best answer I've got to any question you want to ask."

Blue piped up, "You should have waited for me to say I've got an expense account from the squiddie embassy."

"I give a fair price for fair work, you little birdbrain. I don't dig for every last cent I can pull out. Long-term reputation is usually more important than short-term profits - you should think on that one for a while."

I cleared my throat for attention. "Mister... Bear?"

"Just 'Bear'."

"I'm 'Bunny', so I can't really quibble about names, but I'm curious - is that your original name?"

"Of course not. But every other name I've tried since I forgot my first name lowers my income, so I'm 'PI Bear' as long as I've got bills to pay."

"Very well. Bear - how about I hire you for a very short period to ask all the stupid questions, with an option to extend your service for a full week?"

Dollface instantly came in with a couple of boilerplate contracts, on which she was filling in a few blanks on the move, which she handed to myself and Bear. Amy just looked kind of amused at the whole proceeding.

In short order, everyone was sitting down, and I started with, "Alright, Bear, to start with the obvious... what /is/ a 'plushie', in this case?"

"A fungus with delusions of adequacy."

"... Oddly enough, not the strangest Change I've heard of. You don't look much like a mushroom, though."

"My 'stuffing' is the real me. The bear-suit is something I bought off a rack - when I first came out of the zone, I was in some sort of giant polka-dotted mouse thing, and even I couldn't take myself seriously in that."

I'll admit that I was indulging more in pure curiosity than in figuring out how good a private eye Bear might be. "You can pick whatever, um, casing you want?"

"Eh," he shrugged. "Makes it fun trying to track a subject who looks like a dog going into a building and a pony coming out, but that's why they pay me the big bucks. Some of us, like Dollface, like looking more human, even if it's expensive to get the best ceramics. Have to get the clay imported all the way from Georgia."

I nodded as if I had any clue about the ramifications of what I'd heard so far, and while I tried to work out what I wanted to know next, Bear poured himself another glass of whatever godawful stuff he'd already had one of. So, as he downed it in another giant gulp, I inquired, "Do you have a drinking problem that affects your work?"

"No. It's not a problem." I raised an eyebrow, and he managed to roll his button-like eyes. "It's not even alcohol, you silly bi...nt, I would have thought even a human could smell it was vinegar."

"Okay. The obvious question is, /why/ am I watching a talking teddy-bear-shaped mushroom drinking vinegar?"

"Because you can't get enough of my cuddliness and want to hire me long-term to watch over your new kid as soon as the sprog's out?"

"I doubt it," I frowned at him. "And at this rate, I'm strongly considering not exercising my option to hire you for even one full week."

He heaved a sigh (making me wonder how a fungus could breathe - or move, or think, or anything). "I'm not a mammal. I don't even have a skeleton. I don't have glands, I don't have any adrenaline, I don't get angry. But all us plushies are swimming in something like the hormones that make mammals like you all friendly and touchy-feely. Vinegar cancels them out and lets me work without trying to smile and hug everyone I meet."

"The more you drink, the less friendly you get?"

Blue answered for him, "To a point. He'll insult and snark all day, but even when he's soaked in a barrel of the stuff, he'll still do everything in his power to protect the people who need protecting."

Bear grumbled, "I know I said I'm not chasing every cent, but I'm still trying to close a deal here. No need to bring up old history."

A few twitches got one of my hands to rub my face. "Even so, I'm going to suggest you let yourself dry up some - especially if you're going to be interviewing some people and convincing others to help you look up records."

"Do I tell you how to do your job, lady?"

"If you were paying me forty clams a day plus expenses, I'd at least listen to you."

"Fine." He grabbed the bottle and laid it into a drawer. "I'm off the juice while you're paying me, until either someone tries to shoot me or I get so happy I can't stand me and I save them the trouble and shoot myself. Happy?"

"As close as I'm likely to get, for now." I looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "I'm sure I don't even know what questions I should be asking, so how about this - is there anything you think I'd want to know about plushies, that you don't think I'm going to ask?"

"You seem the prud- I mean, private type. No, we don't come with factory-installed parts. Yes, we can have sex. No, we don't-"

I rapidly started shaking my head, and twitched my shoulders enough for the arm-bots to wave at him to stop. "Don't need to know that now. Can read up on it later, if it becomes important. ... or if I don't have anything better to read. I meant, anything I should know about how you can do your job?"

"I'll put it this way - anyone gets mad at me for asking too many questions, part of my insurance is supposed to pay for someone to gather up all my pieces and put me back together. Not exactly the most comfortable way to spend a night, but if I'd been a meatba - I mean, a mammal, I wouldn't be here to take your case."

"Okay, I can see how you could end up with a pretty good tough-guy act if that's the worst that can happen to you," I nodded, feeling rather more positive about hiring him than I had a moment ago.

"Hardly the worst. But I don't think you want to hear about what life can be like for people who need to form a co-op just to cut through the red tape and get some basic utilities."

Thinking through some of the likely implications of that, I was frowning, until Amy touched my arm. Gently, she said, "You're here to rest, not to try to overturn any societies."

I grumbled under my breath, but said to her, "Fine. For now." I turned back to Bear. "Well, it looks like you're not obviously incompetent."

He somehow picked up a pen with the flat end of his arm-paw. "So, who do you want me to look into?"

"Superman."

"... Is it too late to re-negotiate my fee?"

\*\*\*

\*Chapter Two: Off-iciaries\*

Exiting PI Bear's office, we had to pause long enough to let a gaggle of people past, waving shirts and singing, "They got... the mustard... out!"

I looked at Amy, Amy looked at me, and Blue looked bored. "This," I said, as we re-boarded Munchkin, "is a very silly place."

Things went from very silly to slightly creepy as I looked around Munchkin's interior, and saw all four of the liaisons sitting quietly, hands folded on laps, and all /staring/ at me, without a single harsh word between them. "Am I missing a joke? I inquired, nervously shifting my grip on my cane.

Ida stood up. She glanced at the others - Ethel smiled and nodded, Albert looked bored, and Nia sighed dramatically - then back at me. "We talked while you were out, and agreed that if we kept arguing... well, arguing loudly... that none of us could get the job done. So we took some votes, and, well, I guess I'm the spokesman now. Spokeswoman? Spokesdragon?"

Al suggested, "Liaison to the liaisons."

I'd been relaxing while Ida went through her spiel, and nodded at her with an encouraging smile. "I'm glad you were able to work that out without my having to intervene. Trust me, being a meta-liaison is far from the oddest job that bureaucracies have invented."

Ida's own posture relaxed, and she smiled back, if a bit hesitantly. "Are you finished with your business here? There are lots more pleasant places we can go for you to relax and talk." She looked behind her, at the trio of non-meta liaisons, then back to me. "Which any of us would be happy to recommend."

"Well, there's no need to see if someone's going to figure out how to steal the tires off of a vehicle with legs, so we can at least get into motion. Munchkin: Command: Scenic drive. Exec."

I tried to watch everyone's expression at once, as I definitively revealed that my vehicle responded to verbal commands. Unfortunately, I'd only met the locals just now, and was still getting used to all of their particular facial anatomies, so I couldn't figure out much at the time. The most expressive was Blue, who looked towards the back of the carriage, towards the rest of the land-train, then asked, "Where can // get one of these?"

Amy answered, "Risk life and limb investigating pre-Singularity archaeological sites, be prepared to go through more Changes than you can shake a stick at, and work so hard you end up on the edge of a nervous breakdown."

I groused, "Whatever happened to doctor-patient confidentiality?"

Amy, unrepentant, wiggled her ottery nose at me. "Anyone in this car who doesn't already know you're here to de-stress /should/ know."

I rolled my eyes, but didn't press the issue. "Fine." I looked at the Metropolitans. "I hope that I don't need to go into the consequences of blabbing to third parties the private matters of someone with a potentially hair-trigger temper and access to military hardware."

Ida took a step back, but Nia smiled up at me from her seat.

"Now then," I managed to get my arm-bots to clap their hands together and rub them a moment. "Knowing that I am perfectly comfortable with violating whatever local nudity taboos are enshrined in your laws, and dealing with the consequences in whatever fashion I find most entertaining, have the four of you come to any conclusions about whether I need to hide my tail's face?"

Ida took another step back towards the other liaisons, then said, "Please excuse me for a moment, ma' - Your Majesty, while I consult with my... um, these three." Reaching into her purse, she withdrew a pocketwatch, and I twitched my ears to the right angle to overhear, "Ten seconds each to present, ten seconds to vote." As Ida pointed at each one, Al said, "The law is the law, and needs to be respected," Ethel said, "That law's a bad one and we should encourage civil disobedience," Nia said, "Give her this small concession now and she'll feel more like returning the favour," and Ida herself said, "The peace officers have more important things to do than worry about this." They flicked out their hands, rock-paper-scissor fashion, then Ida turned around to smile at me. In a normal volume, she said, "Our consensus is that you can dress your tail as you will, until and unless we're overruled by a formal subcommittee, or higher. I'll head off any peace officers who go above and beyond the call of their duty, and the rest of us will handle any fallout from the groups they're best at handling."

I cocked my head a bit, and asked, "What would you have done if the vote was a tie?"

"That's why we picked an, um, meta-liaison. I have to figure out how to solve any problems, at least until one of us is picked as the real liaison."

I nodded pleasantly... then reached into one of my more visible pockets, withdrew a white ribbon with a couple of eyeholes, and tied it around Wagger's head. Ida looked... stricken? Confused? Not overjoyed, at least. "If..." she started, trailing off, then tried again, "Then why?"

"There's a difference between wearing something because I'm told to, and wearing something because I want to. I wanted to know that if this thing," I tugged on the pieces of ribbon hanging down from Wagger's head, straightening them to drift in the air more aesthetically, "turns out to be uncomfortable, whether I'll end up causing a small or large scandal when I take it off."

"That's-" Ida began.

Slightly impolitely, I cut her off. "You will note that even though we are in my private living room, where nobody outside can see, and /this/ mask," I tapped my temple, "is a lot more

annoying, that I am attempting to abide by your customs and continue to wear it. As long as I'm feeling favorable, I will continue to have reason to avoid causing you discomfort by removing it in your presence."

Ethel piped up, "Don't feel obliged on my account!" to a disapproving 'shush' from Nia and an annoyed blink from Al.

Blue stepped forward, drawing everyone's gaze. "Good talk," she said. "Glad it's over with. Now, is there anything you'd like to do today, or are we just going to keep driving up and down?"

I was actually at something of a loss to answer that, so I turned to Amy, who asked the gang, "Have you got any beaches she can stretch out on?"

Blue's forehead wrinkled. "It's October."

Amy countered, "She's got a fur coat, she'll be fine."

Nia stood and stepped towards the centre of attention, drawing it to herself. "Before you settle on that, I would like to point out that, tomorrow, there are certain cultural events you may wish to attend - and if you do, you may wish to spend some of today preparing for. A proper outfit for the ball, and perhaps something for sitting while watching some Shakespeare."

My interest piqued, I asked, "Which play?"

Al stood as well, and pretended he wasn't elbowing Nia to the side "The program is for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'."

"Hunh," I mused. "Actually one of my favorites. I think I'd enjoy watching someone else put on the show, instead of being in the middle of everything." I glanced at Minerva, who'd been quiet throughout, hands buried in her puppet-crate and pretending she wasn't listening to every word. "I could even call it educational, for our budding little performer over there." Minerva's head snapped up, then she blushed.

Nia smiled, her face looking rather more predatory than the nearby dragon's, "Then may I recommend taking the time for some dress fittings?"

"I can already have anything I plan to wear be let out," I absently rubbed my Streams-filled body. Then, seeing Minerva's expression out of the corner of my eye, I felt a momentary burst of empathy for her, so I added, "But I don't have any information on local styles and fashions." I looked straight at Minerva, trying to fix her ecstatic expression in my mind to tide me over during the coming ordeal. "Now, if you will all excuse me, I need to take care of a minor detail," and hurried back to the washroom, wondering if I'd need to start wearing some of the stock of diapers I'd laid in when my spine wasn't working to prevent Streams from forcing me to produce her namesake.

--

"So," asked Blue from my left, apparently enjoying her china-doll-administered pedicure rather more than I was, "which of the rumours about you are true?"

I was trying to ignore the human man who was holding up swatches of fabric against my pelt and making various unhappy noises about each one. To Blue, I said, "Any, all, or none of them, depending on which ones spread this far. What difference does it make to you whether any given one is true or not?"

"Well - a lot of them are about how you became a queen."

"As I just asked - what would you do differently?"

"Well - could // become a queen?"

"An interesting question. One moment." I turned to the tailor - or possibly seamster - and said, "I prefer blues, whites, and other sky colours, and every piece of clothing eventually starts rubbing my fur wrong, so you might as well just save a lot of time and effort and show me a design I can try to tweak for my own comfort."

He sniffed, making me doubt I was inspiring any 'Art of the Dress' musical montages, and from my right, Nia said, "No need to be snippy, dear - René always comes up with a solution to any fashion problem."

"The fashion isn't the problem - wearing something uncomfortable for hours on end can be a needless extra distraction during important discussions. I have enough trouble as it is trying to concentrate on boring but vital tasks." I looked up at the René, who was rubbing his chin. "If you want to impress me, figure out something I can wear that I won't want to take off as soon as I'm in my rooms."

In one of the phonier French accents I'd heard, he asked, "Does madame have any further specifications, or would a loose burlap sack suffice?"

"I'm royalty - whatever I'm wearing is, by definition, the centre of fashion. If you can make something that's not only not actively unpleasant to wear, but which will impress the locals I will be dealing with - then I would be quite happy to let all and sundry know of your skill."

Nia waved a hand at him. "Shoo. Go be inspirational - it's time for some girl-talk."

"I'm not so sure about 'girl' talk," I gave a quick huff, "but there is a hanging question to get back to." I turned back to Blue. "If you want to have a title, you've got two choices: be given one, or take one. For the first, find some existing system of titles granted by a government, and work through whatever their rules are. For the second, the only rule is being willing and

able to defend your claim to your title against anyone who disagrees with your possession of it.

"You mean, like going to war?"

"War shouldn't be waged over something as unimportant as what you're called. I was thinking more of lawsuits, or continuing to use your title no matter how many disparaging comments you get. Emperor Norton is still known as /Emperor/ Norton because, well, he just kept on being Emperor, no matter what anyone else said or did."

"Don't you get a crown to wear, and a throne, and so on? Isn't that part of being a queen?"

"To the best of my knowledge, the last throne of the Queen of Canada was in Ottawa when the Singularity came and probably destroyed it; and I haven't had any reason to build a new one. As for a crown - I should probably get on having a new one made, at least for formal occasions."

"Can you /do/ that? Just, well, make a new crown?"

"Of course I can. Kings and queens have been getting new ones made for centuries. I kind of like the look of the 'Snowflake Diadem', which was designed but never made real."

The living doll paused in her work on my toe-claws, turning to look up at me. "Pardon me, does Your Majesty's preference for cool colours extend to nail polish?"

I politely answered, "I'm afraid I'm very poor at coordinating colours, such as with my fur. Feel free to use your best judgement."

She nodded, and Blue asked, "If you can win a war - you /can/ win a war, right?"

"I'll put it this way," I smiled tightly. "You remember the city of Buffalo, on the east of the lake, had everyone in it killed? I destroyed the city-killer. Minerva's been working on some puppet shows based on that."

Blue continued, "Okay, so if you can win a war, why not have one, if someone doesn't respect you as queen?"

"Even winning a war can be almost as bad as losing it, and leave you worse off than if you hadn't had a war at all. No matter how well you do, lots of random things can happen even in a small fight, let alone a big one. It was also roughly three years ago that I was attacked, and my heart pierced. If I hadn't already made certain plans involving lots of ice, I wouldn't be here now."

My pedicurist suddenly stood, said, "Excuse me, Your Majesty, I just need to ask Monsieur René about your dress's colour," and hurried over to the muttering artiste.

Blue considered, "Maybe I could just be a princess?"

"If you're asking if I'm going to make you one - sorry, I'm working under a very strict set of inheritance laws. If you want to be a princess," I shrugged, "then just /be/ a princess."

At this point, René returned, hastily scribbling on a clipboard, the doll-woman sedately following. He stuck the drawing under my nose with a flourish and a "Voilà!"

I blinked, tilted my head right then left, and finally admitted, "I don't get it."

"You haff ze complaint about the dress fabric bunching on your fur, oui? Zo I haff ze brainstorm: No more fabric! You will be dressed in light itself, or, for the plebeians who care about material things, in jewels zat reflect ze light. None will have seen its like!"

"... Are you sure I'm not going to be violating any nudity laws? It looks like you're going a little light on the jewels in some places."

"Not to worry - you will be wearing a full-faced mask, see?"

"Well - I came here to draw on your expertise. Ignoring your advice without a good reason would just be bad form."

I turned to see what Blue thought, and she was just blinking rapidly. I cleared my throat, catching her attention, and raised my eyebrows when she looked at me. "Uh, Your Bunny Highness... are you sure about this? It looks... kind of... drafty."

Nia jumped into the conversation. "She has her fur, doesn't she? And René /is/ a genius when it comes to these things - after Bunny wears this tomorrow, /everyone/ who is /anyone/ will want to be wearing the same thing. René is going to be /swamped/ with requests for custom versions."

Blue countered, "Well, how are all these things supposed to stay attached to her? What if she has to, you know, go?"

René took the sketch back, and resumed his scribbling, presumably to refine it. "There are several adhesives that will work - I just have to run a few quick tests to make sure that spilling water or drinks won't undo all my hard work. As for necessities, some areas will have more jewels than others, and that area will have enough that I can place a c-string thong underneath, which will be removable at need."

"Pardon me," I got one of my hands to raise, "'c-string'?"

René patiently explained, "A thong minus the waistband, built to remain in place without that support."

"And how long," I thought aloud, "is this... design... going to take?"

"For me? All night. For you? I have enough hands on staff that once I have decided where everything will go, you will merely need to relax for an hour, or less."

--

"If you really want me to be happy and relaxed," I'd said to Amy, "put a book in my hands." Which is how Munchkin had been directed to the site recommended by Ethel: a used bookstore. (Al had suggested a government library of reports, Ida a public library, Nia a private library, and Blue had almost embarrassedly offered to let me borrow one of the few texts at her home.)

When Amy saw me pause just inside the door to just inhale the scent of the place, my eyes darting around to start trying to figure out what might be where, she snorted good-naturedly, patted my shoulder, and said, "Have fun. I'm going to find a pharmacy - this city's bigger than Erie, maybe I can improve your prescription."

I just nodded absently, and took another few steps deeper inside, followed by my quintet of hangers-on, who - though I wasn't spending any of my attention on them - started spreading out in the aisles and poking around.

From a piled-high table, I picked up one of the items on top - one of the "Harry Potter" books, which a quick check revealed had been printed in twenty twenty-seven, though its aging and weathering reminded me more of books printed during World War Two. My eyes started roaming the shelves, instinctively building up a map of what was where, and various other patterns, from the sharp drop-off in the number of physical books that seemed to date from after my first death, to the implications of the various qualities of paper on texts that appeared to have been printed post-Singularity, to the apparent popularity of any given topic based on the size of its section. Slushpulp romance, both printed and manga, seemed to be the store's main moneymaker, both from the number of books and how easy they were to get to; but while I momentarily considered taking a dive into the genre I usually ignored (for all sorts of reasons), I delved deeper into the dusty aisles.

I managed to keep from pulling anything from the shelves while I made an initial sortie. By the time I finished that, though, my forehead was furrowed, as I'd somehow missed a few sections entirely - computer science, music, and electronics being most prominent. So I took a second walk-through, and this time I realized that behind the beaded curtain in back that led to the facilities was also a doorway to a room with some further shelves. The adult magazines didn't hold my attention for more than a moment - after all, I could look at a naked woman anytime I wanted - but beyond that traditional room was a second, and /there/ was where I found instruction manuals on singing, dancing, and playing instruments. I'd seen odder ways of divvying up subject matter, given the limitations of a physical building, but not often.

Returning to the store's main floor, I took a few breaths and, finally, just relaxed into my browsing. Munchkin was my mobile fortress, and the University my link to the pre-Singularity

past - but right there, surrounded by more knowledge than I could ever hope to gulp down, having to pick and choose which particular items to spend my limited reading time on, I was at /home/.

So, naturally, I felt somewhat annoyed when the peace and tranquility of my home was disturbed by loud voices up front. I carried my first-draft picks - mostly an armload of certain franchises that had continued being written after my demise - to the front counter, more to see what was going on than because I was done in fiction yet.

Outside, Ethel and Blue seemed to be facing off against a half-dozen young men - the latter displaying insufficient muscle mass to be suffering from terminal testosterone poisoning, but doubtfully near what I'd consider capable of making sane risk/reward analyses. As I rolled my shoulders, feeling the heft of the various self-defense items inside my clothing, the men took a couple of steps back... and, synchronized, ran through a few tap-dance steps. My primate and feather-headed acquaintances merely observed the routine, then glanced at each other, and responded with some soft-shoe of their own.

While the shopkeeper and I watched a gradual escalation, I twitched an ear to acknowledge Ida joining us in observing the spectacle. "I don't know what they're thinking," she quietly said to me. "Those are university students, they obviously work well together."

"I'm not from around here," I reminded her. "So I'm not sure what's going on. What kind of stakes are involved here? Is anyone going to get hurt?"

"Not physically," she admitted. "Socially, maybe. Ethel and your girl are supposed to be able to take care of themselves, and students aren't supposed to be better than that, so they'll be able to brag. Ethel may not be her Party's first choice, and, well, I don't know much about what Blue does for a living, so maybe nothing bad will happen to her at all."

I heaved a long sigh, then asked, "And what would it take for that /not/ to happen?"

"Be better dancers than the students."

"And why aren't you, Al-"

"Albert!"

"- and Nia giving them a hand?"

"I don't know about Nia and Al-"

"Albert, not 'Al'!"

"- but I've got instructions from the First Responders Union, to let the other liaison candidates fail if I can. I don't /like/ this sort of thing, and I /want/ to help, but..." She trailed off.

"Right." Internal politics - almost always messier than any other kind. But Ethel wasn't part of that whole struggle; she was in /my/ employ, and at least for now, I was concerned enough about her to not want her to fail to get her next job. I turned away from the window, and away from Ida, as if I didn't want to look at either - but actually so that I could whisper to myself without being seen. "Bun-Bun," I barely breathed, "would /you/ like to try dancing?"

My feet clenched, seemingly of their own accord, in the signal for 'yes' from the last time anyone had thought to ask Bun-Bun her opinion.

"Just," I whispered, hesitating a bit, "try to keep it classy, okay?"

I turned back to the window - and then Bun-Bun turned and walked out the door, carrying me along for the ride. If Bun-Bun didn't clamp down on our adrenaline, I might have started panicking from the loss of control of my body, or at least breathed hard while I got used to the sensations; but Bun-Bun had our breathing under control, too.

I'm afraid that I can't do justice to the next few minutes of my experience - this medium is simply a poor match to relaying kinesthetic experience. At best, I can nibble around the edges, such as when Bun-Bun put a hand on top of our belly, where Boomer was tucked into our pouch, to turn her on and whisper, "Musical accompaniment." Or when the students were joined by more, behind them, as Ethel and Blue fell behind me, following Bun-Bun's lead. I think there was some Flamenco dancing in there, and some Irish line-dancing, and Bun-Bun ordered a piece of cardboard set down, which she used to breakdance on.

I suspect Streams ended up either dizzy, confused, or both. I know /I/ was both.

For all I know, Bun-Bun would have kept going all night, surrounded by an ever-growing audience of human, near-human, and even outright non-human rubbernecks - but when Amy returned from her shopping trip, and saw 'me' doing the tap-dance equivalent of barking at a stranger who'd come too close to my lawn, the ottery girl just ignored all the flailing limbs, walked between us, and said, "That's enough of /that/. I'm her," pointing a thumb at me, "doctor. She's /supposed/ to be resting."

Boomer tied up her improvisational tune with a fading chord, the students relaxed from their final pose and wandered off, and I was suddenly - if barely - standing on my own two legs again.

Amy looked up and down at me. "Care to explain?"

Thinking about how to answer that, I hesitated - I was breathing a bit hard, but swinging Streams around hadn't been nearly as painful as I'd first worried about, and after Bun-Bun's abrupt surrender of control, my legs were steady underneath me again - and during my pause, Blue stepped forward to fill the silence with enthusiasm. "She was /great/! Weird, and she doesn't know how to take a cue if her life depended on it, but as long as she's the lead, she's just... /great/!"

One of the less-human audience members, a porcelain doll whose head only reached as high as my armpit by dint of riding on what appeared to be a plush Golden Retriever, was a tad more critical, "I dunno, she was kind of rigid, especially during the parts where she was supposed to be flowing. As long as she stuck to the more formal forms, I guess she was alright."

I just shrugged, and rather than debate the matter, chose my own next steps: back into the store to find some more books.

--

That evening, with Amy, Minerva, and Blue parked in Munchkin's living car, and the liaisons off wherever people with such jobs go when they're not on the job, I made my way back through the land-train's carriages. I stopped in the lab car long enough to sit in a particular chair by the freezer, ostensibly to rest my legs from Streams' weight in case anyone was watching, but actually to reset the timer to keep Brenda from thawing out for twenty-four more hours. Getting up, I scribbled some notes on a whiteboard hung on the wall opposite the freezer, round about where Brenda would see it first thing upon de-freezing herself if she did thaw, listing when I was making the notes, where we were, where I was expecting to be, and other data which might come in useful if she needed to rescue me.

Going back further, opening the cargo car's door released a rather ripe odour - both the singing jackalopes and Bear Joe were within, the former because it was the only car with enough room for them all, the latter because I'd been expecting to entertain company in the living car and forcing them to endure eau de grizzly seemed unlikely to endear them to whatever I wanted to persuade them of.

I rested my rear on a bale of timothy hay, and watched as the nibbling horde surrounded me; when one hopped onto my impromptu seat, I idly scratched it between its ears and horns. "Welp," I announced, "I'll admit the place is not only weird, but weird in ways I wasn't expecting. But I'm not sure I've picked up any useful evidence of large-scale mind-control. The most obvious possibility is this singing and dancing thing they do - but I tried joining in, and I don't think I was under a compulsion to do so. I've had Alphie monitoring as many sensors as I can, and haven't even picked up any unusual amounts of infra- or ultra-sound, let alone anything more exotic. Maybe I'll reveal the existence of the autodoc tomorrow, and let it scan a few of the locals - maybe there's another mind-affecting parasite, like Erie's? There's a few other options to pursue..."

Another jackalope hopped onto my other side, and without me having to prompt it, my arm-bot started scratching it behind its ears as well. "Now, more importantly... I don't /think/ I've seen any changes of behaviour in anyone I brought in from outside, including myself. But since people are good at rationalizing their actions - would an objective, external viewer agree with that? What have I done that I normally wouldn't? Hm... I let Amy persuade me to hire an investigator instead of looking into something myself. Arguable, but I've always tried to follow a medical professional's relevant advice, and the topic wasn't central to what I'm

working on. I let myself be hauled to a spa, and agreed to wear an outfit that almost doesn't exist... I suppose I could have fought, but I /am/ supposed to be on 'vacation' and relaxing. And I was willing to strip down in front of Technoville's embassy to Dogtown. Maybe mark that decision as questionable. And I let Bun-Bun, well, go dancing. She took to it a bit more enthusiastically than I expected, but I was trying to help someone... hm."

The jackalopes were humming softly, not any particular tune, just notes that harmonized with each other. "Let's assume," I mused, "that I'm being a good little rationalizer, and while part of my mind came up with those items for good reasons, I didn't do any of them for the reasons I think I did. If I were being properly paranoid, could I figure out anything about the mind-control methods or goals, that had been used to get someone to do those tasks? Fobbing off an investigation onto a local has an obvious benefit for a MC'er - it keeps me from poking around into things they'd rather I not see. Getting a pedicure... hm. They'd rather I was relaxed than tense and alert, maybe? Agreeing to a dress made of little more than sparkles... hm, exposing more skin? Maybe the MC'ing method works better with more body exposed, such as if it's enhanced with a drug? And dancing... okay, I can't think of any good reasons to make me do that, and even the bad ones are just silly, like trying to get me more used to dancing so I'll fall into the arms of a handsome prince at the ball and be literally swept off my feet."

At this point, Bear Joe set his massive paws to shoving the jackalopes in his way out of his way without squishing them, until he set his head to fill up the part of my lap which Streams wasn't occupying, grunting until I got the hint and started giving him scratches of his own.

"So. Even if I was as completely paranoid as the least trusting part of my North-ish persona wanted, what plans should I change? Assuming that I just want to counter what I'm being MC'ed into, then I should concentrate more on investigating what's going on around here, and I should prepare for some major effort made against me while I'm undressed for the dance tomorrow. I wonder how much of my current hidden-gear load-out I can get Amy and Minerva to carry for me while I'm pockets-free..."

\*\*\*

### \*Chapter Three: Off-shore\*

In the morning, Amy switched out my droplets-in-juice medicine for some lozenges, like small cough drops. "Same schedule," she said, "just a lot easier to carry around during the day. I'm going to see if I can get some of the gum and resin imported to Erie - it'll be a lot easier to get kids to have some 'candy' then take some 'medicine'." It tasted like licorice - or anise or fennel, since I didn't know which were being cultivated in the area.

Once I'd finished sucking the lozenge into oblivion while perusing the local paper, Amy asked, "And how are you feeling this morning?" When I hesitated a moment before answering, she continued, "Please don't hide anything - the more I know about how you're improving, the more I can help you."

"Wasn't going to hide anything," I said, possibly grumpily, but without any rancor. "I'm just working on building the habit of not blurting out the first thing that comes to my mouth. Part of that is to try to stop using Shniglish, part of it is that there are topics I need to maintain a certain amount of discretion on, and it's even better if nobody can tell which topics I'm trying to be discreet about."

"What sort of topics?"

"Politics. Military. Economics. The Singularity. Technology. More."

"If you did let yourself express your emotions with this Shniglish, how many people would understand you without you explaining it?"

"Anyone with access to a reasonably complete pre-Singularity library. So - anyone who sends a heliogram to Clara at the University."

She retrieved a small notebook, and scribbled something within. "As part of your relaxation therapy, today I want you to not worry about trying to force yourself to keep quiet. If you say something in Shniglish, let it happen. Or if you don't, don't."

I frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Swearing is therapeutic. I don't think I can convince you to start cursing in public when you feel the urge, but I suspect that blurting out how you feel in Shniglish may have similar positive effect."

"Yeh-nigh koohee zoho-gahee-nigh eehah. Ahee-shoohee-rohee-reeheh speech it is."

"Do you want to let me in on what all that meant?"

"Eye-nigh. Eehee-nigh, bahoo oohoo-nigh."

"Are you having fun at my expense?"

"Leeha."

"... Good. I think."

--

Amy's suggestion of spending the morning sunbathing was nixed by the sun failing to appear, the skies covered in dark gray ripples while the air blowing in from the lake froze everyone's breath into clouds. (Everyone who breathed, and was warm-blooded, that is. More than one exception hurried down Metropolis's streets.)

I made the liaisons wait while I went through an indoors morning exercise routine. Bun-Bun's biochemical trickery meant I didn't actually need it, but there was no reason to spread that around too widely. And explaining the biology and thermodynamics of my ear-sleeve cooling system to Blue kept any of the liaisons from starting up any serious conversations until I was willing to deal with anything of the sort.

Fortunately, the squiddies took enough advice about land-dwellers to have built their embassy for mammalian comfort; so, as snow started falling outside, inside there was hot chocolate with marshmallows (or equivalents close enough in taste that I didn't feel a need to ask what they were actually made of), a roaring fireplace, and enough hot air to start a zeppelin line.

The first, well, suppliant was somewhat portly, wore a well-tailored suit and an upper-face mask made of something like engraved leather, and apparently owned a significant portion of Metropolis's fishing industry. And was unhappy. And was trying to make me unhappy.

I simply kept my feet tucked under me, in an admittedly rather un-Queenly pose, holding my mug of hot chocolate with both hands while waiting for his diatribe to run down. I'm afraid that I've quite forgotten his name, but the way he combed his hair and sideburns reminds me of a Biff, so for purposes of this narrative, Biff he shall be.

After going on for some time about his financial downturns over the last three years, Biff finally reached his finale: "All of which means that I am justly owed significant compensation, both personally and as a business entity. Somewhere in the high eight figures, maybe low nine, but we can let the lawyers handle the little details."

Before I finished working out how to phrase my response to Biff's demand, Blue gave a quick snort. As I wasn't feeling emotionally invested in any of what I was going to say, I curiously asked, "Is there something you wish to say, my dear?"

Blue looked between me and Biff a few times, shrugged, then set down her own mug before listing items off on her fingers at him. "You're the one who beached most of your fleet to break the strike, and then tried to get unskilled scabs to pretend to be fishermen - at least, until the injury rate went so high. And you didn't even care about that until the judge held you responsible for the medical costs. You don't even gross eight figures in a year, let alone net that much, let alone lose that much due to squids eating your catch. And if you've been losing money these last few years, then how were you able to afford those pretty jewels your third wife's been wearing? Or is she your fourth?"

Biff spluttered, "Surely you're not going to believe the slander of a guttersnipe like that over a respectable member of the business community?"

"That depends. Would you be willing to wait here while I sent someone to check on her statements' validity?"

Biff paled, but looked like he was trying to be casual. "There's no need to go to that effort-"

I got my arm-bot to hold up a hand to stop him, then said, "Minerva, would you be a dear and open the door to the waiting room? I would prefer to repeat this as few times as possible. Thank you." I took another sip of hot chocolate while Minerva let the other petitioners listen in. To Biff and them, I said, "It appears you are misinformed about certain details, so I will attempt to educate you on them. To start with, I am here in my position of Queen of Canada, not in my position of Queen of the Dominion of Lake Erie. While this may seem like quibbling, it has at least one important consequence. An ancient diplomatic custom is that embassies count as the territory of the nation they represent - in many senses, the laws of the Dominion of Lake Erie apply here. Were I here as Queen of that Dominion, it would be well within my powers to have you arrested for blatant fraud, extortion, and attempting various financial gambits against the government, among other charges. I do not think you wish to get caught up in the Lake Erie court system - it is primarily designed for squiddies, and dealing directly with land-dwellers is something of an afterthought. Such as the arrangements involved in housing prisoners while they wait for trial."

Biff's chest inflated. "You can't arrest me! I'm an American!"

"How large is Metropolis's navy?"

He looked confused. "What?"

"How many armed vessels fly Metropolis's flag?"

"... What the hell are you talking about, woman?"

"Sovereignty. Any nation or state that is unable to defend some part of its borders, tends to lose those borders to a neighbour that can. Are you unaware that, if they chose to, the squiddies of Lake Erie could sink every vessel in your harbour, and prevent your city from doing anything in the water at all?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Why would they do that? All I'm asking for is a little money!"

"Ah, to be so naive. Would you like me to start listing off how many historical wars have been started over just 'a little money'? If I suspected that you represented the general business community of this city, then should the government of Lake Erie put a bill before me asking to blockade your city, or worse, I would feel little compunction in agreeing to such actions. It is merely my belief that you are pursuing your personal profit through private means that prevents me from putting on my metaphorical hat as Queen of Lake Erie and starting some sabre-rattling, such as issuing a declaration of a state of war lasting until your government handed over you, personally, to face charges."

Biff's fists clenched and his face reddened, and it looked like he was about to do something violent. "Oh," I added, "and I really wish I didn't have to say this, but I've been looking forward to a live-fire test of my more discreet security apparatus. Need I say that the

penalties for physically assaulting a head-of-state are much more severe than those related to financial improprieties?"

I was strongly tempted to perform some practical magic to demonstrate that I had security systems that he couldn't even see; such as, say, by applying the maser emitter in my right palm to re-warm a cooling drink. But I'd already been pushing the 'dominance' aspect of the discussion fairly hard, and I doubted doing so further would make Biff any more willing to be a positive factor in my life instead of a negative one, so I decided to start nudging things back to something approaching more productive discussion.

While I'd been thinking through all of that, Biff had turned and started walking for the door; but I said, "Hold. Minerva, you can close that, now."

Biff grunted, then asked, "Are you arresting me now?"

"If the Queen of Lake Erie were sitting here, that would be unavoidable. Fortunately, the Queen of Canada is. While you may be a liar who would be happy to embezzle millions, that doesn't necessarily prevent us from doing business; it just means I need to take such issues into account."

"What sort of... business... do you have in mind?"

I took a sip of my drink before answering, just to prolong his agony a few extra moments, before answering. "I am undertaking various projects, mostly outside of Metropolis. I have the economy of Lake Erie to draw on. What I currently lack is a solid logistical framework. While your primary business is resource extraction, you do maintain a fleet of small ships which could become a useful factor in my transportation net."

"Let me get this straight. I come here asking for damages... and you want to /hire/ my boats?"

"'Want' is an interesting word. Let's say that I'd like to know more about your boats' draughts, widths, propulsion systems, and the willingness of your crews to go upstream."

Which set the pattern for the rest of the morning - though nobody else was /quite/ as blatant in their attempted deceptions as Biff. Somebody whose name I never quite caught was unhappy about some aspect of the squiddies, unloaded themselves on me, and if it was just some misunderstanding I tried smoothing ruffled feathers (only once literally). And, whenever I could, asking whoever was in sight about moving products from within Lake Erie to somewhere on land away from its shores. While I would be happy if I actually found enough pieces to make that happen, especially if I could get it done in time to haul some useful heavy equipment to Lion Castle, I was actually playing the political game by providing a reasonable explanation for my 'vacation' which didn't involve my eroding sanity.

The irony that plastering a fake smile on my face for a bunch of hours came closer to further eroding said sanity than curing it was not lost on me. But as long as I had Amy to watch over

me, and as long as I was willing to follow her instructions, I figured the mid-term secrecy gains were worth the short-term costs.

And, fortunately, this particular drain on my mental resources only lasted until noon, at which time I was hauled off to René's, so I could be bedazzled in time for the ball.

On one side of me, Nia was receiving her own outfit, rather more traditional in form; on the other was a figure which was rather less humanoid than I'd interacted with in a while - humanoid from the waist up, arachnid from the cephalothorax back (or, put another way, her human hip-bones merged into where a spider usually had eyes), and whose entire surface was matte black interrupted with various cyan lines and patches. René's plush assistants seemed to be spending their time finding ways to drape fabrics over her many legs, while she leaned her torso against a padded piece of furniture that I didn't think had an equivalent for bipeds, sipped a drink through a straw, and, as best as I could interpret her expression, looked bored.

Instead of an ordinary mask, she appeared to be wearing something closer to a helmet, with a translucent visor that blurred her eyes without completely hiding them. Given how carefully the plushie assistants were gluing the sparkly-things to my fur, it looked like we were going to be neighbours for a while, so I nodded a polite greeting and said, "Hello."

Nia said something I didn't quite catch, but when I looked at her just shook her head; as I turned back to the spider-taur I saw her hands finishing up some complicated motion. "Oh," I grunted, "um, I'm sorry - I don't understand any sign languages."

After a long pause, the new woman said aloud, "Few here do. Fewer apologize. My name is Agnes Parker - most speakers call me Aggie."

"Shoy, meeheh Bunny Waldeinsamkeit."

"French?"

"Canadian - oh, you mean... Shniglish. It's a small language, but I keep using it without meaning to. I'm always up to learning a new way to communicate, though - how would you suggest I introduce myself to someone in sign?"

"Say 'Sorry, I don't understand sign language' slowly and carefully while looking at them so they can lipread."

English has a number of flaws; one of them is that there's a word for tilting your head forward and back, and another for rotating it around its vertical axis, but there isn't really any language for tilting it to the side. Despite the lack of a word for that, I tilted my head that way with a smile, in a somewhat asymmetrical one. "I suppose that's the minimum that can be expected out of me. And if I want to go beyond that minimum?"

Aggie gave me a once-over; then glanced at the plushies entangling her legs in various decorative ways; then shrugged a little. "'Hello' is this," and she held her hand to her forehead in something like a salute. "And 'My name is' is this," and demonstrated another pair of signs.

I imitated her, ignoring the sparkle-appliers. "I'm guessing I don't finish that by saying my name out loud?"

"That would be rude, yes. I suggest you fingerspell your spoken name. Probably just the first one - I don't know how many letters are in your last name, but forcing someone to wait through all of that wouldn't be polite. Bunny is B, U, N, N, Y." She set her right hand into a particular shape for each letter - palm out and all five fingers up; then folding down all but two fingers; folding them all down into a loose fist, then shifting her hand slightly in the same position; then holding out her thumb and pinky.

"Um, yee-shuhee-roha... you're not hazing me with that, right?"

"What?" She spread her hands, palms up.

"That's actually how to spell Bunny, and you're not doing something to have me make fun of myself?" I imitated some of her gestures, "with the bunny hopping, and then bunny ears?"

"You're not from around here, are you?" As she talked, she continued signing, though I didn't know enough about any sign languages to be able to tell if she was saying the same thing in multiple modes, or if she was emphasizing certain aspects of what she said in sign, or if she was taking the time to insult my ancestry in disparaging terms. She seemed friendly enough that I doubted it was the latter.

"Got into town yesterday, probably heading out again in five or six days. Might be back after that, depending on all sorts of factors."

"What do you do?"

"As long as I have the resources and equipment to? Archaeology, focusing on November of twenty-fifty. Yourself?"

"Most often these days, translation and interpretation between my people and the general society of this city."

"If it's not impolite to ask, what do you mean by 'your people'?"

"We call ourselves the 'people of the eye', though you're more likely to hear... less complimentary terms." Nia muttered something I wasn't able to turn my ear towards her fast enough to catch. "Most often, the 'Hive'. All of us share an origin, and you can recognize our membership by our colour scheme," she waved at herself, "if nothing else."

"I'm always interested in learning more about how the world works," I smiled, "and what's possible in it. What's your shared origin?"

Nia interrupted, "I have some contacts in the university who specialize in zone studies, and who owe me some favours. Why don't I send a message to invite one or two over here?"

"I've heard worse plans," I admitted, "though maybe it would be better to meet them in a day or two, so I can really spend some time with them, and they can have all their resources handy for presenting whatever they're studying."

"That makes sense," Nia agreed, though she didn't look happy. "René? May I have a word?"

While she and the faux-French proprietor gabbed, I turned back to Aggie, whose eyes widened for a moment before she smiled. "Now, where were we? Oh, that reminds me - can you recommend any books on your sign language?"

"It's mostly American Sign Language - we've had to teach it to ourselves, and that's the sign language we found the most books on."

"Had to'?"

"Not all of us kept as much of our human shape as I did, when we became part of the group. Not all of us can hear or speak - but we can all see, and we all have some part of our body we can move. We've had to invent a few variations of ASL, for members who don't have human-like arms or hands, but it's all derived from the same root, and we try to apply consistent sets of transformations to minimize how much study is required. I have a few notebooks in my panniers, if you're really interested."

"I'd like-"

I was interrupted by René leaving Nia to approach Aggie. "Madame," he said, "I have had the most wonderful idea for a new outfit for you - it will be more work, but if I bring in my part-timers, I can still have you ready in time. But we will need to hurry! And I will need to move you to a private fitting room."

Aggie looked uncertain. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I'm already stretching my budget thin-"

"Pish-posh," René dismissed her. "What is the point of attending a ball if you don't draw attention? I will sign my name - when the other ball-goers see what worlds I make of you and come to me, I will just charge them even more."

"Well," Aggie said, "I /am/ supposed to make the best impression I can."

She looked at me apologetically, and I just smiled at her and said, "It sounds like we're going to the same function, so we can continue this if we can find each other there."

She nodded, stood, and I watched her multi-limbed gait curiously as she was led deeper into René's shop.

I excused myself from my own fitting, claiming Streams was jumping on my bladder, and wasn't lying; but had another purpose in mind. In the privacy of the stall, I whispered to my AI, Boomer, in my marsupial pouch, "Any chance you already know sign language?"

She answered, "To comply with various university regulations about the physiodiverse, I am fluent in several dialects of American Sign Language and Quebec Sign Language. However, in my current location, I have neither sensors nor effectors to see or sign."

"My prosthetic arms have microphones, so they can hear what I tell them to do - could you use your speaker to interface with them, without it being obvious to anyone nearby?"

"With a small number of initial commands, that is possible. What will you wish to be signed?"

"Anything I say to one of these 'people of the eye'. If sign's what they understand best, it's best I do what I can to accommodate them."

"While within your pouch, I have no way of recognizing when members of that group are nearby."

"We've got that flexible camera and cable I mounted inside the Hopper armour for you - I can probably get just the tip of it poking out of the pouch, and have René hide it in a cluster of sequins. Now, how many ways can you communicate to me what signs you see someone making? Should we stick to Morse code, or do you think these bunny ears of mine can pick up you whispering?"

"My reference materials on sign language indicate that I should now inform you that there are certain aspects of signed grammar which make live translation difficult, in either direction. For example, facial expressions and-"

"So I'll be a clumsy beginner instead of a fluent speaker - I mean, signer. Better to be an enthusiastic beginner than an uncaring idiot."

With Munchkin parked just outside, it was easy to make another excuse to duck in for a moment, and then to talk René into adjusting the pattern of sparklies he was laying across my fur for my purpose. At this point, I was barely bothering to think of /why/ I was being discreet about Boomer, my robotic prosthetics, or any of the other little details I was keeping private; the mere fact that I /could/ keep something to myself was just about all the justification I needed to /try/ to keep it secret.

But while I kept the hows to myself, I was still willing to show off certain magic tricks. So, once I was all decked out to René's satisfaction, and with his acknowledgement that Aggie

wasn't in a compromising state at the moment, I ducked into her room just before I left the salon, to sign a quick 'goodbye and see you soon' to her.

Her befuddled expression, and a sign that Boomer relayed as meaning 'what?' at my instant fluency, was going to keep me cheerful through at least the first parts of the ball. I said, and had my arm-bots sign, "I'd still like to see your notes on transposing signs to non-human limbs, when we get a chance."

She said, and signed, "I'll collect my main references and get back to you."

"See you at the ball," I returned, and went on my way.

--

"Alright," I looked up and down at Minerva and Amy within Munchkin, while the liaisons waited outside, "I /obviously/ can't hide as much as a spoon in my outfit. Which means that anyone who thinks I'm the slightest bit competent at survival will be wondering where I'm keeping my real security tools."

Minerva asked, "but don't you have Boomer in your pouch, and that straw in Waggar, and your robot arms, and knowing you, probably something in your stomach?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but that's no reason to let anyone /else/ think I'm that prepared. You, my dear, have a nice, large ballgown - plenty of room beneath that for a pair of pants with pockets. As for you, Amy, hm... your torso isn't quite human - do you think this money-belt would fit inside your dress?"

"Not without showing some bumps," Amy frowned, doubtfully.

"Perfect!" I smiled back.

\*\*\*

\*Chapter Four: Off-ended\*

I'm terrible with crowds.

By the time Nia introduced me to the third new person turned out in their Friday finest in a row, I'd already forgotten the first; by the fourth, the third; and everyone else's name slipped in one ear and out the other without pausing in the middle. So I fell back on some of the classic royal tricks - smile and nod and say a word or two of politeness, and let my aide, Boomer, file all the particular details away in a Farleyfile to whisper just loud enough for me to hear whenever I came across those individuals again.

After less than five minutes of that, I was tempted to send someone into Munchkin to fetch a wheelchair. While the locals had retained the pre-Singularity concept of deodorant, the

combination of so many bodies and the large fireplaces chasing away the chill of the outside's snow meant that simply breathing wasn't the most pleasant experience, even without Streams taking up what seemed to be half the space my lungs usually expanded into.

Fortunately, I didn't owe anyone here anything, including my presence; so I took a bemused (and probably amused) Ida by the hand and practically dragged her to a loveseat against the wall, murmuring to the latest John Smith something like, "Sorry, but us pregnant girls have tender feet."

Amy waddled up next to me, and at her raised eyebrow, I shrugged. "Not really my scene," I tried to explain. "No privacy to talk about anything important, I don't know anything anyone here is concerned with, and I don't seem to be able to properly appreciate this post-Singularity post-techno post-music stuff they've got in the background."

Amy tapped her fuzzy chin with one paw. "What would it take for you to enjoy yourself at a party like this?"

"Conversation that's not gossip - if anyone who's here is an engineer, or a surveyor, or someone else who'd understand Kipling's point-of-view, so much the better."

Ida squeezed my hand to get my attention, and while I didn't feel it directly, I did feel the arm-bot twitch on my shoulder, which got me to turn to face her anyway. "Who's Kipling?" she asked, head tilted.

"He designed the 'Ritual of the Calling of the Engineer', which highlights the responsibility of engineers whose work, if done poorly, will cost lives. I've never qualified to wear the Iron Ring myself, but, hm... I think I can remember enough of his poem, 'The Sons of Martha'." I started out with, "The Sons of Mary seldom bother, for they have inherited that good part; But the Sons of Martha favour their Mother of the careful soul and the troubled heart," and with only occasional near-subliminal prompting from Boomer, went through the whole poem to Ida without too many stumbles, ignoring the circle of people who formed around our seat.

A few seconds after I finished, Ida asked, "Is that how you see yourself? As the one the Lord has laid everyone's burdens on?"

"I... usually prefer not to mention the Lord, when dealing with philosophy that has real-world consequences," I hedged. "Too many different descriptions, too few ways of figuring out which ones are true or false before bodies start piling up."

"Bodies'?"

"Oh, look, quadrupeds - say, is that Captain Shatter of the Acadians?" I waved, the spotted feline saw me, and gracefully padded over. "Captain?"

"Your Majesty," he nodded his head. "Have you completed your latest expedition, or is this ball part of it?"

"I did what I set out to do, if not quite how I expected to do it, and with costs I didn't expect to pay. I'm spending a few days resting and gathering a last few resources before I go back to the castle."

"You have not given up hope, then?"

"Even even odds are worth trying to go back. I could still use all the help I can get, though - would you be willing to allow any of your people to assist, even just on tasks outside the castle proper?"

"Perhaps. Would you be willing to hand over command to me instead of keeping it yourself?"

"Very likely - though I'd have to brief you on a number of details in private before either of us make up our minds."

"Shall we go somewhere private?"

Ida finally jumped in, "There are a selection of private rooms around the ballroom, for just such occasions."

I nodded, then said to Shatter, "I'm willing - but I'm currently under close medical supervision," I nodded to Amy, "and am following all her instructions closely."

Amy asked Shatter, "This private discussion you want sounds serious. Will it involve making important plans and considering disturbing scenarios?"

"It will," Shatter agreed.

"Then I can't allow Bunny to have it tonight, unless there's an immediate threat to life or limb." Amy looked at me. "Is there?"

I reluctantly admitted, "There's no evidence that waiting a day, or a week, is going to leave anyone worse off than they already are."

Shatter sat down, licking at a paw as he said, "Then we will talk later, once you are able. Are all of your kind so delicate when they are pregnant?"

"It's... complicated," was the closest I could think of to the truth, without spilling any secrets.

"You appear to be rather large for one month of pregnancy," Shatter observed. "How many are in your litter?"

"Just one, but a transformation zone was involved. I'm effectively eight months into a nine-month pregnancy."

"I will be sure to let Miss Neckline know - I believe she will want to talk to you about sparks of life." His slitted eyes slide to Amy. "I am guessing that will be a safe topic of conversation?"

Amy nodded agreeably, "I don't see why not."

Shatter rotated his head, left then right. "I am having trouble seeing over all these people. Are all the non-humans at this event right here?"

I said, "I met a spider-woman the other day who said she'd be here."

Ida added, "Albert and Ethel should be somewhere." She started explaining the liaison and meta-liaison thing to Shatter, and I shifted my position on the couch, trying to settle Streams onto some less uncomfortable organs.

One of the circle of masked, dressed-to-the-nines people took the opportunity of my conversational pause to step closer. "Would you care to dance, your majesty?"

Being a wallflower had always been my approach during those few times I'd been pulled to a social event, so I demurred with, "I'm afraid that I'm going to be completely uncoordinated."

The man smiled and said, "I'm sure everyone will understand your circumstances, ma'am."

Amy put one paw on my shoulder and said, "Go ahead and dance. Enjoy yourself. It's why you're here."

I /wanted/ to say that the two commands were mostly contradictory, at least in my case, but the fellow reached over and took my hand, and the arm-bot's default programming had it grab back as he pulled me to my feet. So I verbally rationalized, "I am trying to follow doctor's orders," and didn't fight as I was escorted to the dancefloor, where, despite the barely-musical music, various couples were slow-dancing.

As quietly as I could manage, I near-whispered, "I /really/ don't know how to dance."

"Here, I'll put your hands here, and mine here, and we can just rock side to side a bit, and turn around for a while."

"That, I think I can do."

After a few moments of aimless circling, he asked, "How do you like the music?"

"That depends - are we politely passing the time or comparing actual musical tastes?"

"If we were being polite?"

"Then I'd say something about being unfamiliar but getting used to it."

"And your real opinion?"

"I find it hard to call anything music that doesn't have melody, rhythm, and preferably harmony."

"Ah, but you see, all the wealthy people here are trying their very hardest to impress all the other people here, and /everyone/ can like music with actual melodies, so how could they show off how superior their tastes are with music everyone can like?"

I'll admit my ears finally focused in on him then, now that he'd expressed a non-vapid idea. "How about with music that's simply expensive to produce, these days? I suspect that, say, electric guitars can still be found, and amplifiers powered, but that it wouldn't be easy for non-rich people, so the wealthy people could still show off how different they are."

His smile turned into a frown. "I am afraid such instruments are preferred by the wizards, who have... their own parties."

I blinked a few times. "Toffee once accused me of being a wizard, but I'm guessing that's not the same thing."

"Probably not, unless you have a familiar which serves your will, and you can use magic to do things ordinary people cannot."

I thought of Brenda, and of Clarke's law, and hedged, "Well, depending on your definitions..."

"Ah, the song is over."

"... How can you tell?"

"Practice. Shall I escort you back to your seat?"

"Please." Bun-Bun's legs were still going strong, but I was still breathing harder than I'd expected, and appreciated the idea of a break. Returning to the couch where the party's token non-humans were still gathered, I observed that Al had arrived, wearing something with epaulets and extra cords dangling here and there.

"Please excuse my tardiness, Your Majesty," he stated, rather than asked. "I am afraid that duty required me to complete certain paperwork before I could leave for a social engagement."

I nodded, nostrils instinctively flaring at the bouquet of the new mix of species crowded around the small couch, and tried to ignore it, the way people from before my first death, what I still thought of as 'my time', ignored invisible hygienic faux pas. (And I spent a few

moments wondering whether 'faux pas' was the plural of 'faux pas', before just making a mental note to ask Boomer later.) I offered a platitude, "Everyone has to deal with what they see as their duty,"

"And my social duty," Al stated, "is to offer to escort you to the dance-floor." He held out his arm, I glanced at Amy, Amy smiled and made shooing motions, and so I found myself back on the dance floor, this time with a man-sized rabbit.

I can't say anything about the quality of Al's dancing, other than his stiffness and lack of conversation, pleasant or otherwise. What I can say, somewhat reluctantly, is that as we danced, I found myself looking up and down at him and considering certain activities that I'd been ignoring ever since being placed into Bun-Bun's feminine form. I hadn't thought about them during my previous dance with the human whose name I'd never caught, so I started second-guessing myself and wondering if I'd been ignoring those ideas merely because I hadn't been around any male lapines.

I was feeling so out-of-sorts, flushed, and unlike myself that as soon as we circled near the ballroom's exits to the washrooms, I gave a hurried excuse about, "Sorry, pregnant bladder," and pulled myself from his arms to get a few moments to myself.

Unfortunately for my plans for solitude, a significant amount of the ladies' loo was taken up by Aggie's arachnid anatomy. I barely had time to note that her abdomen was painted up as the Earth, her cephalothorax as the Moon, and the rest of her in something dark and full of stars, before I slid by her into a sub-room (much better than a mere stall) containing an actual commode. I was thinking about just closing the door and sitting down and that's as far as my thoughts went, but my plan was derailed as one of Aggie's legs kept the door from closing.

"You don't look alright," Aggie said, not bothering to ask if I was.

"I'm fine, fine," I waved at her. "Just need a bit of air."

"/This/ air? I know they've got some kind of pot pourri, but-"

A plushie, shaped as a waist-high duck, stepped into view. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you not to bother any of the other guests."

"It's okay," I ran my hands over my face and ears; then, remembering a detail about Aggie, whispered to my arm-bots to start their sign-language program. "We've met."

The pseudo-avian bathroom attendant somehow managed to make her beak frown, then withdrew. I took another couple of breaths.

"Better?" Aggie asked.

"Maybe," I said, and watched myself sign. Even through Aggie's visor, I saw her eyebrows rise. "Just need to think through an aspect of myself that I thought I'd thoroughly settled."

Aggie signed, without saying, and Boomer whispered, "Is it something you can talk about?"

I almost demurred without thinking, then actually took a moment to consider the question. This wasn't the sort of topic I was used to talking to /anyone/ about, let alone someone I'd met for just a few minutes. That said, I was so inexperienced at discussing such topics that, for all the evidence I had, a stranger might offer advice as useful as someone who thought they knew me. I stepped forward and leaned out the stall to look at the plush duck. "Any chance I could convince you to step outside for a couple of minutes, maybe give the door a knock before someone else comes in?"

"Of course, ma'am. I can have someone guide you to a private room if you need longer than that."

"Thank you very much." When she was gone, I sighed again, closed my eyes, and skipping the threats of 'I could destroy you if you spread this around' that almost seemed like a good idea, just asked, "Do you know the difference between asexuality and celibacy?"

I opened them in time to see Aggie sign what Boomer translated as, "Choice?"

"Close, but I'd say it's something closer to 'interest'."

Aggie didn't seem to be slow on the draw. "Who's drawn your interest?"

I grimaced. "A rather boring, rules-bound paper-pusher. Who's the first male rabbit I've met in... well, ever."

"It's okay to be interested in someone for their body, even if you hate their personality."

I grimaced further. "That's part of the weird thing. I'm trying to imagine his body, and... eh. I can /imagine/ doing... interesting things with it, but there's other bodies I can imagine a lot more, a lot easier. ... Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe just talking for a few minutes was what I needed."

"He didn't give you anything to drink, did he? Have you eaten since you got here?"

"I'm pretty sure I haven't been drugged. I appreciate you watching for my safety, though."

"What about an aerosol drug?"

"... Is that actually a thing? How would anyone /tell/?"

"He could have gotten a love potion from a wizard. I suppose they could make an airborne one."

"That's the second time I've heard of wizards tonight, and I'm not sure I like what I hear."

"If you're going to say anything like that about them, you should just sign it, not say it out loud."

"Mm... I don't think I can. I'm cheating - I don't actually understand sign yet, but am using a clever trick to fake it."

"A magic spell?"

"I wouldn't call it that. Other people might. Anyway. Airborne love drugs. And I thought people could be scummy before I died the first time. A- I mean, he might be innocent, though. Wouldn't be the first time I found out I had some loose screws inside my own head."

"Is it important to know? Can you just stay away from him the rest of the party?"

"He's... someone I kind of work with. If he's doing something unethical, I'd want to stop working with him."

"So test it. Or test yourself."

I paused for a moment's reflection. "Tricky," I said finally. "Maybe I'm just the sort of person who... reacts to the right scent, and just haven't come across it until now."

"You say you work with him. Does that mean you've met him before?"

"Yes."

"Did you 'react' before?"

"Not that I recall."

"So just-"

Aggie's signing was interrupted by a slightly muffled knock, followed by the duck-plush bathroom attendant, followed by Nia, whose smile tightened and looked strained as she saw the two of us. "You're missing a lovely party, Your Majesty," she said. "Why don't you come out and dance some more?"

Aggie signed, "If you ever need help, or just want to visit, here's my card," and pulled one out of her sleeve.

My arm-bots had barely automatically accepted it before Nia was between us, saying, "I'm sure you don't need to be bothering her with your arm-waving and so on - let me just take that card and I'll see if we can work it into our schedule."

A whispered word, and I guilelessly said, "What card?"

Nia blinked. "Didn't this... invited guest just hand you a card?"

"Do I look like I have a card? With this getup, where could I /put/ it?" I curled Wagger around my hip, to show that her head hadn't been anywhere near my hands.

Nia shook her head, as if to clear it, then took my hand in hers and tugged me towards the door. "Be that as it may, you have more guests to meet."

I glanced down at myself, to make sure I hadn't dislodged Boomer's camera when I'd slipped the card into my pouch, then let myself be towed back to the main ballroom.

Al was waiting just inside, and I felt my stomach flip-flop - though this time I wasn't sure if it was from him, or some airborne chemical, or just the anticipation of having to deal with those. "Nia," I asked, "I'm used to having more pockets than René gave me - do you have a cloth or napkin I can borrow?"

"You look fine."

"Not everything I do is about how I look. Look, there's the buffet table, I'll just grab a napkin."

"Fine, here," Nia reluctantly handed me a lace hankie, which I was planning on dabbing onto Al's fur while holding my breath - but as Nia and I finished our byplay, I suddenly started feeling velvety and crinkly and all sorts of other adjectives I wasn't used to thinking of in connection to myself.

From right behind me, Al's voice said, "I believe Her Majesty and I have a dance to finish," and before I could work out a cogent response, I was back on the dance floor with him. Without missing a beat, he said, "And we finish this dance, we can find a discreet room for another sort of dancing entirely."

"Sorry," I said through gritted teeth, trying to breathe through my mouth, "but I have no interest in that sort of thing."

"Of course you do. I can smell it, even if the humans can't. You and I were made for each other." One of his hands started sliding down my back, and I got ready to have Wagger start biting if it strayed too far.

"Rohoo, eye-nigh-roheh, ehah-nigh."

"Beg pardon?"

"Even if my body says one thing, my mind says another. And a spoken 'no' has a lot more legal weight than some scent you claim to detect."

"Perhaps you are unaware, but the law is quite clear. Due to the impracticality of trying to legislate against so many different kinds of deep-rooted instincts, whatever sexual acts two non-humans engage in amongst themselves are between them, and the courts will not get involved."

"... /What?/ That's absurd! I can't believe such a... blatant pretext for rape could be the law!"

"Judges hate domestic disputes - no matter how they rule, they'll lose votes. And there are a lot more human voters than non-humans. I am entirely within my rights to scoop you up and carry you to another room - or even drop trou right here, though that would be rather gauche, and I'd get a talking-to by my supervisor tomorrow."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "/Anything/ sexual between us is legal?"

"As long as we don't involve a human, yes. Do you have a request?"

"More of an observation, that people are clever at making anything sexual. To wit, four little letters: B, D, S, M. If you don't let go of me in five seconds, I hope you appreciate the M."

"I anticipated such a reaction. I'm wearing a cup."

"And I'm a wizard. Esc," I said the word to let my arm-bots know an important command was coming: "Tase."

He dropped to the ground, I stepped back and turned to keep walking away as the dancers came to a halt around us. "Don't worry," I pattered, "nothing to see here, just some intra-species discussion. He'll be fine. Ida? There you are. Feel free to inform anyone relevant that Albert's services as a liaison will no longer be required."

"What?" Ida asked.

"I'm going to get a cup of cocoa or something, then sit down. While I'm doing that, please exercise your liaisons skills to smooth any ruffled feathers with the host of this party and any disturbed guests."

The hot chocolate wasn't nearly hot enough, and I was feeling rather less than respectful of local mores and customs, so used one of the arm-bots' other tricks, and set the maser in the right palm to low power to reheat my drink to something more palatable. If anyone gave me funny looks for waving my hand over my cup as it started it steaming, they were behind my back.

While I was doing that, and putting my composure back together, my ears rotated to pick up a few shreds of conversation here and there. Several times, I heard variations of, "Boy, John Doe is going to be upset when he hears he sent me in his mask in his place and missed

/this/!", which gave me a new perspective on how Nia's supposedly-important party could seem so boring.

As I took my first perfectly-hot sip, wishing I could feel its warmth in my hands, a plushie penguin wearing a collar and bow-tie waddled up to me, and asked, "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but the band and several others have inquired what your favorite form of music is."

"Absolute favorite? Pre-twenty-fifteen geekcore, exemplified by people such as Weird Al Yankovic, They Might Be Giants, and Jonathan Coulton. Things I like? Baroque music, jazz singers like Ella Fitzgerald, east-coast fiddling, and anything else I can at least tap my feet to."

"Thank you, ma'am; I'll pass that along."

He waddled off, I gave Streams a quick heft, and started back to the couch, where Amy was in the middle of, "... right through her heart. I don't know if she was dead or not, but the newspapers said she was frozen, and now she's walking this way."

I nodded politely. "I'd make a comment about doctor-patient confidentiality, but I'm guessing that doesn't apply to newspaper stories."

Amy said, "It doesn't. It's also time for your next dose." She handed me one of the lozenges, and I dutifully popped it into my mouth and started sucking.

Ida was back at the couch (and Albert was nowhere in sight), and asked, "Is it true? You were shot in the heart?"

"Quite so. I'm afraid I don't have any scars to show you - I'm a very good healer. In fact, depending on how you want to count things, I'm up to my... fifth heart, now." The one I was born with, Bun-Bun's first heart, the mechanical one, Brenda, and Bun-Bun's regrown one.

One of the circle of humans stepped closer to me, and started to say something, but was interrupted as the pseudo-music really did come to a stop. Someone near the band called out, "In honour of one of our guests tonight - Bunny, Queen of Canada - I am proud to present a song by one of her favorite composers, 'Weird' Al Yankovic."

I lifted my ears as an electric guitar, or something close to it, started playing, followed by drums, other instruments, and then a voice: "Don't wanna be a Canadian idiot!" I couldn't help but smile at the appearance of actual melody, rhythm, /and/ harmony. And it /was/ a Weird Al tune, so I happily enjoyed the whole thing, nodding my head and tapping my feet along all the way to "Always hear the same kind of story. Break their nose and they'll just say 'sorry'. Tell me, what kind of freaks are that polite? It's gotta mean they're all up to somethin'. So quick, before they see it comin' - Time for a pre-emptive strike!"

I whispered to get my arm-bots applauding politely, and scattered people joined me. Whoever was doing the announcing called out, "Does Queen Bunny wish to reply?"

Ida hurriedly slipped over to me from the couch and whispered, "That means, do you want to sing something in return."

I whispered back, "If I do, should I go up with the band?"

Ida whispered, "I wouldn't recommend it - didn't you hear them trying to insult you with that song?"

I blinked, forehead wrinkled. I had no particular desire to get into any sort of musical duel: it was a fight I had no reason to try to win, so gracefully losing was certainly an option. On the other paw, I was kind of curious how well I /could/ do against the Metropolitans in their own game, and there was at least a small chance that making an impressive showing might sway one of the party-goers to be more willing to make a trade - so trying to win in a classy way was also an option.

I whispered a few words for Boomer to pick up, and her sound system started playing some non-copyrighted improvised backup music that led me into, "When I look around me, I can't believe what I see: it seems as if this country has lost its will to live.

The economy is lousy, we barely have an army... But we can still stand proudly 'cause Canada's really big!" I got a few laughs at the right lines.

Without further preamble, the band broke into a tune I didn't recognize until they hit the chorus: "Blame Canada! Blame Canada!" In reply, I drew again on the Arrogant Worms, with the more relevant verses of "I'm proud to be Canadian". The band changed tack a little, with a country-ish song I couldn't place, with "... and if there's one thing lower than a sideshow freak, it's a gritty, scum-sucking pencil-neck geek." The natural counter to that was from Weird Al: "White and Nerdy".

"Once I was the King of Spain! Now I eat humble pie!"

"Everybody knew the story of the princess who saved herself."

By this point, the guests had stopped muttering and asking where my backup band was hiding, and just dancing along with whatever tune was in the air.

As the band broke into the light air of Coulton's version of "Baby Got Back", I circled around to their low dais, and whispered to Bun-Bun, "Can you dance as cleanly as they're singing this one?", at which point my hips, and Wagger, started bouncing left and right, soon joined by the rest of me. A few whispers to Boomer, and by the time it was my turn again, she'd help me improvise a variant of "I am a paleontologist", "I am an archaeologist". After that one, the band seemed to have run out of ideas, so I called Amy up to join me, and I started Coulton's singing melancholy "Furry Old Lobster" to her - and, oddity of oddities, the live band joined with Boomer's synthesized backup. In honour of the squiddies, I went for "I Crush Everything", and then, just because I could, a few from They Might Be Giants - 'Put it to the Test' for the idea, and "Birdhouse" and "Istanbul" just because I could.

At which point I was thirsty and tired, and flushed in a way I liked a lot more than Albert had managed, so I stepped down from the stage to much less unenthusiastic applause than before, and the band started up something quite unrelated - classic rock, with the first lyrics, "You're as cold as ice!", presumably due to the still-falling snow outside.

As I collected a new hot drink, one of the masked humans stepped closer to me than the others and said, "I thought you said you didn't know how to dance."

It /could/ have been the first person to take me to the dance-floor - or a body-double wearing his mask. Either way, I shrugged, and said, "I don't. I cheat."

"How can you cheat at /dancing?/"

"Surprisingly well, apparently."

He was shoved aside by another human - possibly a bodyguard, possibly a football player, possibly a brick wall dressed in a tuxedo and mask. "I know exactly what you need."

"Better fur-glue to keep my outfit intact?"

He crossed his arms, and flexed various parts of himself. "You. Me. Backroom. Now."

I looked up and down at him, pursed my lips, and came up with a plan that just might have been stupid, but didn't seem so. "Don't be so absurdly obvious," I told him. "I'll go back now. You go back in a few minutes." I swung by the buffet table on my way back.

I'll give this for whoever was hosting the ball - they knew what their back rooms would be used for, and stocked appropriately. After rummaging through some drawers, I was trying to figure out exactly /how/ some of the implements were supposed to be used, without touching them, when the walking pile of testosterone came in.

"I wanna see your tits," he said, removing any doubt of his intentions, and any doubt from my mind about what I was about to do.

"Don't be ridiculous," I told him. "We'd never get these sparkle-things back on. Let's just go to the main event."

"Okay," he said, and started fiddling with his shirt.

"I've never done anything like this before," I said, entirely honestly. "I've only read books. So I hope it's going to be good for you."

"Yeh."

"Where do you want it? On the bed?"

"Sure."

I nodded... and placed one slightly damp, body-temperature egg in the middle of the sheets. He paused in his clothes-fumblings. "Whuh?"

"I hope you like it," I said. "Just like my books said: the female lays an egg, and the male covers it with his seed. This one's obviously too small, so you don't need to worry about birth control." I patted him on the arm as I walked out of the room, with a smile and a wish of, "Have fun."

\*\*\*

#### \*Chapter Five: Off-guard\*

While the evening's main entertainment was a small theatre in the same building complex as the ballroom, I took a slight detour to Munchkin.

On my way there, I ran through one of the mental exercises I was trying to get more into the habit of - checking my perspective. Looking at things from my South point-of-view, I thought I should hunt Albert down to get a bottle of whatever scent he was soaked in, for personal recreational purposes. West thought I should try to shore up the shambles of the memory palace I'd started to try to make to match masks to names. East wondered if I could build a better interface between myself, Boomer, and the arm-bots. And North... was rapping me on the skull shouting "Hel-/lo/, McFly!", pointing out how out-of-character it was for me to voluntarily start singing and dancing in front of a crowd, and that I had come to this city to investigate whatever mind-control methods were being used. Candidates for which currently included Albert's scent, whatever made everyone /else/ in the city sing and dance on cue, and if I was going to be thorough, whatever Amy was doing to try to keep all of my POVs from going cock-eyed nuts, and possibly an entirely unrelated factor.

At least for the moment, I wasn't going to chase down the male who hadn't been willing to take 'no' for an answer, I'd already forgotten enough names that I might as well stop trying, and human-computer interface design would be something best done when I had a lot of time to use the flow-state from my Thinking Cap. But I could at least see if Internet could whip up some discreet nasal filter plugs in the time before the play started. And at least one other thing.

Inside Munchkin's living car, Blue was babysitting Minerva by offering her constructive criticism on her puppet shows. When I peeked in, Minnie was saying something about, "... old scripts from Clara. It's hard turning them into something I can use, when it's so hard for me to change backdrops... Hi, Bunny! Is the play over already?"

"Just about to start, actually. Just popping in to make sure you-all were doing alright in here."

Blue nodded once. "Other than some of the funny ideas Minerva has about what makes a good story, we're all good here."

"Good, good," I said. "Um - Minnie. Minerva, I mean. There was one unhappy incident at the ball, and it made me think... and I'd like you to wear this the rest of the time we're in the city." I held up Scorpia, in digital-watch form, by her band.

--

Once Ida had led Amy, Nia, and me to the balcony we'd been given for the night, we found Ethel, a few bottles of racked wine (plus one which was already open) and an assortment of crackers with mysterious toppings.

"I didn't see you at the ball," I observed, settling into a chair and speculatively eyeing a cracker covered in little red spheres that could have been eggs, could have been seeds, could have been candy, and for all I knew, could have been the local recreational drug of choice.

The chimpanzee-shaped woman took a sip from her wineglass before responding. "I can only take so much bourgeois politicking in a day."

Ida smiled and pointed out, "You missed seeing Queen Bunny sing. She put on quite a show."

"Don't mind me," I said, "I'm still trying to remember the definition of 'bourgeois'." I tried a different cracker, whose topping turned out to be peanut butter, despite its vibrant blue colouring.

Nia grunted. "/Please/ don't get her started. We've only got so much time before the show starts."

"The bourgeois," Ethel stated, lifting her glass to Nia's groan, "are the owners of the means of production. The economic ruling class, who control the legally-approved methods of initiating force against the proletariat - that means the people who work for a living."

"Ah," I shrugged. "And where would I fit into this categorization scheme?"

"Hard to say," Ethel squinted at me. "I'm still trying to figure out how the squiddies organize themselves, and the embassy stopped letting me make appointments to ask a few months ago. You say you're their queen, which should put you at the tippy-top of the class of exploiters who'll be taken down when the revolution comes, but as far as I can tell, you don't seem to be doing much exploiting. You also don't seem to be doing much work for wages, you're just... doing stuff."

"If it helps," I offered, "about three years ago I had a job as a motorized bicycle courier."

"Ah, class mobility is a whole other issue," Ethel waved the hand not holding her drink broadly. "I'm not sure Marx's theories /had/ a place for you, and if he didn't, that I've got the chops to extend them to cover you."

"Did Marx's theories include any mention of existential risks that threatened to kill off both the proletariat /and/ the bourgeois?"

"That's 'bourgeoisie', and-"

"Say," Nia interrupted, "have you ever seen 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' before, Your Majesty?"

I gave Ethel another shrug, who just smiled back and refilled her glass. Turning to Nia, I said, "It's the first Shakespeare play I ever saw - and the first one I ever read. I usually think of it as my favorite."

"You like romances with star-crossed lovers?"

"Well... not really. For one, all the other Shakespeare plays I've delved into have been tragedies. For another - well, the main bit of plot that I always focused on was Bottom getting an ass's head. Not Bottom's character of being a pompous ass, but just... wondering what it would be /like/ to spend some time with that different a skull. Of course," I waved at my lepine facial features, "I've got something of a better idea about that, now."

Ida whispered, "Ssh, I think they're starting to turn down the house lights."

--

I had to resist the urge to be 'that' guy' and point out the various anachronisms in the play, or other nitpicky details (such as whether the moon was supposed to be full or not). Squinting a bit, trying to use my eyes to the best possible, including trying to understand the polarization, I was moderately sure that Oberon and Titania were being played by the same actors as Theseus and Hippolyta, just with different masks and costumes.

When Oberon said, "Ill met by moonlight, Titania", I expected to identify with one of the inhuman monarchs, and wondered if I could glean any useful psychological insights from looking at the play from that perspective. But the two of them were tied up in their relationship to each other, their marriage and quarrels and so on - in that scene, I felt a lot more sympathy for the changeling boy, just a regular kid caught up in an argument he had no way of knowing the entirety of.

Then Puck started dripping pansy-flower love-potion in people's eyes, and I was uncomfortably reminded of Brenda being imprinted on me, and how I had - rather literally - fridged her. If Brenda was like Titania, besotted without any choice, then that made me a rather poor Bottom, in many senses - including being a pompous ass.

When Robin Goodfellow finally restored amends, and the house lights came back up, I was feeling rather quiet and introspective; wondering, among other things, whether I should have chosen to spend this week looking for ways to bring Brenda back to a non-homicidal state of mind rather than on improving my own psyche.

Once I returned from the little queen's room (which I'd had to visit between every act, thanks to Streams forcing me to live up to her name), Ethel handed me a wineglass, which my arm-bots automatically took hold of. "To the Revolution!" she toasted.

Ida lifted a glass of her own. "To finding your family."

Nia's salute was, "To reconciliation."

Amy said, "To a healthy body."

The best I could come up with was, "To always trying your best," and I touched the edge of the glass to my lips without tilting it or taking a sip.

Ethel squinted at my glass, then at my face, then down at my belly. "Oh, sorry," she said. "Forgot. I can get some grape juice up here if you like."

I shook my head. "The show's over, we won't be staying here long."

An impressively deep basso profundo voice declared, "You will be staying as long as I want you to say!" In the balcony's doorway stood a man in deep maroon robes, holding an intricately carved walking staff, with a black bird sitting on his shoulder with an equally-intricately filigreed beak... and a broad spread of acne across his youthful face.

The other ladies were slow on the draw, so I was the one who asked, "Can we help you?"

"Do not toy with me, false queen!" he thundered. "I am here to prove your... falseness... for all to see!"

"That's an interesting perspective you have," I tried to placate him. "But I have visiting hours at the Lake Erie embassy for such serious discussions. Why don't you make an appointment - or, even better, write a letter, so you can be sure to get down every piece of evidence you think warrants attention?"

While I'd been stretching out the diplomatic bafflegab, the young man had been breathing hard, inhaling and exhaling fairly quickly; now, he took another deep breath, and my over-sensitive ears heard the faintest squeaking sound, as of a balloon quickly changing size. He boomed, "I'm wise to your tricks, temptress and deceiver! You will humble yourself to a /true/ wizard this very night!"

He shifted his grip on his staff, and at that point I didn't care whether he was going to try to whack one of us with it, or if he'd stuffed it full of more tricks than my own canes - he'd made

a credible threat and was in the process of carrying it out. The second thing I did was make a decision never to wear an outfit with as few pockets as the one René had come up with ever again - keeping useful gear inside Amy's dress had seemed a good compromise, but it was too far out of reach to do anyone any good in the moment. The first thing I did was smash my wineglass and throw it at the man's face, which succeeded in making him abort whatever he was doing with his staff to flinch and protect himself, giving me enough time to make the third thing I did to be grabbing one of Ethel's empty wine bottles to repeat the procedure.

The young man exclaimed, in a rather ordinary, nasal voice, "Hey! No fair! You're supposed to use /magic/!", as I followed the wine bottle with my own body, aiming to give him a repeat of what I'd done to Albert earlier. But he saw me coming, and rapidly backpedaled, his bird spreading its wings and cawing as it tried to maintain its perch - which at least got him out of the way of the least bone-jarring escape route from the balcony.

I spent a split second considering pausing to grab the Bat-belt from Amy - it had my foot-gun, among other useful things - but decided to keep up the pressure on the robed, well, nerd, long enough for Amy and the others to slip out. So I shook my shoulders in a certain way as I passed through the doorway, which had the effect of the arm-bot ejecting a tape-bot into each hand. To distract anyone watching me from the tape-bots' existence, I bellowed back, "You idiot! Hasn't anyone ever taught you that /real/ magic is imposing your will on the universe - regardless of how you impose it?"

Unfortunately, he'd regained his balance, and before I could perform any other distractions, a flame shot out of the top of his staff, which he lowered to aim at me, forcing me to dive to the floor to try to roll out of the way. Unfortunatelier, Streams' weight meant all the practice I'd taken in learning how to fall was completely useless, and my intended action-hero-like roll turned into a rather undignified sprawl. I made the best use of my position I could think of, and let go of the tape-bots as I rolled to the side of the plushly-appointed (if rapidly filling with smoke) hallway, so that they could sneak up on the man when he wasn't looking. Unfortunateliest, when I did that, the bird made a horrid croaking sound, launching down to swoop at the small bots, still in their innocuous cassette-tape forms, and my frantic waving at it only protected one, while it flew down the hall with the other.

"I know all about your electrical arms!" the would-be magician declared. "As long as I keep you from touching me, you can't shock me!"

I gauged angles, the wall behind the man, and other pertinent details... and fired the maser in my right palm between his legs, a sharp crack of sound the main indication that I'd just burnt holes through the front and back of his robes. With just a slight motion, my forearm lifted to point at his head. From some deep instinct, I growled, "Your move, creep."

"Enough!" called out a new voice. "You have lost, Elmer. As I warned you you would."

"But Waa-alter - I've got her! I don't even need to use anything but-!"

"Elmer! Look down at yourself. She has warned you she is about to use lethal force."

"...What?" As Elmer looked down at his sartorial injury and his face paled, I looked away from him long enough to glance at Waa-alter - who turned out to have a similar robe, only hooded; a similar staff, only longer; a distinct lack of pimples and a ZZ-Top beard.

The elder apparently-sorcerer sighed. "Sometimes I wonder how I survived my own apprenticeship. It seems like some people just can't learn fire is hot without sticking their hand into a blast furnace."

I coughed once from my still-undignified floor position, not having moved my arm's aim. "Speaking of surviving," I stated.

The elder of the pair stated, "I trust you haven't forgotten how to be humble, Elmer?"

The younger straightened, and I got ready to perform my first deliberate act of lethal violence against another person, but he simply offered a half-bow. "You have proven yourself superior to this apprentice, madame wizard, and I apologize for the inconvenience."

He straightened, and looked like he was expecting some sort of formal, ritual acceptance. I wasn't feeling in any mood to comply, so I turned my head toward Walter. "Hasn't anyone taught him what an actual apology contains?"

"Perhaps, perhaps," the bearded man laced his fingers together over his belly. "Would you like to elucidate the details you have in mind?"

I turned my eyes back to Elmer. "Restoring matters to the state they were beforehand, if possible; demonstrating that you know why what you did was wrong; and at least some effort in the direction of not repeating the mistake in the future."

Walter sounded like he was musing about some abstract scholarly presentation as he said, "I've heard worse definitions. And much worse demands by a victor. Elmer, if this is all that she demands of you, you will be getting off lightly, even if I add my own negative reinforcements during your next lessons to be sure you learn what you need to from this."

Elmer looked a tad puzzled. "I could... help you stand up?"

I shook my head at him, and took advantage of Bun-Bun's oversized thighs to slowly and carefully rise back to standing under my own power, still without moving my arm's aim.

Elmer tried again. "Buy you replacements for the wine and glassware?"

"If this is going to be /this/ hard," I growled, "Then to start with, I want my property back, which your bird has taken."

"Oh, right. Ruth! Return!"

By this point, not only were Amy, Ethel, and the others sticking their heads out of the balcony door, but several other nearby portals had sprouted spectators' heads. Walter looked at them, then at Elmer. He stated, "Unless you wish to air the squabbles of wizardkind to the general public, I suggest you hurry up."

Elmer was sweating, and held out an arm for the black bird to land on; it dropped the tape-bot into Elmer's hand, which he held out to me. "Uh... don't mess with royalty? With bunnies? With wizards I haven't properly scouted out first?"

Whatever adrenaline Bun-Bun had provided was now fast disappearing, and I was feeling much too tired to keep up any clever banter. I just wanted to head back somewhere quiet to pull a mattress over my head. So I declared, "Hopeless. Simply hopeless." I stepped over to the tape-bot that hadn't been nabbed, grabbed it with my toes, and tossed it up to my free hand. "Let's just walk nice and calmly to whatever the local equivalent of a police station is so I can get charges of assault against a foreign head-of-state filed. I was hoping for a nice night, now I'm going to have to deal with all the paperwork from this for hours and hours."

Elmer's eyes widened. "/Mundane/ charges? In an actual court? You /wouldn't/!"

I couldn't figure out Walter's expression - it included a smile, but also something like an angry glower. "She's got you dead to rights, boy. She gave you a chance to apologize in a way she found fitting, and you haven't. If you haven't got a trick up your sleeve to get out of this, a mundane jail is quite appropriate." He then turned to me. "However, // have some incentive to keep my apprentice out of the hands of the civilian criminal courts. Would you be willing to accept a bond from me, in exchange for delaying filing charges until we can have a proper, private conversation?"

"... I don't know what you mean by 'bond'."

"Some suitably large fine, which is yours to keep should Elmer try to do something as foolish as pulling a runner."

"At the moment, I don't trust Elmer not to try to aim that fiery toy of his at me as soon as my back is turned. Cash isn't of much use to a dead rabbit."

Walter nodded as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. "Elmer, your actions have placed this lady in a certain degree of dishabille. A good host dresses to match their guest, and I suggest you do likewise."

Elmer obviously swallowed a few objections, but let his staff fall to the floor, and started removing various other objects from his garments, until he was down to a pair of boxer shorts and a bird perched on his head.

After a few moments of thought, I let my arm lower, though I was ready to twitch my shoulder to get the arm-bot ready to fire at the slightest notice.

Walter stated, "You may have one of your associates remove Elmer's belongings for the moment, to examine as you wish."

I huffed through my nose. "As valuable as those objects may be, I don't know enough about them to be able to tell if they're actually valuable enough for Elmer to want them back."

"Oh, they're not the bond I had in mind. I was thinking of offering three hundred kilograms of pure lithium."

I blinked several times at that - that was enough to run Munchkin's fusion reactor at full blast for over a year. I hurriedly tried to hide my interest by quickly asking, "What makes you think I'd be interested in such an offer?"

"Your heliograph network reaches to Buffalo, where you mentioned your interest in catalytic chemistry in public. Unlike certain foolish apprentices, // do my homework when a new wizard becomes prominent."

"Ah. In that case, I believe we have a suitable arrangement, for the moment." Even if it was more because I was more interested in collapsing somewhere that felt safe than in haggling in public with far too many of my sparkles having been rubbed off of my fur.

--

Six clicks west, back at the embassy, I was treating Elmer's clothes and gadgetry with all the caution due if they were made of toxic waste. Which, for all I knew, they were; once I'd been able to extract the tricorder from Amy's pockets, Alphie reported all sorts of strange chemical vapours in the air around them. (Including enough residue of sulphur hexafluoride to explain Elmer's extreme voice changes.) Outright toxins were only one worry - so were mind-affecting chemicals, tiny cameras, radios, and anything else imaginable that I didn't want anywhere near Munchkin.

Amy had said, "Leave them on the floor. You're on vacation - you've had a stressful moment, you need to get back to relaxing."

To which I'd responded, "Sorry, but I'm invoking the immediate hazard clause. I'm not going to be able to rely on surprising anyone with those tricks again, and I need to know what security measures /will/ be enough to protect ourselves from any other so-called 'foolish apprentices'. Or would-be wizards - that Walter seemed pretty sure of himself and prepared for how everything went down."

And so, it was while I, hazmat-suit-clad, was laying each particular object on its own plastic sheet, taking pictures and spectrograms and noting down everything that looked like a trigger or button, that the embassy staff informed me I had a visitor: one PI Bear, here to update me on the progress of his investigation.

After a moment of thought about information compartmentalization, I reluctantly concluded that there was far too much bizarre stuff going on in the city for me to figure out in a single week, even if I spent it all working instead of under medically-recommended vacation. So I had the staff relay an invitation for him to join me, along with an offer for a teddy-sized hazmat suit.

He wandered in wearing his fedora and trenchcoat, apparently unconcerned about the dangers that were my current concern. I briefly wondered if the benefits of letting my own biology be replaced with fungal fluff would be worth the downsides; but recalling that such transformations could include effects like Brenda's imprinting, placed all such plans in the 'last resort' pile, even further down than running off into the forests or hiding inside squiddies' stomachs for the foreseeable future. (Though I did acknowledge that the latter seemed likely to be more relaxing than my vacation had been turning out to be so far.)

"Wizard stuff?" he asked, gruffly, and with a slight whiff of vinegar.

"Assuming everyone was telling the truth, yep," I agreed, using a fing-longer to poke at what seemed to be some kind of bladder from inside the robe's sleeves, which Alphie reported as being a nexus of what appeared to be some faint gasoline fumes.

"Well, I'm sure the embassy here will pay me if you can't."

"Thank you for your support."

"You hired me to investigate. You want me to cheerlead for you, that costs extra."

"I'm kind of tempted to take you up on that, just to see how annoyed and cheerful you can be at the same time."

"Save your money. You're going to need it for all the baby expenses, from a nanny on up."

"Don't you mean a nanny on down?"

"Right, out of town. Lots of us plushies end up in childcare, and we're a lot cheaper than humans. Better at the job, too - I've seen some bad domestic situations, but not a single one where a plushie did anything but what was best for the kids."

"I'll keep that in mind," I set the idea aside for the moment. "How goes the investigation?"

"I dropped off copies of all the paperwork so far back at the lobby. I've started with the easy stuff - archives of the Superman beat in the papers, pulled a few strings to get some less-public police reports, interviewed some of the more recent witnesses who saw him up close. I've got Dollface going through published stuff from previous researchers right now, trimming down the overlap."

"Any conclusions yet?"

"Every single thing I've found so far says he's so clean he squeaks. Either he's the world's biggest boy scout or he's got someone who can hide anything that even hints he's less than an icon of hope and inspiration."

"Mm." I shifted to something that seemed less likely to incinerate my guest, some sort of mechanical contraption that had been fastened around a leg, with a rack of spring-loaded things that reminded me of caltrops. "Get any good data on what he can do that regular people can't?"

"I've got witness statements of people who've seen him fly, ignore bullets, lift a car, and shoot lasers out of his eyes. What more do you want?"

"Sense. Okay... have you got anything about when he stopped just being in comic books and TV shows with special effects, and started showing up in person?"

Bear crossed his arms, and tapped his cute little fuzzy chin a few times. "I think that started in the twenty-forties. I'm sure it was before the Depopulation." I turned away from the caltrop gizmo to look at him, and he chuckled. "You were thinking he was some sort of super-duper Changed, and just pretending to be the real deal, right?"

I grunted, and looked away. "Find me some real proof to rule that out, and my hiring you will have been worth the cost."

\*\*\*

#### \*Chapter Six: Off-ering\*

My embassy-provided breakfast arrived with a selection of newspapers. The Metropolis Star's headline story was about a report recommending that the 'Guardians of Traffic' be torn down as a hazard to shipping; while its lifestyle section included several photos of the ball looking glamorous, and some reviews of Midsummer Night's Dream. All very old-school, respectable broadsheet journalism.

The Plain Dealer was rather more in the tabloid school, starting with its enormous headline, "Sorcerous Scuffle With Sexy Sovereign!". Just inside was a picture of me, at around the point in the evening where my clothing could least be described as having anything in common with modesty, with the further alliteration, "Sensually Sultry Sultana Sorceress Supreme!" After I grumbled about sounding like I was some sort of raisin, I commented to Amy, "I can honestly say I never expected to be a Page Three girl," but after her look of incomprehension, had to spend a few moments explaining what that meant.

The Story Town Times was much smaller than those two, with a somewhat different focus: "Nonhumans Can be Wizards Too!". A bit further in, the usual Births, Marriages and Deaths pages had an extra section for Changes.

The Challenger, which appeared to be photocopied onto a couple of sheets of typing paper, proudly proclaimed itself as 'The Communist Party Newsletter', and this issue appeared to consist entirely of an editorial by Ethel on the difference between names and substances - focusing on the specific example of how calling someone a queen didn't necessarily mean that that someone forced workers to produce more value than they were paid. I kind of lost the thread of her point once she started throwing around terms such as 'dialectical' and 'use-value', but from what little I /could/ interpret, she seemed to be saying "Think hard before you shoot any queen, when the revolution comes". Which seemed nice of her, but I wasn't sure whether Ethel's target audience was the other members of the local Communist Party, or me.

While I was confabbing with Boomer on Ethel's jargon, Amy, whiskers buried in the Plain Dealer, asked, "Did you read this?"

"Mostly skimmed," I admitted. "Only so much time to read before I meet with the wizard this morning."

"I'm kind of reluctant, since I'm confident I can predict your reaction, but I think this sidebar, here, is the sort of thing you want to know."

"Hrm?"

"It's a list of all your secrets."

"Doubtful, but still annoying. Pass it over." I slid the Challenger down the list, revealing one item at a time. "Okay, I'm a wizard; sure, why not, people have been calling me that a while. I can shock people with my hands; I knew that one was public as soon as I zapped Al. I... can overcome love potions because I have no heart, I took it out and boxed it up and froze it? ... Possibly more true than they know, but I don't see /how/ they'd know that, so more of a lucky guess. I... lay snake eggs? How'm I supposed to do that while I'm pregnant? I - have relationships with bears the way Empress Catherine the Great had relationships with stallions? ... That may be technically, literally true, since it's only an urban legend she was a zoophile, but since that /is/ an urban legend, hrmp. And anything I say about treating Bear Joe like a big teddy bear would just make that worse, and any claims I make about asexuality or virginity or celibacy won't be believed by anyone who believed this one in the first place.

"Moving on, I... have... a thousand horned offspring? That makes even less sense than any of the others. Even if they think I was lying about being dead for three years, I'd have to have been giving birth to one once every day, or a litter of a dozen every fortnight. Laying snake eggs in between, I guess. I don't think even the Weekly World News would have been this sloppy." I frowned, wondering where they'd have gotten the idea at all; I could make a guess where the seeds for the other supposed secrets had come from, but the only 'horned' things I'd been dealing with were the jackalopes, and I'd been keeping them secreted in Munchkin's cargo car. The only people who'd ever seen me anywhere near them were Julia, who was far and possibly demolished; Streams, who was in no position to be spreading any rumours of

anything; and Bear Joe, who wasn't really vocal, and had pretty much been staying in the cargo car as well anyway.

My arm-bots helpfully started tapping an index finger on the table as I continued this line of thought. I'd taken reasonable security precautions - but had somebody gone to unreasonable lengths to get around them? Was it feasible that, say, someone had made a camera too small for me to find, and snuck it through the airlock into the cargo car? Seemed unlikely, as I hadn't let so much as a fly through, and Alphie should have called out something if the tricorder had picked up some unexpected chemical bonds. A flea seemed too small to have the optics to pick up any fine details, like the jackalopes' horns. Maybe a distributed optical array of bugs the size of fleas or mites? I made a mental note to hit the shower more often, until I could figure out a better way to try to handle such spies.

Of course, I wouldn't be doing myself any favours if some other espionage method was in use. There was already someone, or something, claiming to be Superman flying around - was X-Ray Vision on the table? Certainly not the comic-book version, but I had heard of a few ways to see through walls. Infrared or radio-wave imaging didn't seem likely to have good enough resolution to tell the difference between a jackalope or a bunny. Something with a smaller wavelength, maybe - some advancement on the terahertz scanners airports had been using when I'd first died seemed possible, though they might have to use ionizing-radiation levels of power to get any info through Munchkin's walls. I could check some of the radiation sensors I'd put together during the Lion Castle expedition. Or, more simply, maybe someone had just drilled a hole in Munchkin's walls? Munchkin's original specs said all the cars were supposed to be air-tight, with air-pressure sensors to detect leaks; maybe if I looked carefully at those sensors' logs, I might see something.

"I need to check something on Munchkin," I said, rising from the table. "Shouldn't be long, but could you stall the wizard if I'm wrong?"

"Like how? Juggle?"

"Make smalltalk - you're better than me at that, anyway. Tell him embarrassing stories about me. Almost anything, as long as you keep it clear that I'm not deliberately snubbing him, I'm just a socially-clueless engineer who's acting like engineers tend to."

--

Munchkin's air-pressure sensor logs were clean, with no unexpected bumps.

Munchkin's various radiation sensors' logs each had a rather interesting, ever-so-slight bump, at nearly the same moment. Said moment had been while Munchkin had been driving to where the play and ball had been held. In addition, when I compared the timestamps of the bumps to Munchkin's speed, each sensor had registered its slight spike in exactly the same physical location. Checking Munchkin's 3D maps, said location was where a couple of wood-framed buildings had been on either side of the road. It was entirely possible that somebody had put some sort of emitter in one, and a sensor in the other.

In short, there was a non-negligible chance that someone had X-rayed Munchkin while I'd unknowingly driven past. The question was, why had whoever it was taken their information on the jackalopes' existence, and leaked it to the Plain Dealer? I was able to think of any number of explanations - but all of them depending on some important detail I had no data on.

While I tried to figure that out - among so many other mysteries - I started a couple of short-term security measures, starting with shuffling Munchkin's cars around, continuing with tweaking the alarms on the radiation sensors to sound off if that particular pattern of bumps showed up again, and after trying to glance at my wristwatch for the time and then looking at a wall-clock, setting Internet to start building all the pieces I'd need to build a variety of man-traps to start installing throughout Munchkin.

--

I'd been mighty tempted to do everything in my power to make my meeting with Walter as safe as possible. However, as some of the measures would be so offensive as to make it likely he'd just call off the meeting entirely, I had to compromise at least somewhat. And once I started asking myself whether any given security measure was worthwhile, I had to ask myself, 'worthwhile for what?', meaning I had to figure out why I was bothering meeting with him in the first place.

I felt that I hadn't been at my best the previous night, at the moment I'd agreed to hold onto a few hundred kilos of lithium (presently on some pallets in one of the embassy's stables), and hadn't had a particular plan in mind. So, as I walked towards where I'd arranged for Amy to entertain Walter, I refreshed my memory of my current line of reasoning: Maximize my own expected lifespan, by ensuring the continued survival of sapience in general, by preventing a Second Singularity, by researching the First Singularity, by all sorts of methods using all the resources I could get my hands on, whether said resources were physical, mental, emotional, or social. Getting my head back on straight and looking at things in that light, I felt I had a fairly good sense of how to tell when I should change the thrust of the forthcoming conversation.

And so, as I entered the meeting room with the large window looking north over the snow-blown lake, I had a significant quantity of my personal survival-ensuring tricks secreted about my person under my Windsors, more in the room itself, more elsewhere in the embassy, and a few hidden in completely incongruous locations; I had a tablet computer from the university inside a clipboard, with various portions of its data ready to decrypt if I needed to refer to them; and I was re-skimming the embassy's summary on Metropolitan wizards, which papers were hiding the tablet until and unless I needed it. I wasn't sure I believed a word of the report, but even just knowing that a social group that called themselves "wizards" had put up a good enough show that Lake Erie's equivalent of a Plan Red against Metropolis had listed them as potential resistance ringleaders seemed worth going over another time.

When I walked in, neither Amy nor Walter rose, as formal etiquette implied was de rigeur for a head of state; but as my goals included improving social resources (in order to acquire better other resources), I chose not to make an issue of it.

I /did/ make an issue of clearing my throat to interrupt Amy, as she was saying, "... maybe not bears, but she does have a griffin friend I'm trying to get her to open up more about - oh, hello, Bunny. Your Majesty, I mean."

"Amy," I nodded. "Walter. Don't get up, just let me grab a chair. Okay. Walter, I'd like to get back to being able to relax on my vacation as soon as I can again. What would it take for all of this to be put behind us?"

"That's largely up to you, Your Majesty," he leaned back, folding his hands over his belly. "You are the one with the grievance against Elmer for his attempt to duel you; what could he do that would satisfy you?"

I snorted. "Convince me that he's not going to try that again as soon as he can. I'd prefer it even more if I didn't have to worry about any one of any number of wizards and apprentices pulling the same shenanigans, but that seems rather out of reach for a single apprentice to accomplish."

"Ah, you seek safety, then?"

"I seek many things. Safety lets me try to get them easier."

"Then may I suggest a simple solution? Announce to the public that you are not actually a wizard, and no other wizard, or apprentice, will have any interest in engaging you in a duel."

I blinked. "/That/ was what...? Nevermind. Okay, that could work. I just need to ask one thing, first."

"Ask away."

"Safety is valuable. So is being honest in public announcements, especially ones that can be checked, so: /am/ I, in fact, a wizard? "

"You should know that better than anyone, my lady."

I snorted again. "Words' meanings can twist and turn - there's a lot more to deception than outright lies. I may be a wizard at networking protocols, compared to anyone else alive at the moment, but that, by itself, doesn't mean I have anything in common with the group /you/ refer to by the word 'wizard'. If all it takes to be a member of the latter group is fancy robes and a flamethrower staff, well, I've got Elmer's."

"The robes are a nice perk, but not essential," Walter twiddled his thumbs. "If you wish to get semantic, then being a wizard is not strictly an either-or proposition, but there are a number

of overlapping criteria, sets of gates to pass through and membership-circles to join, pieces of secret knowledge to acquire and be able to apply."

"Of course it couldn't be simple," I slumped a bit in my seat. "Fine. Setting aside whether I'm some percentage of wizard or not, assuming that I decide that saying I'm not a wizard is an unacceptable deception, what would it take to keep the rest of my vacation here duel-free?"

He smiled widely. "Well, for one, you could demonstrate that you are so much more powerful a wizard than any of us that any attempt at dueling you would have a foregone conclusion."

I glowered back. "And my having killed the being which killed off the population of Buffalo isn't proof enough of that?"

"Old news, passed through multiple people, isn't very convincing - I'm afraid most of my compatriots think you're claiming credit for something you didn't actually accomplish."

I grunted, and only with an effort of will kept myself from grumbling something uncomplimentary. "Fine. Let's say I don't feel like revealing enough of my few remaining secrets to prove I'm more than a match for this whole city." I wasn't sure whether or not I was actually bluffing with that, if I put my mind to figuring out how, and given all the resources I could put to the task - but I didn't /want/ to, so I was pushing at least the shape of a bluff, whether its substance was bluffish or not. "Got any better ideas, or do I need to start preparing to turn all your apprentices into toads in pre-emptive self-defense?" As I said that, I considered the retroviral technology I'd used on the snake-oids, and started wondering whether I really could.

"Well, the next option that comes to mind is convincing wizard-kind that they don't want to duel you in some other way. Perhaps by getting some of our more prominent members to feel fond of, or at least friendly to, you."

"I'm afraid I'm all out of love potions."

"Not quite what I meant, but I think I'm glad to hear it. I was thinking of something a little more traditional: a few of my compatriots and I get together every week for some informal drinks, snacks, games, stories, and so on; and the next such meeting is tomorrow evening. Should you choose to join us, then I am sure that the more rambunctious apprentices would think twice about annoying someone who might be our guest, and might be a new member of our group, with equivalent power to us; and if you only plan on remaining in our fair city for a few days after that, it would be simple enough to be vague on the details until your departure."

My arm-bots tapped my fingers for me, and I decided to just lay my metaphorical cards on the table. "That's the first reasonably acceptable proposal you've made so far, which makes me think it's the first one you've mentioned that you actually want me to agree to, which makes me wonder whether this... invitation is the whole reason for our meeting today. Which also makes me wonder whether that was the purpose of last night's little contretemps."

Walter just kept smiling. "I can certainly see how such an idea could occur to you."

I shook my head, and just wanted to end this whole thing, and only my list of goals kept me from walking right out. I tried to keep things civil and polite. "I'm sorry," I said, and ran my memory through the list of all the events I'd gotten invitations or advertisements for, for the next day, and picked one of the longest-lasting ones. "But there's a production of Macbeth I've been extraordinarily keen on seeing, tomorrow afternoon, ever since last night's play whetted my appetite for Shakespeare."

"The Sunday Players one?" I admitted that was the case, and his smile grew, if anything, wider. "Then there is no conflict at all! Two of us will be attending the same play - many of us have a weakness for classics with wizards or witches, from Faust to the Wizard of Oz."

I blinked a few times, and tried to figure out how to present a second objection that would be socially acceptable, and not obviously an excuse. But Amy put her hand on my elbow, and finally entered the conversation. "This could be good for you," she said. "I know you dislike socializing and parties and so on; but a small group of people with common interests, and no shared work, may be the sort of interaction that works best for you."

My heart - whether it was my fifth or not - sank. Precommitting to accepting her medical advice did have certain downsides, now that I was having to fulfill said commitment. But I had left myself an escape clause from said advice: "Security issues?", I asked.

Walter spoke up. "Neutral territory, no dueling or other assaults allowed, on pain of everyone ganging up against the troublemaker."

I sighed and thought, 'Well, crap,' as I said, "Then it looks like I'll see you there."

--

After the wizard came more a few morning meetings - even a vacationing queen had certain responsibilities, one of them being handling cases of excessive *lèse-majesté*. Or, looking at my goal-tree, good handling of the press could improve people's opinions of me in a way that improved my access to useful resources.

Unfortunately, my skills at socially manipulating people were sub-par, at best; so almost anything I might try was more likely than not to backfire.

Fortunately, while I was down by one liaison, I still had Blue, plus three. Well, maybe two - I wasn't sure if Ethel would be thinking of herself more as a reporter or more as a liaison.

Unfortunately, while I was talking with some of the embassy's staff about what the security guards would and wouldn't be willing to do - after all, they were mostly human (or near enough), not citizens of the Dominion of Lake Erie, which put a certain upper limit on their loyalty - Amy waddled her ottery tail past the people whose jobs it was to keep me from

being interrupted, interrupting my discussion on priorities during emergency situations with a distracting tug on Waggoner. At my raised eyebrow, she said, "I've just gone over my notes, and we need to have a serious discussion, soon. Definitely today, preferably this morning. My schedule is more open than yours, so I'll let you find me when you have time."

Fortunately, that was the last distraction before the meeting with the press that I'd carefully avoided calling a 'press conference' started. The Dealer's reporter had widened his eyes when he saw me, the Star's reporter had just raised an eyebrow, and the Times' had smiled a vulpine smile on her (literally) foxy face. All three of them were wearing fedoras with press cards in the hat bands, and fairly simple, Green Hornet like masks.

Ida, who still seemed to be acting as meta-liaison, took charge. "Hattie, from the Times? Would you like to have a fifteen minute interview with Queen Bunny, starting in just a few moments?" As the fox's eager nods threatened to dislodge her mask, Ida turned, and said, "The Star. Do you want the fifteen minutes after that?" He tipped his head much more sedately, so Ida turned to the third figure, whose smile was slowly widening - until Ida spoke. "The Dealer. I am supposed to inform you that Her Majesty's government is looking into filing libel charges against your publication, among other responses, up to and including buying out your publisher to shut it down. I am also supposed to inform you that had your editors stayed within the bounds of common decency, Her Majesty would not have been opposed to offering you exclusive interview and photography opportunities, as well." Ida glanced at some index cards she'd made, then nodded to herself, and looked back up. "On my own, I think the photos you could have persuaded her to allow would make your usual Page Three look like an Amish catalogue. She's going to be in town for a few more days - you've got that long to figure out how to change her current impression of you, or else lose the best chance at a publication-boosting articles since Dewey defeated Truman. Now shoo."

I spent a pleasant fifteen minutes chatting with the fox about the Changed's position in society, class discrimination, and similar progressive talking points. After just the first few questions, I interrupted the next by saying, "Before we go further, the embassy's media advisor said I should tell you, around now, what I'm hoping to get out of this. I need manpower - in particular, people I can trust. The work I'm, er, working on is hard, and dangerous - but I feel is more than worth the risk. It's to the benefit of all Changed - and, okay, I'll admit, non-Changed humans will benefit as well. With the tax revenues raised from the Dominion of Lake Erie, I can pay fair wages for fair work. And I care less what species anyone is than the quality of their work. If your paper can help me with this, I'm willing to let your people poke their noses into any aspects of my life that don't impinge on security issues. You'd be able to report on what I'm like when I'm in private, Changed unemployment would go down a notch, and I'd get the help I need. Positive-sum results all around. What do you say?"

"I'd say," she said, "that if my editor says 'no', I'd tie her up for the next few days so nobody finds out she said anything but 'yes'."

The Star's reporter was initially interested in my economic policy statements for Lake Erie, of which my consistent response was, "Barring exceptional incompetence, I prefer to leave

such matters up to the Dominion's government; if, for no other reason, so they can gain experience with the parliamentary system." Once he figured out that I either didn't know or wasn't going to give him any secrets on how the squiddies' actions would be affecting the portfolios of those of Metropolis's citizenry who /had/ portfolios, I interrupted him with another somewhat personalized appeal. "The embassy's media advisors suggests that I take this opportunity to try to increase Metropolitan investment in, and trade with, Lake Erie businesses. Even just raising awareness of what /can/ be invested in in Lake Erie would be a positive, which can be done by an editorial choice to report on such opportunities, possibly using my presence as a justification to anyone questioning the editorial decision. As an additional benefit, almost all money so invested would come straight back into Metropolis's economy - after all, it's not like Metropolis cash can be spent in Rochester. And, as a potential benefit for your paper in particular, a friendly relationship between your paper and Lake Erie could include benefits such as helping your paper acquire inter-city news through the squiddies' own communication networks, or rapidly carrying stringer-reporters to other locations. Or, perhaps, providing funds to pay for an independent ombudsman, which would improve your paper's reputation for fairness and impartiality even further."

He merely jotted down some notes, said, "I can pass your requests up the food chain," and asked my opinion on the heavily-debated proposal to raise feeds on shipping on the Cuyahoga River. I sighed, and plodded through the rest of the interview.

\*\*\*

#### \*Chapter Seven: Off-sides\*

"Alright," Amy said, once everyone else had been chased out of the conference room, "we've been here two days, and I've been focusing on reducing your stress levels. Last night you were in what you thought was a life-or-death situation, with all that implies. I'd like to start talking about that in a minute. First, though - at this rate, we'd probably do better if we just drove away, left the city behind. What would you say to that?"

"I've got a few commitments over the next few days, but all of them have a medical escape clause. If you think we should pull out and go camping, that's feasible."

"I need to remember to watch which questions I ask around you. How would you /feel/ about dropping everything and going?"

Amy was my p-doc, but I was still keeping more than one secret from her. Trying to work out what I could tell her, which would evoke the best possible psychological treatment, without letting any of my cats out of their bags was even trickier than just facing my usual reluctance to try to figure out how I felt and share it. The latter problem, at least, could be solved just by deciding I really wanted to and powering through any discomfort - the former needed all sorts of self-analysis done in real-time, along with mentally modelling Amy, her reactions, how psychology and psychiatry worked, and how Amy thought they worked. Oddly enough, trying to do all that was probably nudging my brain to improve faster and in more ways than regular psychotherapy would have led to.

"All the people in this town are /crazy/," I opened with. Amy made some encouraging noises, and I continued, "I don't understand a thing that's going on half the time, and the other half I'm probably just fooling myself that I do." My arm-bot started tapping a hand's fingers on the conference table, and I nodded my head at it. "But I'm letting myself try things I normally wouldn't, and am letting myself... try less hard to be in complete control of everything. I think Bun-Bun likes dancing. I've had worse weeks. If Elmer hadn't shown up with a flame-throwing wizard's staff, I'm pretty confident I'd rather stay than leave."

Amy consulted her small notepad for a moment, for all I knew for no other reason than to help me think of her more as a professional mind-doc, then looked back up to me. "But Elmer did show up, and you felt threatened. If Walter had not interrupted, and Elmer had continued to threaten you, what do you think you would have done?"

I frowned, and looked out the window. "I haven't practiced nearly enough to be confident that I can disable someone non-lethally, even with all my tricks. I would have shot - well, gotten my arms to shoot - to try to kill. I could say that the way he was having that stick around was putting a lot more people at risk, but as best as I can recall how I was thinking at the time, that wasn't a concern."

"Have you ever tried to kill anyone before?"

"The Berserker, the one that killed almost everyone in Buffalo. At least, I helped lay the plan, gather the gear, and provided impetus, even if I wasn't there for the big kaboom."

"Alright - have you ever tried to kill anyone in person, before?"

"Did my best to knock that drone out of the sky, when it was coming after New Buffalo."

"By 'anyone', I mean someone that looks to you like a person. Someone human, or at least with a face."

"Um." I thought back. "Called in an airstrike on that cat-shaped kaiju... but at least as far as I remember, other than that, I've been lucky enough that I always had a non-lethal option. I've threatened, been threatened, shot and been shot at, but... yeah, this is about as close as I've come to killing a person."

"Would you like me to lead you through the exercises to help process that?"

My fingers tapped for a few moments before I answered. "If you think it'd be useful, I guess."

"You only 'guess'?"

"Look - I understand that killing is a bad thing. Morally wrong, both from utilitarian practical perspectives and working out ethical codes from underlying metaphysical principles. I can

even put together a set of logic, based on my own working assumptions, that imply 'all life is sacred', even though I don't necessarily think that."

"That sounds like a bit of a contradiction. Could you elaborate?"

"If you want. Um... Okay. Given all the evidence I've seen, I've got no reason to conclude that anything supernatural exists, and-"

"Not even Superman flying around?"

"Just because I don't understand a phenomenon doesn't mean that I should say, 'And therefore, it has supernatural causes.' Would you like me to go over the relevant epistemology, or should I continue with the life ethics thing?"

"Let's not get sidetracked further."

"Fine. So, no supernatural, no souls. Whatever minds are made of, it seems to involve patterns of connections between neurons. Treating this idea /seriously/ is something that not even a lot of atheists bother with, since it has all sorts of awkward conclusions. One of the more relevant ones adding complications to what 'self' really means, if someone's self is defined as the pattern of their neural connections at a particular moment. The pattern keeps changing, sometimes staying within recognizable bounds, sometimes jumping tracks entirely. With enough effort - which more than one zone seems capable of - it seems possible for one person's mind to gradually be turned into a copy of another person's mind, including all the memories, skills, personality, and everything else. In a certain fundamental sense, your self and my self are not quite so separate as people commonly assume. Even animal minds can get in on the action. ... And I'm still perfectly happy to continue with my carnivorous diet and eat whatever animals I need to."

"Hurting other creatures that you identify with your own self seems uncomfortably self-destructive."

I managed a shrug. "Maybe. Maybe not. Another part of this whole identity mess is that me at time x doesn't necessarily care about the thoughts and opinions and goals of me at time y, if me-y has changed too much from me-x... just as me-x doesn't feel obligated to pursue the goals of earlier mes, if me-x's understanding and goals have changed. But that's an exception to the general rule, in which me-x, me-y, me-z, and all the other me's share so much in common, and have goals that are so similar, that it's worth all of us cooperating with each other from our different points in space-time. So, among other consequences, if me-x foresees a certain risk that me-y is going to be mind-edited to have certain goals that me-x doesn't - like, say, having a wire plugged into my brain so that my main goal becomes pushing a button that runs electric current through the wire - then me-x would want to make plans and preparations to keep that from happening to me-y, or at least for me-y to be rescued so that me-z ends up being more like me-x again."

"I... see..." Amy said, frowning and looking uncomfortable. "I think. And how much longer until this ties into the ethics of killing?"

"At least two ways. The short-term connection is that looking at things this way can be extended to other people in general, instead of just different me's. The more someone else's goals line up with mine, the more we become willing to help each other reach them. Then the morals of dealing with yourself become just an extreme case of the whole approach, in which you have a better chance of being able to predict what your other selves' goals and intentions really are, letting you generally trust your selves more than you can trust anyone else."

"And the other way?"

"Whatever goals I have at any time, and whatever goals you have, or anyone else has, we all have one goal in common - keeping at least some people alive to continue to /have/ goals. There aren't too many people working on existential risks right now, as far as I can tell. Which means that, until I find someone who's able to do a better job than me, I have to treat myself as having more moral value than anyone else. Or, put another way, using the best mental tools I can apply to the best data I've been able to gather so far, it's more important to everyone, other than Elmer, that I stay alive than that Elmer does. Of course, there's at least one little hitch with this reasoning."

"Just one?"

"Maybe more, but one that's particularly worth paying attention to. This line of moral reasoning... justifies too much. Maybe. I think I could extend it to cover anything I feel like doing. Eating meat to stay healthy is just one such stretch. Man isn't a rational animal, he's a rationalizing one; the fact that I know a little more about what logical fallacies to avoid just means that when I /do/ rationalize something after the fact, I can expect it not to have any obvious such fallacies. So the fact that I /don't/ see any fallacies in this line of reasoning isn't necessarily evidence that it's true, since whether it's true or not I'd be able to predict that I wouldn't be able to find them."

"Hm." Amy scribbled a few more notes, twitched her whiskers, then asked, "Are you /planning/ on using this reasoning to justify anything else that you would find morally questionable? Acquiring a harem to relieve stress so you can do your work better, or expropriating a book-store's inventory?"

"Well - accurate data can be important, so I can see myself looting a library or whatnot."

"My mistake. Do you foresee yourself using this reasoning, not for actions directly related to your anti-extinction work, but to improve your personal life as a middle stage to improving your work?"

"Mm... something /like/ this reasoning is why I'm trying to work with you to get my head straight. Well, straighter. This whole vacation thing, watching Shakespeare plays, and so on, is part of that."

"Vacations are rarely considered to be unethical."

"Um." I tried to come up with any such scenario. "I can cobble together an absurd set of events that would lead that to happen, but they seem about as likely as coming across an actual runaway trolley with people on both possible tracks it could be switched onto. I don't /like/ hurting people, or making them do things they'd rather not do, and as long as future me's share that inclination, I don't think that'll happen. But... one zone imprinted Brenda on me, and I think Lion Castle did something to the minds of everyone else on that expedition, so I can't be anywhere near as sure as I'd like that my future selves are going to share my current goals."

"Have you figured out what you will do if you work out that this... line of reasoning turns out to be incorrect?"

"I've already got backup plans in place. To start with, try to surround myself with as many people as possible who've got a good chance of understanding my perspective, and pointing out where it's wrong - the old saying goes that 'many eyes make all bugs shallow'. And in case of major mental malfunction, precommitting myself to take the advice of an appropriate medical professional, even if I disagree with her." I thought a step further, and slowly added, "But now that I'm thinking about it, if I were to end up with a genuine mental problem, I'm not sure that I'd keep that commitment. Even just having my mirror neurons tweaked so that I got a kick out of inflicting pain on people, and I could end up paying a lot more attention to the Evil Overlord advice list than I currently have to."

"Can you make a backup plan for that situation, just in case it ever occurs?"

My fingers were tapping again, and I didn't respond for a good while. Amy didn't rush me. Eventually, I said, "A lot of what I'm doing... is trying to be able to do more things, hoping that I can use one tool to build on another to build on another until I've got a solution to the big problem. Some of that involves being able to do things, even when other people don't want me to, for whatever reason. Anything I try to do that limits what I can do... well, it limits what I can do. Which increases the risk of a Second Singularity killing everyone before I head it off. Comparing that risk to the risk that my mind goes haywire enough that I start pulling truly unjustifiable unethical stunts... even if I turn into a total bastard, there's still a reasonable chance that I'd be able to continue progressing on the main job. Seems to be a simple four-square game theory problem, where I can also try to weight the rows and columns by their likelihood. Pass me the pad? I want to be sure I get this right."

In moments, the arm-bots were scribbling out what I was describing to them. "Let's call the left column 'Sane-ish Bunny' and the right column 'Evil Bunny'. I like to think of myself as intelligent enough to avoid the more obvious pitfalls, so say that the left column is... ninety percent likely, and the right column ten percent. We'll set the upper row as 'Enforceable

Limitations', and the lower row 'No Limits', and our goal here is to figure out which row provides the best expected output.

I continued, "The best possible outcome is if I say sane, and have no limits. Then I can work as fast as possible, and have the best possible odds of heading off the Second Singularity. Let's just call this lower box 'Win', since it's the closest we're going to get to one with this decision. Call it a score of '1', to compare with the others. Now, for the lower right - if I go evil, and still don't have limits, then I'm at least reasonably likely, if not probable, to keep working on the problem, though there's certain odds I'll be distracted with, er, immoral distractions that will slow me down; and there's going to be the cost of the harm I do to individuals in the meantime. But avoiding extinction is a pretty important plus compared to that cost... so going by my gut feel, I'm going to say this box has a score around three-quarters that of the 'Win', so we'll call it 'Probably Win' and a score of point seven five.

"Now, top left. There's a certain chance that any limits I put on myself, which can be applied against me by other people whether I think they should be or not, will be used against me even if I'm still sane. Given the lack of people making any visible effort at all to avoid extinction risks, then even just me reducing their quarterly profit by a few percentage points would make them /want/ to stop me. But let's say I'm a clever rabbit, and come up with ways to make that unlikely, so that there's only, oh, a five percent chance that the limitations would be applied against me in a way that slows down my work. But I'm very bad at guessing how other people will behave, and I could regale you with stories about entirely sane people who were committed to mental institutions, and whose every act was taken as further proof of their insanity. So I'll throw in a fudge factor to take into account my broad range of uncertainty about how likely this sort of thing will be, and since a normal curve centred around my initial guess is going to have its right tail cut off because there can't be less than a zero percent chance of my improper commitment, let's say that the median result is, oh, triple my initial guess. So this square's value is point eight five.

"And top right. I go bad, but the limitations keep me from doing any harm. From the lower right square, we can deduce that the cost of the harm of me going bad is point two five or less, with the remainder of that cost from the odds of failing to stop the Second Singularity. Say that point two of that is from me harming people, and point zero five of that is from me being evil distracting me. So this square should be scored as at least point two, from preventing that harm. But... will if I'm kept from working, will anyone else pick up my work where I left off, in time? Does the top left square imply ... hm, lemme tackle this in another direction.

"Totting up the bottom row, ninety percent of a score of one and ten percent of a score of point seven five gives an expected value for 'No Limits' of point nine seven five. Let's assume that, contrary to intuition, the score for the top right box is a full one, somehow, the same as the 'Win' box; ninety percent of point eight five and ten percent of one gives an expected value of point eight six five. So I don't need to worry about what the actual score for the top right box will be - no matter how much damage such limitations on my actions would keep a hypothetical evil future me from doing, my initial estimates are that such limitations are more likely to do more harm than good."

I leaned back in my seat, blinking myself back to the present instead of the abstract realms of thought accessed through white paper and black ink. "And I'm sure everything I just said could be argued over and nitpicked and so on. And I'm sure that there are people who would /want/ to tear down my reasoning, for one reason or another. But I'm the one in the hot seat, and I have to make my decision as best I can, in the time I have. So I'm not going to say a backup plan isn't worth coming up with - just that giving too many other people veto over my actions seems more problematic than helpful. Um... where did the conversation leave off, again?"

"You seem to be quite enthusiastic about working this out on paper."

"Eh; I've been fond of game theory and this sort of analysis since I first read Hofstadter's chapters on the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma. I know it's an important question with real-world consequences, but as long as I'm looking at it abstractly, as numbers, I can avoid most of the emotional issues that would cloud my judgement."

"If you were to spend more time on this, to improve how sure you were of the numbers, what would you do?"

"Hm. To start with, I'd explicitly split the right column into 'I turn evil, but am still working' and 'I turn evil /and/ stupid and stop working'. I'd also take into account that implementing external limits that I'm aware of would affect my behaviour - it's astonishing how much the behaviour of someone who's not stupid resembles conventional morality, in everyday life, no matter how evil their goals may be. Let's see - oh, yes. I'd need to do something about the meta-uncertainty of the top left box's score - just chopping off the normal curve at a hundred percent seems like terribly awkward kludge. Especially since I prefer to deal with probabilities and uncertainties using a logarithmic scale, anyway. Hrm... there's a thought. If I drew a normal curve on a logarithmic scale, then if I converted back to a linear scale, I think it would look a lot like I'd cut off the curve as it got closer to a hundred percent anyway. Which matches my intuition, which is nice; but would it move the centre of the probability mass, of the curve drawn on the linear scale, as far to the left as I guessed?

"Let's see - let's say that my best guess, the centre of the curve on the logarithmic scale, is at ten decibans, with a standard deviation of something near ten decibans. About the only thing I remember about standard distributions is that a squidge over two-thirds of the area under the curve is within one standard deviation, and ninety-five percent within two. So something like, mm, a seventh of the probability mass would be between minus ten and zero decibans, a third from zero to ten, a third from ten to twenty, and a seventh from twenty to thirty. Converting from decibans to linear probability, a seventh of the probability would be between ten percent and fifty percent, a third from fifty to ninety percent, a third from ninety to ninety-nine percent, and a seventh from ninety-nine percent to ninety-nine point nine. Pretending for a minute that each of those four buckets have their probability equally spread out, and taking the averages, let's see... an average of somewhere around seventy-five percent. Well, whaddaya know - I /under/estimated how far the middle of the curve would

move, which means this is a /really/ bad plan. I should double-check with Boomer to make sure I didn't completely mess this up."

"Before you do, could you pass me my back my notebook? Thank you." She flipped through a few pages, made a note, then looked back up. "How have you been sleeping?"

"Nothing unusual sticks in my mind, so I conclude it's been within the normal range." Having stopped writing, my hands were free, so I curled Waggoner around and rubbed her chin against the side of one hand, until my arms got the idea and started scritching. "I can probably get you more details from the records of Munchkin's cameras if you want specifics, like how long it takes me to fall asleep, or how many times I wake up, and the like."

"I'll look into that later, but for now, I'm going to point out certain aspects of your recent behaviour that I've noticed. To start with - you feel that your goal, of working against existential risk, trumps all else, and that because it's so important, you need not exercise restraint in related matters."

"I could quibble about minor details, but on the whole, of course."

"You're currently more talkative than usual, talking faster than usual, and are over-explaining your thought processes."

"I'm willing to take your word on that."

"Your thoughts are racing more than usual."

"Hunh. Haven't heard that in a while."

"Mm?"

"Eh, every few years I'll get in a mood where I finally start coming up with some ideas which might actually be original - and I'll notice that as I come up with some of the better ones, my head will twitch to the left. Pretty sure it hasn't happened since I first died, though."

"I see. Back to my main list - you are currently distractable, easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant side topics."

"Aheh. I suppose I can't argue with that."

"Psychomotor agitation. I am fairly sure that if your thumbs were under your direct control, you would be twiddling them." She gestured with her pen at Waggoner taking advantage of my hands' willingness to stroke her.

"I suppose?" I shrugged. "I guess I could say I'm a little tense."

"You are involving yourself in activities that have a high risk of negative consequences, without appropriate concern for them. As just one example, you could have told René that his proposal was too immodest for your comfort, or at least that walking around a public social event while effectively naked might not be the best way to make social contacts conducive to your long-term plans."

"Ah."

"I am officially diagnosing you as being in the middle of a hypomanic episode."

"Hypermania? That doesn't sound good."

"Not 'hyper', 'hypo'."

"Hypo means too little, as in hypocalcemia meaning having too little calcium... are you saying I need to be /more/ manic?"

"No, in this case, 'hypo' mania means you don't quite qualify for a diagnosis of a full manic state - and believe me, nobody wants you to experience that."

"Okay," I nodded agreeably, "So I'm hypomanic. Anything we can do about it?"

"Unfortunately, a lot of the therapies developed before the Singularity are no longer available to us. Of those that remain, I'm reluctant to prescribe lithium salts while you're still pregnant with Streams."

"If you think that's the best thing, I could get her out sooner - there's a risk to using the age zone to bringing her up to just before birth, but if we're also dealing with risks inside my own head, well, apparently I'm not at my best in balancing risks right now, if I understand you right."

"I'd like to try a few less invasive things first. Non-chemical interventions such as increasing your self-awareness so you can detect symptoms - even just starting a chart to track your mood will be good. We can re-start your therapy sessions. But I think the most important thing you need to do... is to reduce your stress."

"Isn't that why I'm on vacation in the first place?"

"Maybe, but we haven't been doing a very good job. You need to participate in activities that are less formal, less public, and involve fewer people who are hostile to you. In short, you need to start letting your hair down."

"Sounds good to me, Doc."

"If possible, I'd also like you to look for ways to improve your mood level, including interacting with people in ways that are completely unrelated to work or politics; or

generating a sense of achievement, or applying yourself to some constructive creative outlet."

"Hm. I've been kind of focused on getting various things done, so just... doing something creative, unrelated to that, hasn't been a priority. ... Nothing comes to mind, immediately."

"Which is why my immediate prescription is for you to go down to the room with the big pool on the ground floor, dressed for swimming, and do nothing more mentally taxing than reading these two slushy romance novels so you can tell me which one you like better, and why. I want you to jump into the water at least once between every chapter - you can stay in as long as you want, and swim, splash, play, or just float around a while."

"... Are you sure those are romance novels? That's a unicorn on one cover and... some kind of dinosaur? Or is that a bird on the other?"

"The bookstore had a whole section of romance novels with Changed people."

"Ah. ... Well, you're the doc, Doc."

"I am. Go, swim, read, relax. I've got a few things to check."

--

While I was trying to take seriously a plotline about a housewife who was worried that her lover was more interested in the livestock, Amy came by the embassy's pool room (which had been installed to let squiddies meet with people up close, but was surprisingly warm and comfortable given the outside temperatures), wearing a one-piece swimsuit over her otter-fur. "I've exchanged some telegrams," she announced, dangling her legs in the water. "That spider-woman you met? You've got a play-date for Monday. She'll show you around, and then you, my dear, are going to have a completely superfluous, non-political, stress-free sleepover."

"Um - I'm not sure those last two words are anything but contradictory..."

"I can't hear you, there's too much splashing," Amy said, her words quite clear with just the two of us; and then jumped in the water.

I looked at my ridiculous book, rolled my eyes, and tossed it to the side. Stepping to the side of the pool Amy had already wriggled to the far side of, I announced, "Of course, you realize, /this/ means war!", and dove in after her.

\*\*\*

\*Chapter Eight: Off-spring\*

While Amy's plan seemed to involve keeping me as far away from anything that could be described as "work" for as long as possible - and I was fine with that - she was willing to call the edge case of meeting up with Miss Neckline as falling on the 'personal' side. Or, as Amy put it, "You ate her kid, and she thought that was a good idea and passed the gravy. I'm pretty sure that makes you step-cousins or something."

While I may have disagreed with Amy's genealogical theory, the Acadians were among the few people in the area I'd met before, and it wouldn't be completely silly to call them among the closest I had to friends I could talk to at the moment... even if I was rather wary of their apparently religious beliefs.

Which came immediately to the fore, as when the black-furred, feline shape of Miss Neckline joined us in the pool room, she padded straight up to my deck chair and put her head on my bikini-bared belly, pressing one ear through my fur. After a few moments of that, she stepped back, and blinked up at me. "The Captain," she said, mouth unmoving and nostrils flaring, "said you had one big one, but I wasn't sure I believed him."

I twitched my shoulders, and my arm-bots set my trashy novel aside, folding their fingers together on my upper belly. "Did Shatter also pass along the odd circumstances that led to this?"

Neckline folded herself into a typical cat's sitting posture, folding her tail around her feet. "Only that we should talk. Is this about your species' mating behaviour and social habits?"

I sighed. "Short version. Met a talking skunk big enough to swallow me whole. She tried. I survived, captured her, took her to a zone to make her young enough to be able to handle her easier. She got youthened a bit more than that, to minus one month, and here we are."

The very tip of Neckline's tail started twitching, and I was suddenly uncomfortably all too aware that, like Streams, Neckline was also a predator fully capable of tearing my throat out. "Your infant is not... yours? Not from your ovaries?"

"That's about it," I agreed, hoping I wasn't about to have to fight for my life again.

Neckline turned her head away from me and hissed, then her head dropped, and I lost the sense of her carnivorousness. "I hate this place," she grumbled, and I raised my eyebrows.

She glanced sidelong at me, and I said, "Don't worry, I'm not too fond of large parts of it myself. Complain away."

She looked away again. "I came here hoping to see what the spark you carry was growing into, but... /that/. I know it's not your fault, but I'm disappointed, and - pissed off."

"I can't say I understand everything about that, but I can sympathize." I nodded to the pool. "Are you one of the sorts of cats who hates water, or would you like to join me for a swim? My psychiatrist says it's all kinds of relaxing."

Neither of us said anything for a while, me relaxing by floating and looking up at the ceiling, occasionally backstroking, Neckline doggy-paddling from one edge of the pool to another. Eventually, she pulled herself onto dry land, her fur plastered in a way that would have made a cat-meme image generator drool, and I pushed my way over the top of the water to her, bumping my head against the pool's edge. "Feeling any better?"

She licked a paw with all the dignity available to a cat in any situation. "I suppose. I can't wait until this mission is over and I can go back to my family."

"Well, be glad you've got the option to - not everyone's so fortunate."

She paused in her grooming, looking down at me inscrutably, then continued. "I am not familiar with your customs. Will you be raising this skunk as your child, once you have birthed it?"

"Well - there are options, and then there are options. All of them have downsides." I rolled over, hauled myself up next to Neckline, and turned back around to splash my feet in the water. "The zone that put her inside me can make people older, too - though it doesn't do birth. I could go there tonight, and try to get her aged up to just before being born, and put her up for adoption tomorrow... though the zone might pull another prank on us. If you think this is bad, you don't want to know what else it's done. From everything the medical tools I have can tell, she's old enough that she could survive out of the womb even now, so if I decide I really, really don't want to experience giving birth, I could have surgery and have her taken out in what we call a 'cesarean section'... as long as I don't mind the risks of surgery, which in this era of limited anesthetics and antibiotics, aren't negligible. I even have an option of consulting with a creature who could take her out of me with no risk to either of us - but waking /that/ being up puts a lot of /other/ lives at risk."

"I am not hearing you say you will raise her."

I looked away from Neckline, feeling uncomfortable. "Streams may have the body of an infant, but she has the mind of a full-grown adult. There's all sorts of troubles trying to be a parent to such an individual, and that's without getting into the point that full-grown adults of her species are, apparently, perfectly willing to eat and kill people like you and me - and that she tried to kill me once already. I honestly don't know what would be best for everyone involved - me, her, the general public - or, if I can't find a solution where everyone wins, whether I really should discount what's best for Streams because she's guilty of attempted murder. Heck, she wasn't even told that this was a /possibility/, just that I was going to put her somewhere she couldn't hurt anyone else, so for all she knows, she's stuck there indefinitely."

"You claim queenship, do you not?"

"If you're saying that what I decide, goes, then maybe so - but that doesn't make /making/ that decision any easier." I kicked my feet a few moments, then added, "Well, except in one way, but I don't like it."

"I have read many stories of your monarchs. Their emotional aspects often argue with their logical aspects, even if those aspects are all within the same brain."

"In case you haven't heard the news, my brain is currently slightly off-kilter, and being tended to by one of our mind-doctors, and I've recently had it pointed out to me that my decision-making process is one of the bits of me that needs fixing."

"What does your queen brain tell you you should do?"

"Go back to my fundamentals - my goal-tree. Working to avoid a new apocalypse, by staying alive, and by getting other people to help me. Which means I should prioritize whatever options put my life at least risk. And that if Streams is more likely to kill someone who could help me than she is to help me with my work herself, then I should keep her from doing that."

"You are talking of killing her?"

"... That's one way of doing that. Just leaving her as a newborn, to grow up, would keep most anyone safe from her for years, though, so that'd be almost as good, from this point of view. And in case I need to mention it, the nearby cultures have a particularly negative view of infanticide compared to yours, so me avoiding doing that would increase the likelihood that I could find people to work for me."

"There is an obvious solution that you do not seem to be thinking about."

"I'm all ears."

"With proper raising, one who is born a killer will not remain one once they are grown."

"Maybe so, but I barely have any idea how to parent an ordinary kid, let alone one who starts out with a mind of her own."

"I was born an animal. A hunter, a killer. My parents raised me - and even though you smell delicious, I am more than able to keep myself from trying to taste you."

I felt my ears lift up, following my spirits. "I'm suddenly feeling hopeful - but another thing I'm bad at is guessing implications and insinuations. Are you proposing... I don't want to guess what?"

"I am proposing that when your Streams breathes the air of the world again, that I take her with me back to my family to raise."

I couldn't tap my fingers of my own volition, so I found myself wiggling the toes on one paw. "Does this have something to do with the spark you, um, passed to me?"

"Not directly. But you and I carry sparks from the same ancestors, and one day, you /will/ bear a child who will carry that spark to future generations. Until you do - we are something none of your languages have a word for. Something like family, something like friends. I have a... duty to keep you in good shape for your real offspring. Of the two of us, I have the family that can best ease your burden."

"Mm." I looked across the pool's water and did my best to think. "If you could take care of Streams after she was born... that would make it a lot easier for me to figure out what to do in the meantime." I kept wiggling my paw's toes. "I know that our cultures are very different, and that your family would surely do things I disapprove of... but Streams herself comes from a third culture that's different still. And until Streams is able to participate in /some/ society without putting the lives of those around her at risk, I can only give her preferences so much weight."

Neckline was silent, letting me keep thinking aloud. "It's an option. It's certainly a better option than some of the plans I've had. But - my mind-doctor says I shouldn't make any big decisions today. So I shouldn't say 'yes'. But I can at least say that I'm not saying 'no' right off the bat."

"Should I ask your mind-doctor to make your decision for you?"

"Only if she thinks this hypomanic episode lasts very long. I'm supposed to be back to my usual self, such as it is, in a day or two."

"Good. Captain Shatter is keeping the Travelling Matt docked at this city for longer than that. If you can only make small decisions, have you thought about the rest of your pregnancy?"

"How do you mean?"

"If you are not choosing to be a queen keeping a prisoner, but might be an involuntary mother who wants the one you give birth to to live well... what can you do to give Streams a good start?"

"Well - I play music for her, of sorts she can actually hear in there, when I can."

"That is nice of you. What about talking to her?"

"She can't hear a word. At best, enough of my voice to hear I /am/ talking. I've tried other things, like pulse codes from tapping or poking, but either she doesn't understand the idea, or she doesn't have enough control of her body to kick me when she wants to."

"Do you not have technology that can solve the problem?"

"Mmmaybe. But about the only things I've come up with that have a chance of communicating involve surgery, cutting into my womb to insert something or otherwise breaching the barriers protecting the amniotic sac from infection. While I may not trust my judgement at the moment, before today, I gauged that I'd rather give birth to a healthy Streams who was traumatized from isolation than try to prevent the trauma in a way that put her life at a significantly measurable risk."

"Every parent must make decisions like that," Neckline commented, licking her leg dry. "When I was pregnant..."

And we spent some time chatting about some of the physical issues of pregnancy and of birth, the details of which have little bearing on anything that happened and which included a number of squicky details I'd really rather not try to remember. (If any reader really wants to know what that conversation was like, they can start by looking up 'mucus plug' in their encyclopedia of choice and then closing said book, walking away, and imbibing the brain bleach of their choice. I recommend 'The Eye of Argon', though some would say that's just replacing one awful memory with another.)

As Neckline got ready to leave, I did think of one last thing to say. "By the way, Amy's arranged for me to go to something called a 'sleepover', a cultural, um, thing that generally involves friends getting together to sleep at one of their houses. If Shatter is staying docked for a few more days, well, want to learn a bit more about local cultural events by joining in one?"

"You think of me as a friend?"

I noticed my toe tapping, and stopped it. "Well - I think we could be. And the person I've entrusted with the care of my mind seems to think it's important I have more than I do. And you're about as close to one as I've got... and I've started trying to explain too hard."

"When will this sleep-over be?"

--

The next person to make it through the embassy's various levels of security and flappers (a term I'd never forgotten the origins of - while I'd learned it from Heinlein, it was originally from one of the lands in Gulliver's Travels, where the important people were kept from hearing supplicants by various people who flapped balloon-like bladders against their ears, said flapper people having to be convinced individually to stop, with cash on the barrelhead usually serving as a magic ritual to cut through all the red tape) was the vulpine Hattie, the reporter from the Times.

It wasn't until I saw her jaw drop at the sight of me that I realized that when I had donned my bikini, I had neglected to put on anything resembling a mask.

I briefly debated pulling a towel over my head, or grabbing a smaller piece of cloth to tie over my face cowboy style, but decided that since I was here under medical orders to relax, I shouldn't stress over someone else's taboos.

"Welp," I told her, "this is me, while I'm in a non-public space. Pre-singularity notions about nudity and all. If you want to leave until I match local notions, go ahead. If you want to stay, go ahead."

"Uh - if you're comfortable like that, could I get my photographer in here?"

"I'd prefer you didn't. If you want a portrait of my uncovered face, we can do that later. Heck, there's probably already some of those floating around, from Erie and Buffalo... and, come to think of it, those silly pornographic comics about me had my face as uncovered as the rest of me."

"If you are so, um, indiscreet, then why not let me have a camera in here?"

"I have different notions than you about privacy. I don't think getting rid of it entirely is a good idea. Most directly, I'm under medical orders to try to relax, and for most of my life, having my actions under threat of being permanently recorded by camera has tended to do the opposite of relaxing me."

With her ears perked at just that angle, she looked hopeful. "But you don't mind my being here?"

"It's new to me, so I might find out I'm more uncomfortable than I expect later, but... I /know/ why you're here, and I don't have to worry about hidden agendas or secret plans, and even if you're here to try to assassinate me I'm confident I can handle that. You know I've got a few things I don't want you to report on, and are willing to be here anyway, so - everything's all out in the open."

She nodded at that, glanced at Amy, who was just visible as a head peeking over the pool's edge, looked around again, found herself a lounge chair, and took possession of it. She set her fedora on it - and then began untying her mask.

"You don't have to do that," I said. "If you're more comfortable with it on, that's fine by me."

"How could I say I'm the best reporter in the biz," she said, turning her now-naked face to point her muzzle right at me, looking me in the eyes, "if I don't do my best to share in the experience?" Two seconds later, the rest of her clothes were on the chair, and three seconds later, she was in the water.

"Er..." was about all I managed, before I decided it would be more trouble than it was worth to point out my culture's perceptions in the differences between swimming in a bikini and skinny-dipping.

--

I was once again in the water, trying to decide if the relief from not having to support Streams' weight would make it worthwhile to build some sort of mobile bathtub and use my status of not having to care much about what anyone else thought to get away with floating through the rest of my time in Metropolis, when someone else made it through the flapper brigade: PI Bear.

He seemed not to care about the state of dress of the three furry ladies in the water, and I didn't feel like dealing with life without buoyancy again just yet, so with a few whispered words to Boomer, who whispered to the arm-bots, I rested my elbows on the tile of the edge of the pool, and my chin on my hands. "How goes?"

"I have a significant finding, that I decided I should bring to you as soon as I could. How much do you trust these two?"

"Amy's my mind-doctor - I tell her almost everything, and trust her discretion. This is Hattie, a reporter with the Times. I anticipate anything she hears will go in the paper. Does your finding have anything to do with me or my people, other than that I hired you to look into it?"

"It's from over a decade ago. I don't care if this goes in the paper or not - do you?"

"Doesn't bother me either way."

"Fine," he nodded. "What I have," he said, pulling out some papers "appears to be evidence that Superman spends a good bit of effort making sure that people only see one of him at a time - but that at least once, there were two Supermen at the same time. Either he can travel in time, or there are at least two Supermen pretending to be just one, or there's a stupidly complicated plot with one Superman pretending to be two pretending to be one."

"Let's assume time travel is off the table," I said dryly, as Hattie and Amy swam up next to me. "How do you know what you know?"

"These pictures are from when we had a zombie attack at the same time Mammagon was stomping around."

"Mammagon'?"

"Rat the size of an apartment building. Superman punched it out, then went to help round up the zombies before their infection spread too far. What I've got here are some pictures of the exact same moment - you can tell because this piece of rubble is falling in mid-air in the foreground in this one, and the background here - and here's Superman flying along in the one, and here's Superman on the ground winding up for a punch in the other."

"... Have to admit, I was expecting a different reveal entirely. What are the odds the pictures are faked?"

"Not zero, but pretty low. I've got the negatives from both cameras, lots of sequential shots. I know a few guys, and I'm not sure /they/ could paste up fakes this good."

"Not even with a computer?"

"Well, yeah, sure, if you've got a /computer/. But if someone's got one of those, why fake up some negatives and prints and then just file them away in archives?"

I started to say, "It's an interesting point," but Hattie just about squeed, and looking at her, I guessed she just finally couldn't contain herself.

"Do you have any idea," she enthused, "just how /big/ a scoop this is?"

She reached a dripping hand for the papers, but PI Bear stepped away from the pool. "I've got an idea," he admitted. "but it's the lady with the long ears paying my bills, so these belong to her."

Hattie's focus lasered in on me. I thought she was about to try the puppy-dog-eye thing, but instead, cleared her throat, and said, surprisingly calmly, "Being embedded with you will be a step up in my career. Getting a real scoop on /Superman/? I'll be able to /name/ my next salary. What do you want for access to this?"

I nibbled on my lip and wiggled a toe as I thought silently, then thought some more out loud. "I started PI Bear looking into this for my own reasons - and I think this isn't the only thing about Superman worth finding out. The most relevant thing I want... is helping PI Bear find out as much as he can, as fast as he can." I turned to the fuzzy guy. "Like I said, it doesn't bother me if she reports on this... as long as it doesn't interfere with your investigation. So how about this - if the two of you can come up with some way she can help speed your legwork, she can have first rights to the story. Think that might work?"

"You're the boss, boss-lady - at least for the week. That's the way you want to do things, that's the way we'll do things."

Hattie gave another squee, gave me a quick hug, then jumped out of the pool to shove her muzzle as close to the pictures as she could.

I rolled my eyes, pushed away from the side of the pool, and sank into the water, puttering around down there while keeping Waggoner's head above the surface to breathe for me.

--

The morning edition of the Story Town Times included Hattie's first article about being 'embedded' with me, and it looked like she'd decided to paint me in glowing terms - I guessed that speeding her career along a few notches had put me in her good books.

Under Amy's supervision, I spent the first half of the next day being as relaxed and calm as I could get, which mostly meant more reading, and staying near the pool so I could jump in whenever I was feeling too massive. Eventually, I just gave up switching, and read in the pool.

But all good times must come to an end, and eventually it was time to go see the Scottish Play. Supernatural-like events, prophecies, a monarch seizing a throne - plenty of stuff for me to think about; and I hoped that, this time, the wizards I met after seeing some live Shakespeare wouldn't be trying to make hasenpfeffer. But, just in case, I went out loaded for bear, with a full set of tools of various sorts of mayhem within my clothes... including a walkie-talkie, the counterpart to which was where Bear Joe could hear it. I spent at least fifteen minutes next to the freezer Brenda was in, debating whether I should put together some radio-based mechanism to turn off the freezer in a hurry; but eventually decided that if I did need her to come save my life, whatever the situation was would likely be so urgent that it would be over long before Brenda had time to thaw.

Which was still on my mind as the play's witches introduced their familiars, Graymalkin and Paddock. Depending on how you wanted to count, I had something of a small horde of them myself, from the tape-bots hidden inside my robotic arms, to Waggoner, to Brenda, to Bear Joe. I was trying to treat them each with the proper respect they deserved - even if, in the case of the tape-bots, that was the respect due to a finely-crafted piece of machinery. But keeping Brenda frozen didn't seem to be properly respectful, even knowing the risk she posed to other lives if released. I reluctantly concluded that, assuming my thought processes weren't being too distorted at the moment, being honourable towards my allies was a lower priority than avoiding the extinction of sapience. Not that honour wasn't a useful tool towards that end - I still needed lots of help, which would be nearly impossible to get with a reputation for abandoning my people - but it was one tool out of many, and in some situations, the /honourable/ thing to do would not be the /right/ thing to do.

I still felt bad about keeping Brenda frozen, even ignoring her utilitarian use to me; and wanted to come up with some way to safely revive her. If I could spend the time to work on that, after my mind-improving vacation, and after doing my best to get Sarah out of /her/ current straits.

I tried to focus my attention back on the play. Which was just getting to the part of Macbeth thinking of betraying his own guest, his cousin, by murdering him; which added an uncomfortable echo to my thoughts.

I tried to focus on the plot, of the events that supposedly happened in Ye Olde Scotland, but my racing mind still looked at things from my own peculiarly particular perspective. I'd taken the throne for my own purposes, which, according to the root-nodes of my goal tree, was arguably for my own gain. Macbeth himself had been reluctant to do the same, while Lady Macbeth had been all too willing. However, neither of them seemed to have any idea about what to /do/ with the power of the throne once they had it, other than to try to keep it. They didn't even have any heirs of their own to pass the throne on to, so even if they'd beaten all challengers, once they died, all they'd really have accomplished was to keep someone else

/off/ the throne for a while. While I was trying to identify the next extinction event, to head it off; which seemed to make a certain amount of difference. On the other hand, that reasoning also implied that the Macbeths' greatest crime might have been their lack of imagination... which, depending on how fate and prophecy worked in their world, could be laid at the feet of the witches, who seemed to also be some version of the Norns or the Fates.

At one point, Macbeth was disturbed by what he considered to be an evil spirit taking the shape of Banquo - but then, in the next scene, he was as calm as a cucumber, which I took as an indicator of a bit of sanity slippage, another uncomfortable reminder of my own life. Later still, in Act V scene iii, Macbeth asked a doctor,

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?"

To which the pre-psychology doctor answered, "Therein the patient Must minister to himself." I glanced at Amy, who, even without formal training, was ministering to me quite well, I thought; and decided that the doctor's advice was a load of bollocks.

Later still, after the Queen had suicided, Macbeth faced what I decided was his greatest failure of imagination - that he, himself, had nothing more to live for. While the soliloquy might be a bit of classic posturing...

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing."

... and may even be true, so far as it went, well... if nothing else, there was always the chance of finding some squirrels. Or something even better than squirrels.

Finally, when it was revealed that the witches' prophecy was accurate in detail, but deceptive in overall shape (ie, that Macduff wasn't born, but was "from his mother's womb Untimely ripped")... I had my own bargain with the entities of Lion Castle (to get some invisibility cloaks in exchange for delivering some mail) to consider the accuracy and implications of.

All-in-all, while certainly thought-provoking, it probably wasn't the best way to calm my mind.

And I still had some wizards to meet and play games with before the day would be done.

\*\*\*

## \*Chapter Nine: Off-icial\*

Apparently, to a wizard, 'neutral territory' was code for 'a bar'.

It was a nice bar, given what I could tell with my extraordinarily limited experience with such places, with electric lights and polished wood and chalkboard signs and clean everything, but was still a place designed to extract the contents of people's wallets in exchange for making them stupider. Given that Elmer had been walking around with a flamethrower, once I set foot within I started second-guessing whether I should set my second foot within; and, even when I did, started counting the escape routes. The one saving grace of the place wasn't the careful amount of space the other patrons left around the table of robed figures, or the vases of flowers that hadn't been smashed by drunken brawlers, or even the shotgun mounted prominently behind the bar and within the bartender's reach; it was that on one of the chalkboards, prices were listed for tea. Not herbal tisanes, or some post-Singularity caffeinated beverage that was almost, but not entirely, unlike tea; but 'green tea' and 'black tea' and several variations thereof.

That, and I recognized the card game the wizards were already playing.

Well, kind of. I'd never actually played "Magic: the Gathering" myself, but had absorbed a lot about it through osmosis ever since their publisher bought out "Dungeons and Dragons". Taking a closer look as I neared their table, it seemed from the individual cards' copyright dates that the past-time had lasted at least until twenty forty-nine, and had probably kept going all the way to the Singularity itself.

One of the players said, "I've been trying to think up a good joke about 'play the red queen on the black king'. But it just doesn't work right without a standard deck of cards."

"I've got one of those," I said, pulling the unmarked deck from a pocket. (I left the marked deck right where it was.) "And I can run through some solitaire until you're done, though I'd rather watch."

"Mm," another grunted, and set a card from his hand in the middle of the table. "Three mana to enchant my forest with Squirrel Nest. I've got Earthcraft down, so I can start spawning all the tapped squirrel tokens I want, unless one of you wants to stop me?"

"Yeah, no," said a third, "I don't feel like losing by being nibbled to death. Counterspell."

The fourth added, "I don't mind if he takes you two out with squirrels, because thanks to Angel's Grace," he slapped a card of his own down, "I can't lose, he can't win, and no more spells can be played this turn. And I'll use a non-spell Planeswalker ability to counterspell your counterspell."

It was ridiculous, arbitrary, had no relation to anything in the real world, and I couldn't stop grinning as I watched the game progress.

--

These wizards had, I gathered from snippets of conversation in between game-talk, collected every last Magic card that had survived the Singularity anywhere near the city - and had even paid ridiculous amounts of money to inter-city traders who could find any more. (And had toaded a few inter-city traders who had tried to pass off fake cards.) I actually felt a little unsettled, flipping through a box of carefully wrapped cards, realizing that these could very well be the only Magic cards that would ever be played again. No more paying a buck for a basic land and thousands for a rare Black Lotus - each and every one of these cards was now a unique artifact, and if lost, wouldn't be replaceable at any price. And this was just the one game that these people had agreed with each other to play tonight - between themselves, they had the last remaining pieces of more than one collectible franchise, not all of which still had enough parts to actually play a full game.

"Would it be safe to guess," I said aloud, "that if Elmer came in here with that fire-shooting staff of his, you'd do /something/ horribly uncomfortable to him before these cards went up in smoke?"

"Let's just say," said the wizard playing mostly green cards, and held one up to my view, "this would be the least he could expect." The card's title was 'Graphic Violence'. "I don't know if Walter's going to show up tonight. Part of the point of having an apprentice is teaching them restraint /before/ the flashy stuff, so things like that never happen. I've got a few harsh words for both of them, next time I see them."

"Does this sort of thing happen that often?"

They exchanged a few looks, then greenie turned back to me. "If that had been /my/ apprentice, I'd have told him not to, and fired him if he tried it anyway."

The red-player asked, "Fired, or fire-fired?"

"Let's just say if he wanted to get back in my good graces, I'd probably want him to walk through the ironic punishment zone until something happened to him."

I piped up, "What sort of zone's that?"

Blue-y leaned back, pulled out a pipe from somewhere, lit it, puffed, and pontificated, "Not all zones are small enough to fit in a building. Some stretch over large areas, and interact with each other in interesting ways - I have some theories about fractal placements, but can't hire enough mundies to gather the data I need. The zone we call 'ironic punishment' is fairly close to the storybook zone, and may be connected to it, only instead of turning everyone into something out of a children's book, it seems to figure out the worst things you've done and inflict some appropriate response for the retributive theory of justice. Mind you, this is extrapolating from a very messy set of data, given how hard it is to pin down the zone's shifting borders, and how few people tend to be willing to admit a crime whose most appropriate punishment involves some sex-based Change."

The player who'd been setting down white cards grumbled, "That's overkill, and you know it. We should just get a wizard's court together and follow the rules."

Blue shrugged. "According to the rules, to bother with a court, the victim would have to be an acknowledged wizard, and while our guest may be many things, and may have claimed wizard-hood, she hasn't actually been acknowledged by the /rest/ of us as one."

There was a brief silence of card shuffling, and I barely resisted rolling my eyes. "And what, if it's not too much trouble to ask, would it take to be 'acknowledged' as a wizard?"

White said, "Oh, that's simple. Do the impossible."

Green added, "Have a familiar."

Red commented, "Be flashy."

And Blue contributed, "Show you can keep secrets."

"Hunh," I hunhed. "That's surprisingly close to, and annoyingly different from, 'to know, to will, to dare, to keep silent'."

White said, "It's probably like the number twenty-three, or five. If you go looking for the pattern, you'll find it. Doesn't mean the pattern means anything - we're human, or close enough, and tend to divide any idea up into a small number of sub-ideas. There's only so many sub-ideas to go around, so two related ideas' sub-ideas are going to overlap more often than you might think, but trying to force a correspondence between the other sub-ideas is likely to get you into trouble."

Blue tapped his chin. "I'm curious where you got your foursome from, though. It's not a bad aphorism, as I think about it."

I winced a little, and shook my head. "It's part of a whole esoteric body of complicated but false knowledge. There were plenty of books on the topic published pre-Singularity, but it's honestly one topic I wouldn't mind leaving to history, if I had the chance. Or, at least, keeping it out of the hands of people who don't understand that just because it's written down doesn't mean it's true."

"Even so," Blue continued, "to the prepared mind, even falsehoods can reveal the truth."

"Welp," I said, tapping my toes in an irregular pattern, "if you really want to read something like that, I can get you a copy of something relevant."

"You can arrange physical deliveries from your university on the other side of the lake? Or will you have a copy transmitted over the heliograph for transcription?"

"Even better," I said, as the bar's door opened, and all the patrons went silent. "There are advantages to being the 'royal' of the 'royal mail service'." Bear Joe paused in the doorway, lifting his head to snuffle at the air - and, coincidentally, nudging Alphie and the tricorder inside the building with a hindfoot - then, with nobody shooting at him, trundled his oversized way towards us. I stood up to wrap one arm around his neck, and use the other to remove the text from his mouth, freshly-printed by Internet. "I call this guy Bear Joe, though that's not his name. I'd call him a great big teddy bear, but that's just because he makes a great pillow, and I'm not sure if it would be politically incorrect to use the term with live plushies around now. And here's, hm, let's see - "Golden Dawn Rituals and Commentaries, Volume One", by Pat Zalewski. Wouldn't have been my first choice, but should cover a lot of their secret society's, um, stuff."

Green asked, through the gradually-recovering bar-noise, "Wouldn't something smaller have been more convenient? Maybe a cub?"

I patted Bear Joe on his shoulder. "There's convenient, and then there's useful, and then there's friendly, and then there's just plain old doing the best you can with who you've met." Bear Joe dropped down next to my seat, which I found just a teensy bit reassuring, given he was still a full-sized grizzly.

Blue flipped through the text, stopping at a few of the diagrams. "And what would you have done if I'd asked about some obscure pre-Singularity cuisine? Nudged the conversation to some food-related topic you actually have a book on?"

I spoked an eyebrow. "Wouldn't answering that go against your 'keep secrets' thing? But no, this trick is much more impressive than that... well, if anyone's willing to bother this comfortable-looking bear to have him go out and grab another book."

Red smiled, "I'm willing. What's the trick?"

I didn't hide my eye-roll. "To start with, we order something from the bar he'd enjoy for when he gets back. Honey's always a fave."

White nodded, and waved to the barkeep. "I'll take care of that. You do your trick."

I shrugged, keeping a perfectly straight face. "What do any of you want to read about?"

Green jumped right in, "Elephant husbandry."

Red wasn't far behind with, "Exothermic chemistry."

White asked, "Bringing back the dead?"

Blue pretended he didn't already have one book and finished with, "Memory improvement techniques."

I just nodded, and ruffled the fur on Bear Joe's head. "Whaddaya say? Up to stepping outside to grab their books, and then relaxing with a nice treat?"

He just grunted, and dropped his head to the floor.

I sighed, and gave the quartet a tentative smile. "Sorry, fellows - looks like he's done for the night. Guess I'll have to go out myself."

Blue looked up from his book at me, skeptically. "You really need to work on your presentation. Even if you need an excuse to step outside for some part of your trick, making it this obvious you have to is just plain shoddy showmanship. You should at least have gotten us to say what we wanted as part of a larger conversation, come up with some other excuse to go out, and then, say, slipped the books under our chairs to reveal to us at a good moment."

Red rolled his eyes. "Oh, don't be such a nitpicker. One of the oldest tricks in the books is to pretend to blow a trick, or just be a bumbler, and then show off even more impressive ones than the ones that failed."

White nodded, "Yes, but we haven't seen a recovery yet."

I sighed a bit, and stood. "While you all work that out, I'll go get you your books. Here, your pipe's gone out." My arm-bots followed the pre-programmed routine: I held out my fist to Blue, flicked the thumb, and applied the small flame on its tip to his pipe.

As I started walking away, I heard a bit of a babble from them, "Impregnated gloves?" "-no gloves, maybe a fake thumb?" "-watching, and if she can palm a thumb that fast she can deal herself a straight flush every time-" "-painted it with foxfire?" "-no, it was actual fire..."

Inside Munchkin, while waiting a few moments for Internet to print out fresh books, I reviewed Alphie's report on the bar, then made my way back in. I handed each one their texts - on exactly their requested topics - and smiled tightly. "I'm sorry that having an infinite library of books you can't get anywhere else isn't enough of a trick for you all. I've had to focus my efforts on finding out ways of, well, accomplishing things, instead of having the luxury of looking for ways to accomplish them with fireworks. Thanks for watching my seat for me, Joe."

Red looked up from his table of contents and glared at me. "You're just /giving out/ the instructions on how to make FOOF from scratch? Are you /trying/ to kill me?"

"You wanted exothermic, that's about as exothermic as it gets. And that book's data is a lot more reliable than the Anarchist's Cookbook, which I was thinking of just because it's such a classic. Besides, chemistry is easy - do you have any idea how hard it was to dig up accurate information on breeding pachyderms?" I gestured at Green, who seemed happy enough.

White lifted a hand. "Objection. This book is only about how to freeze people, not how to bring them back to life."

"Vitrification isn't a secret. But even without your clique's thing on secrecy, I wouldn't feel like spreading info on revival to someone who can't at least get this bit right."

Red exploded, "Hexanitrohexaazaisowurtzitane!?", as he rose to his feet.

A couple of voices chorused, "Gesheinduit?"

Looking up at Red's furious face, I felt a bit of relief that Bun-Bun seemed to have our adrenaline turned down low, but I still dropped my left hand onto Bear Joe's head for a bit of reassurance. "You said you wanted flashy," I tried to talk him down. "I gave you flashy. You want less flashy?" I lifted my right arm and waved it, "Look behind you."

He turned, and much of his body twitched as he saw the mystic sigils made of fire on the walls of the bar - which had presumably been painted by some other wizard previously for their own trick reveal, which Alphie had noted and pointed out to me, and which I'd just lit with the maser hidden in my robo-arms' right palm.

White grumbled, "You, sit down, and you, stop scaring the mundies."

I pitched my voice a bit high to whine, "He started it," mostly to use up the few seconds the chemical-impregnated wallpaper would stay lit.

Green opened up another box of cards, and set a stack in front of my chair. "We're all playing with monocolour decks tonight. Want to continue the theme? Got a deck already built for a fifth."

I shrugged. "As if I know what I'm doing? I'm willing to play along."

The table was cleared, decks shuffled, initial hands dealt, and as I started reading the ones in my hand, White announced, "I win."

"What?"

He held out one card, spouted some gamer-babble, then more of his hand with similarly incomprehensible words, until the others nodded and Blue said, "Good game." They gathered their hands back into their decks and started shuffling again.

The next few games didn't end /quite/ so fast, but while one player pointed out a few of the basics to me - such as 'you can put down one land card per turn, unless a card says otherwise' or 'the rules changed a few times, so what's on the card isn't always how the card actually works - for example, 'Instant' used to be a separate card type instead of a subtype of 'Sorceries' - another would be assembling some ridiculous combination of card effects to produce an infinite number of soldiers, or directly inflict infinite damage, Blue used three

cards to give himself infinite turns, White invoked an alternate loss condition by forcing us to draw all the cards from our draw decks, and I was generally lucky if I could play a single card.

After a particularly egregious example, in which Red spawned an infinite number of copies of a super-powerful avatar, I just set my hand down and pushed back from the table. "So," I asked. "This deck that you prebuilt for me. By any chance, is it the only one that doesn't have all these insta-win things?"

Red asked, "What fun would that be? Lemme see your deck. Here - a nice simple two-card combo, Sanguine Bond and Exquisite Blood. Put them down, and as soon as anyone takes any damage, you win - the one gives you as much life as someone loses, and the other makes someone lose as much life as you gain, and they cycle around and around until everyone else is dead."

"Okay," I reluctantly admitted. "But each one needs five mana to cast - how am I supposed to get that before you all wipe the board clean, or whatever? And there's, what, sixty cards in the deck? I'm supposed to rely on them both showing up in my starting hand?"

"Well, that's just one combo, there's plenty of others. And plenty of other tricks that other cards let you do, like digging through your library to pick up the card you need. You can rebuild your deck if you want, just remember that you can't have more than four each of any card, or one of a legendary. Unless the card says otherwise, like Relentless Rats."

I thoughtfully tapped my toes, and my arm-bots noticed and helpfully started me tapping my fingers. "And you're playing with the most recent rules published by Wizards of the Coast, right?"

"You've got it. We managed to snag print-outs of the most up-to-date rulings from just before the End Times."

"Okay," I said, and nodded to myself. "I need to check on something. I'll be back in a few minutes, you go ahead and keep playing in the meantime."

I stood, made my way back out to Munchkin, and as promised, was back at the wizards' table in a few minutes, now carrying a few sheafs of papers. As the quartet gathered up their most recent game and gave me curious looks, I handed them around for their inspection.

"Right," I said. "Top page. As a head-of-state, I'm issuing a royal proclamation which re-incorporates the pre-Singularity company of 'Wizards of the Coast' as a Crown Company, with myself as director. Second page. Me, wearing my hat as head of the Wizards of the Coast, issuing an update to the rules of 'Magic: the Gathering', announcing the first release of a new card to the game in decades. Third page, a picture of the card."

Said picture had a card titled "Queen Bunny Wins", with a picture of myself, and rules text reading, "A deck can have any number of cards named Queen Bunny Wins. If Queen Bunny Wins is in your opening hand, tear Queen Bunny Wins into pieces and win the game."

I pulled a pack of sixty freshly-printed 'Queen Bunny Wins' cards out of my pockets and set it in front of me. "Shall we play a game?"

The four of them were looking at the papers, then at each other, with a variety of expressions crossing their faces.

White finally said, "I wasn't here when the game nights started, so someone remind me - are we playing by the rules published as of twenty fifty, or the most recent rules, which happen to have been the ones from twenty fifty?"

Blue answered, "It's been so long, I don't think anyone remembers.

Green added, "Even if anyone did, I'm not sure that the spirit of the enterprise would have let us make that distinction, until now."

Red grunted. "What, all of you are seriously considering letting her try this? We've /got/ the rules we play by. Why should we let her change them, just because she wants to win?"

I threw in, "That's not /quite/ my goal. I went easy with the card - I didn't have to include the Blacker Lotus tear-it-up mechanic, which puts a strict limit on how long the new card can affect your usual game-playing. The sixty-card deck minimum means that the more times the card is used, the more other cards have to be added to the deck each time a 'Queen Bunny Wins' is activated, reducing the odds that one will /be/ in the opening hand."

Blue said, "Before we decide either way, I'd like to point out that the Bunny Gambit opens up certain possibilities for us. The rules from twenty fifty include a few quirks that have haunted all our games ever since - the update to emblem cards was controversial even among players at the time. Bunny probably doesn't care either way, but we could have her issue a few new rulings to pin those last few issues down for us."

Red glared at him. "And you're probably already thinking of how to get her to pick the rulings you prefer, aren't you, instead of the ones that are best for the game experience?"

White was frowning thoughtfully, looking up at the ceiling. "I'm not sure that this approach is even legal in the first place. Wizards of the Coast was an American company, and Bunny is queen of Lake Erie, Canada, and the Commonwealth. Does she even have the authority to nationalize a foreign corporation?"

I responded, "If you ask the government of Lake Erie, I'm also the head-of-state of Mars' moon, Phobos. The question isn't whether I have the authority - it's who has the ability to tell me that I /don't/? The old American government appears to be defunct, and de facto, unable to file any lawsuits disputing the company's transfer of ownership."

Green spoke, "I don't know that I approve of setting the precedent that lets her say she owns whatever she wants."

I took that as a cue to reveal my trump. "Before I derail game night entirely over arguing about arcane legal principles, I have an alternate suggestion. I take these sixty cards and put them back in my pocket. And then, instead of everyone here aiming for slam-dunks all the time, at least a bit of focus is put on basic ball-handling. Land management. Putting creatures down to actually fight each other, instead of being part of some infini-combo. Having games that make sense according to the game's backstory and fluff, instead of being nothing more than running through arcane interpretations of rules like a computer. You know - /playing a game/."

"Hm," said one, and "I could live with that," said another. A few more exchanged glances, then some nods at me, and I started to put the deck away. But then Blue held up one hand. "Before we do that, and without committing one way or another about whether it's legal or not - I want to play one game against that deck. Two-player or multi-player, either way."

Shrugs all around, both of us shuffled (me rather unnecessarily), I put the deck on the table, and we started.

I lost the freaking game.

I'm pretty sure Blue cheated by some fast shuffling of his deck, but it was still absolutely ridiculous. ... At least I didn't have to tear up any of the cards.

After that little debacle, as new decks were quickly assembled for a new set of games, White commented to me, "Congratulations on being a perfect embodiment of your colour."

"Er, pardon? How does fiddling with meta-rules have anything to do with vampires and zombies?"

Green said, "Black isn't about the undead, specifically - that's just one set of tools. And in case you've gotten the wrong impression, black isn't evil, either, nor is white good."

Blue spoke up, "Each of the colours is based around a philosophy. White's is 'peace through structure', blue has 'perfection through knowledge', black is 'power through opportunity', red is 'freedom through action', and green is 'acceptance through growth'."

"White and blue sound more like my speed than black. After all, I've been building up the structure of a whole nation, and am a confirmed bibliophile."

"Ah," said Red, "but you decided on what you wanted - a back-to-basics set of games - saw that you had a way to seize power to cause that to happen, regardless of how it affected our current rules, and you took it."

I didn't answer right away, frowning to myself, as I found myself thinking about a number of my larger-scale activities in that light - in much the way I'd been thinking of them in new ways while watching Macbeth. I had my goals, and had decided that they were important enough to use any means I could think of to reach. So far, I'd been able to work towards them via means that were at least arguably moral, but if I ever decided that the best way to achieve my goals was to do something less pleasant, such as committing sacrilege on the dead to raise their mindless corpses as my tools? Or if the only way to keep myself in the running was to, as the first infinite combo for black I'd been shown had done, drain the lives of competitors in unethical ways? I couldn't say that I /wouldn't/ do any of that - I didn't think it was likely that any such actions would make enough of a difference to offset their downsides, but avoiding the permanent extinction of sapience was important enough that if I /were/ faced with that choice... I could very well see myself acting completely 'Black'.

To try to avoid an uncomfortable conversational pause, I grumbled, "Who picked /five/ colours, anyway? A lot of historical symbolism would match up better with /six/ - white, black, and four elements. I can match up red with fire, blue with water, and green with earth, but what about air?"

"Actually," said White, "The classical element of air is mostly part of Blue."

Blue added, "If you really want a six-colour version of the game, there /were/ some proposals for a variant which added 'Purple', with caves as the basic land..."

And the game went on.

--

Later that evening, after all the games - of all sorts - had been finished, and I was back at Munchkin, I curiously flipped through another deck of Magic cards. Like the Bunny Wins deck, it was freshly printed - only these cards had been chosen by the best Magic players in a thousand miles or more. They'd picked the cards which, after much arguing, they'd settled on as working best as an introduction to the game for the mundies, as well as providing a completely playable, non-collectible version of "Magic: the Gathering".

I set Internet to printing up a few more decks, as possible trade goods; and found a couple of pockets in my Windsor jacket to stuff the first such deck into, to be handy to try out during the last few days of my vacation.

\*\*\*

\*Chapter Ten: Off-beat\*

After Aggie joined us for a morning swim, showing off that her spider-centaur form's many legs gave her a pretty good frog-stroke, everyone who was joining me for the Hive tour piled into Munchkin - me (and Bun-Bun and Boomer and Waggar); Amy and Minerva (and Scorpia, and Toby the Dog (the octo-kitty)); Miss Neckline; Blue, Ida and Ethel (Nia had

declined); and Hattie, who'd brought along a plush parrot she kept on her shoulder, which she claimed was her 'recorder'. Bear Joe and the jackalopes were still aboard, but hanging out in the cargo carriage.

The Hive itself was ten miles west of Metropolis's industrial district, and five miles to the south of Story Town - maybe twice that, if you took the Rocky River. According to Munchkin's internal maps, we were heading to the "John H. Glenn Research Center", next to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

"It was falling apart," Aggie said and signed, "and nobody wanted to risk themselves with all the old equipment to rehabilitate the place and make it livable. So when we People of the Eye came by, looking for a new home, it was pretty ideal. Cleveland - sorry, 'Metropolis' - has some good homestead laws, so we took advantage of those, and here we are." She waved a touch more dramatically at Munchkin's walls, which I'd set to large virtual windows.

Neckline asked, "Is all that black on our left the old aeroport?"

Aggie nodded. "Yes, and no. That's where the airport was. We've replanted with a thousand acres, going on fifteen hundred, of, well, black-grass. It's not much of a name, but it's the foundation of everything we do - a field of solar collectors, turning sunlight into stored chemical energy."

Minerva piped up, "There's no snow! It's black, so that means it absorbs heat, so it melts all the snow off, right?"

"Not quite," Aggie smiled, "though that does help. If you look closely, you'll see a large box every so often - those are the hives for the bugs that tend the grass, including clearing off the snow, and which gave us our local nickname. I'd suggest staying away from them - they're friendly to anyone they think is part of the Hive, like me," she patted her black-and-cyan chest, "but some local yahoos tried playing 'mailbox baseball' last week, and they're still kind of rattled."

Feeling a bit security conscious, I asked, "Are we in any danger, if any of them come this way?"

"No," Aggie negated. "As long as I'm with you, I can calm them down, and their attack is more about swarming over you to suffocate than any kind of toxin, so you'll have plenty of time for me to shoo them off. And you'll be even safer than that - once you put on your guest suits, they'll ignore you completely."

Ethel asked, "Do we /have/ to change clothes?"

Aggie frowned a tad, then shrugged. "Only if you want to come inside. I'm afraid that places where we live end up containing substances which don't bother us at all, but can cause regular humans trouble. To start with, there are some nano-scale micro-fibre threads, which, if you breathed them in, would eventually give you lung trouble, the way asbestos does. The

guest suits keep everything that should be close to you close, and everything that shouldn't be, out. They'll also provide bioluminescent signals to the various animals that are part of our system, letting them know not to try to use you as a support pillar or anything like that."

She smiled at everyone, but only a few of us smiled back.

Minerva asked, "If we have to wear suits, does Toby the Dog have to stay inside here?" She reached over to scoop up the critter, a cat's head attached to an octopus's body, and the animal quickly glomped itself around her upper arm.

Aggie's smile softened. "If you want to bring, um, him?"

"Her," Minerva stated, firmly, and I wondered how she'd found out.

"Her," Aggie acknowledged, "we have bubbles that do the same things as the suits, they just aren't as tight." She gestured at Hattie's cloth-covered shoulder-bird. "She'll have one for her recorder, so you can bring your pet along, too, if you want."

Hattie said something I didn't quite catch, along the lines of 'not a pet, a working animal', but I was distracted. At Aggie's direction, I drove Munchkin into what looked like an old aircraft hangar, wide and with a rounded roof. Once the land-train had settled onto its legs, we all clambered out, and I set the usual security systems online.

Aggie called out, "This is where we meet up with anyone who wants to trade, or talk, or whatever, but doesn't want to come in. It's also where we've got changing rooms. We've got a bunch that are good for humans, and," she nodded at Amy and Hattie, "we've got Freddie, who can adjust them for near-humans." She looked at Neckline, tapping her chin. "You might be a bit of a challenge - but at worst, if Freddie doesn't have a quadruped getup that's comfortable, we can try putting you in a big bubble and find someone to carry you."

And the spider-taur turned to me. "And for you, Your Majesty, I was able to convince René to let me have a copy of your measurements, so even with your particular body-form," she waved at Waggoner, who I had nod back, "your suit should fit you perfectly." She raised her voice again, "If you need any help, just give a shout - I've got my own quick stop to make."

While I wasn't exactly happy with René's failure of customer privacy, once I was in the changing stall (which, from its size and shape, I guessed had been converted from an actual stall) and was trying the suit's fit, I was reluctantly willing to admit that the benefits of the tailor's loose lips might be worth the cost, at least in this particular case. Through some magic of clever technology, the smooth inner lining was skintight - and yet, my fur was laid at the angle to be comfortable and not distracting. The main part of the outfit covered my whole body from the neck down, fit like a glove - and still, according to a paper instruction sheet, could be tugged open to allow, as it put it, "every standard biological function". I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disturbed that said functions, according to the diagrams, appeared to include childbirth, nursing, and placing an infant in the marsupial pouch that I could have sworn I'd kept a secret since coming to Metropolis.

The outside of the suit was a smooth black, with a selection of mostly-bluish lines running up and down the torso, arms, and legs, on both front and back; I thought it was very Tron-ish, and reasonably stylish.

The headpiece was a hood, which continued the lines upwards, all the way to my eartips, leaving the transparent eye-lenses and mouth free. Looking at my fully-suited self, the former managed to avoid the 'evil darkness' look that Darth Vader's smoked lenses had produced, while the latter seemed to have an attachment point for a diver's breathing mouthpiece, though no breathing gear seemed to be around. I swung Waggoner forward to take a look at her, and the end of her tailsleeve had the same features. I spent a few moments experimenting, making sure both of us could breathe, tugging open the seams to make sure I knew how, and then tucking myself back in.

Stepping back out into the main part of the hangar, only Aggie had finished before I had - and it looked like her own 'quick stop' had included ditching her mask, replacing it with a saddle on her large abdomen. She demonstrated a bit of flexibility by turning her front torso far enough to give it a pat, smiling at me. "I'm sure you could manage on your own, but given the advanced state of your pregnancy, I'm sure your feet will thank you by the end of the day."

"Are you sure? The angles on that look like you'd be really uncomfortable."

"Don't worry, when I'm not chatting with outsiders, my day-job is being a tanker. I can fill up my whole abdomen, and no matter how pregnant you are, you're not as heavy as a full load of water. In fact, I'm strong enough to lift you /and/ a full tank, if you want to see what my job's like, later on in the tour."

"Welp, I guess everyone's got hidden abil-"

I was interrupted by a yelp, which, as I turned around, revealed itself to have come from Ida, who was covering her mouth and staring at Aggie. I looked back at our tour guide, saw nothing amiss, then back to Ida, feeling just a touch confuzzled.

Ida helpfully revealed the cause of her distress by announcing, "You're /unmasked!/" with all the fervor of a proper British housewife faced with full-body nudity.

As a couple of other faces popped out of their stalls, and Aggie started proudly proclaiming that she was in her own home now, thank you very much, I sighed, rolled my eyes, and went back to my stall to collect my clothes - some to drop back in Munchkin, and at least a vest with filled pockets to wear during the tour. I decided to leave my own mask in the 'Munchkin' pile.

--

"What we have here," Aggie called out, before we'd even left the hangar, as some of us watched her curiously, and a few of us watched anything at all /except/ her, "are pipes, wall-panels, and other hardware we've built and have ready for sale to the city's citizens. We have some natural advantages at making products like these, which keeps our costs low; which is good, since we have few other ways of acquiring the cold cash the city wants for our taxes."

Ethel asked, "What about all that, what was it, black-grass you're farming?"

Aggie heaved a dramatic sigh. "While we're taxed on that as per local tax laws on farmers, and we've offered to pay the tax on that farm in kind, the black-grass produces an energy-dense liquid which is vital to the People of the Eye, but nearly useless to anyone else, and so the local bureaucrats have declined to accept said liquid. They've set the tax rates at the level of us producing a cash crop, and all our appeals have been rejected, because," she raised her voice to a nasal whine, "'tax policy that is used to incentivize economically productive behaviour is entirely within applicable guidelines'." She coughed, and lowered her voice again. "Of course, that would be a lot more believable if they didn't keep /changing/ their tax policy in ways that just happen to prevent any of us from starting any /other/ enterprises. Such as last month, when one of us tried to open a bed-and-breakfast, and had gotten everything ready to go - right up until a new tax law passed requiring much higher levels of insurance coverage, whose estimated cost just happened to exactly match the B-and-B's expected profits. So - hardware. Now - nobody here is claustrophobic, right?"

After a few shaken heads, Aggie led us to a Star-Trek-like door, with a seam down the middle, and a black control-like panel next to it that lit up as Aggie came close. "Alright, try not to press too hard on both walls at once, and if it gets too dark, give me a shout so I can brighten my biolums." Apparently with no more than an effort of will, her cyan patches all flared with an obvious glow. She touched the panel, and the the door opened, revealing...

... a stupidly wide hallway, ramping down below ground level, the floor ridged with some interesting patterns along the edges, brightly lit from all sides with rosy-white panels. Aggie was turned far enough that I could see her grin, even from my perch on her rear, as she said, "You wouldn't /believe/ how many people ask for a tour and chicken out just before I open the door. The stereotypes about what a 'Hive' is run pretty deep around here, it seems."

After the requisite number of rolled eyes, everyone filed through the door, including the bubbled pseudo-parrot somehow stuck to Hattie's shoulder, and the octo-cat in Minerva's arms, and we went deeper into the Hive's brightly-lit hive.

--

"Ah, hello!" Aggie called out, then turned back to us. "Here's one of our hardest workers, Ben Hurcanus."

The walls of the hall were curving away, forming a sort of diamond-shaped open space instead of a simpler intersection. From further down the hall to the right than we could see came a gravelly voice, "I keep telling you, Ben isn't my first name, Joseph is, or just plain old Joe. But if I haven't convinced you yet, I'm not going to convince you today. So who are all your little friends today?"

As Aggie carried me around the corner, I found out at least one reason why the corridors were so large - if they were any smaller, the rather enormous black-and-blue exoskeletal creature, with mouthparts that looked more like industrial tools, waddling through them wouldn't have been able to fit.

Aggie turned again, "Your Majesty, everyone, I'd like you to meet Ben." She turned back around. "Ben, I'd like you to meet Her Majesty, Queen Bunny, plus her entourage. I'm giving them the nickel tour."

Joe - or Ben - wagged some part of his anatomy. "It's a pleasure to meet you all. I'd offer to shake your hands, but the last time someone took me up on that, I accidentally ate them. Don't worry, I brought them right back out again, safe as Jonah, but it was embarrassing all around."

Aggie took on her 'tour guide' voice again. "Ben here has the body of a 'digger', and can not only chew through soil and rock, but helps hold up the volume he digs out long enough for the spoil to be removed and some of our smaller workers to slide structural supports and paneling into place. I think he even dug out the hall we're in right now, isn't that right, Ben?"

"Ah, you're overselling again," Ben answered. "It was Tyrone who dug this cross-tunnel, I was too small for this work when we came here."

Minerva piped up, "Were you human then?"

"No, little one," Ben said, "I've been a digger ever since I joined this community. Changing from human to digger took just a few moments - going from a human-sized digger to a full-grown one, a little longer."

Minerva tilted her head, "Can you change back to human?"

"Ach, now why would I want to do that? There are good people here, and if I went back to what I was, someone else would have to start doing what I'm doing, and then who'd do their job? Now, little Aggie, I know you want to show me off, but I have a terrible pain in my stomach, I think some old rebar got lodged where it shouldn't, and I'm off to let the tiny doctors at me to do their thing. Could you have everyone move back to the main hall so I don't step on a foot I shouldn't? Great senses of touch and taste, we diggers have, but eyesight, not so much."

--

"Now this," Aggie waved us through a translucent door, "is, depending on who you ask, a lunch room, a cafe, a dining hall, or anything of the sort. Any of us who can make it in here can get all the nutrients we need. While almost any body-plan of the People of the Eye /can/ eat the same sorts of foods that a human does, we do a lot better by ingesting the fluid produced by black-grass... for which we have more names for than we do for this room. I like 'coffee', myself."

The dining hall, or whatever it was, had a half-dozen counter-top islands in the middle, large mirrors on most walls giving the illusion of a larger space, and an assortment of blue-and-black critters from dog-size on down.

"In fact," Aggie continued, "your suits use up a certain amount of energy to glow, and they use the same fluid to recharge themselves. If you'd like to give that a try, then on the sides of your hips is an intake valve, which should fit any of the hip-high nozzles in the islands there. The suits can also share energy with each other, and almost any of the animals you see - which are all going to be friendly to you since you've got your suits on, so feel free to try feeding some."

Turning her torso halfway, and her head all the way to face mine, Aggie smiled at me. "Now, if you'd like, I can fill up my tank here, and show you how much I can carry." She turned away from me a bit, looked at the wall, and pursed her lips. "Actually, though, I'm getting some signals that, if you don't object, an even better use of my time would be to carry some pipe-cleaners from across the hall to where they're needed more."

Even though I was supposed to be relaxing, I took a few moments to consider the security issues before nodding. "As long as we check in with everyone every few minutes."

As we went back to the hall, through another nearly-see-through door, I looked at some of the glowing lines and patches on Aggie's backs, and felt like tracing their edges with my fingertips, but realized I had, apparently, kept one secret from the Hive - my arm-bots' cameras were completely hidden inside the suit, and they had no way to track my eye movements. Even Boomer's camera would need me to unseal the suit to let her take a peek at anything; which made me start to feel a bit nervous.

Apparently, Aggie could pick up on that, one way or another, because she said, "If you'd rather not be alone with me, we can just head right back. Or even cancel the tour - it's pretty much for your benefit, after all... though I will admit that I'm hoping you'll let me show you more, so you've got the full background later."

"It's not you, it's me," I said, with a quick half-smile. "I should have thought of it earlier - I guess this vacation hasn't finished bringing my mental abilities back up to what they should be - but among other things, the trick I pulled to understand and use sign language isn't working now."

"You don't have to hedge your words," Aggie said, rotating around to face the door again. "We know your arms are robotic. I'm going to let you in on a little secret." She reached for

the door control panel, and flipped it up, revealing wires and miscellaneous little doodads. "We use computer-based technology, too." Letting the panel fall back closed, she sighed a little. "And if you think you'll have problems if your secret gets out, just imagine how we'll have to deal with a bunch of people who already think we're the local Designated Acceptable Targets."

"Mm," I said, and swung a leg over the saddle to slip to the floor. As Aggie shifted her many legs around, I was a little surprised to feel the floor vibrate a tad with each of her steps; at first I thought it was just shoddy construction, but looking down at the floor didn't reveal any obvious signs of lack of care. Maybe it was a limit of the materials they used, or a deliberate design choice. "If the locals are so hostile to you, why stick around? Metropolis isn't the only city in the area."

Aggie crossed her arms, grimacing. "It may be easy for you to scoot all over in your Munchkin, but the rest of us have to walk everywhere - and there's a lot of uncharted zones and hostile wildlife that's a little harder for us to outrun. We barely made it here from Cincinnati in the first place, and as things are, if we had to go anywhere else, we'd lose a lot of good people."

"Ah." I felt a little embarrassed flush rise, and glanced at an unmirrored part of the walls. "I guess I'm still not used to all the ways life has changed - I think I've got everything down pat, and then an assumption I didn't know I was making pops up and makes me stumble." I turned around to perch my rear on one of the counter edges, bringing Waggoner around to shove her head under my hands' fingers - they at least had enough tactile sensitivity to figure out how to start petting her. "I want to offer a suggestion or two, but I also don't want to assume I know more about your problems than you do."

"Actually," Aggie turned back to me, "you can do more than suggest ideas, if you want."

"Mm?"

"When we've got enough time for a good sit-down talk later, one thing I'd like to talk to you about is whether we could rent Munchkin - or buy passage, or some other similar idea involving you helping us get from where we are to where we want to be."

"Well," I blinked, "that's more pro-active of you than I was expecting. Not sure that I can agree to anything of the sort just now - there's plenty of things I'm going to need to be doing as soon as my vacation's up."

"I know," Aggie nodded firmly. "Which is why one of the offers I'm supposed to make isn't just to pay our passage in cash or foodstuffs, but in manpower. Hattie's opinion piece on you today says you need people you can trust, to help you in dangerous situations - I think we People of the Eye might be able to fill your needs better than a random assortment of civilian Changed."

With my fingers currently blind, I started tapping my toes. "It's... an interesting idea," I admitted, then tilted my head. "How long have you been planning it?"

"Well, we've been improving it as we've been reading the newspaper reports on you... but I'll admit that when we first met in René's, I was there, at least in part, to get a better look at you in person, and start trying to figure out if it would be worth trying to make /some/ sort of deal with you. ... I hope you're not mad."

"Eh, not so much, as you can probably tell - say, is that from the suit, or can you sniff out how I'm feeling some other way?"

"It's mostly the suit. I got a few built-in instincts when I joined the Eye-folk, a lot of them about feeling how other Eye-folk feel, and the suits help translate."

"Hm. We'll have to talk about that more, in a bit. Anyway - as I was reminded the other night, looking for opportunities and taking advantage of them doesn't necessarily make anyone evil; and I have to admit, if you and your Eye-folk are the sorts to /look/ for ways to improve your lives, that puts you a step above of a lot of other warm bodies who'd be willing to sign on." I breathed in, and let it out. "But let's let all that simmer in the back of my mind for a bit before we make a firm decision. Where are these 'pipe cleaners' you're supposed to be helping with?"

She smiled, then turned to aim the rearmost point of her spidery back end at one of the island feeding nozzles, and backed up. There was no obvious result, until I saw her start shifting her legs further back, implying that her centre-of-mass was moving back as her rear abdomen filled up with... something.

After almost a full minute, she stepped forward, then quickly turned around to shove her hand against the nozzle - when she pulled it back, she was holding the head end of something long, squirmy, and rather eel-like, in the black-and-cyan colour scheme that seemed to be standard in these parts.

"Pipe cleaner," she stated, and I stepped forward for a closer look. Whatever else she'd been about to describe was cut off - I'm not sure which of them moved first, but Wagger exhibited a bit of her independent mind and darted forward, the eel cleaner-thing slid through Aggie's hand, somehow Wagger's breath-filter unzipped open, and my snake-tail was gulping down the eel-creature whole.

After a few moments of confused startlement, and then a few moments of confused interfering with each other, we eventually managed to separate the two tubular torsos, though I, at least, was still pretty confused, and Aggie certainly acted that way.

"Maybe," she asked, stuffing the eel back into the counter-island, "it thought your tail was a pipe?"

"You can't tell?" I was making sure Wagger's lungs had completely exhaled before sealing up her protective filter again. "Anyway, maybe she thought your cleaner was lunch. Um... they're not people or anything like that, are they?"

"No, don't worry. Not all of our people can talk, but they can all sign. We're not really set up to support carnivorism, but can handle a certain level of losses, so if you really want to eat a few of our animals, that's not a problem. For now, you probably want to let your friends know I haven't kidnapped you, so how about you hop back on," and she raised and lowered her abdomen despite the extra weight that had to be inside it, "and we'll go join them?"

--

Somewhat later in the day, after watching Aggie deposit cleaning eels into wall-nozzles in random places of the Hive, or observing individual Eye-folk shape panels to fit a corridor or get trimmed into parts to build furniture, and other similarly exciting pieces of Hive life, Aggie led us to a room around the size of a basketball court, with a bunch of the panels forming a raised floor at one end, and a couple dozen pieces of chair-like furniture nearby, around half of which were filled with Hive personages of various anatomies. There was only one that I would have been willing to call 'humanoid', and even she would probably be better described as somewhere between 'chimpanzee' and 'rodent', with fingers and toes of wildly differing lengths and widths, plus a tail that was longer than most dogs - not longer than dogs' tails, but longer than the whole canine. One of the least human looked roughly like a flea blown up to doggyish size, with a pair of massive hind legs, and a couple of antenna-like appendages swooping back from what I could only call the 'head' because of the dark spots that I guessed were eyes. There was a harpy as interpreted by Giger but cutified by the Tron special-effects team, a mirrored sphere which had opened up a panel to reveal a humanish torso poking out like a snail, a tripod I couldn't have proven wasn't inspired by a Pierson's Puppeteer... and, spread out behind the furniture, the really odd shapes, for whom even the rough approximation of a chair was as silly as a hairbrush for a frog.

Almost all of them had various greebles and doodads that were, presumably, as useful to them as a tarantula's mouthparts was to it. Some looked less like the contents of a toolchest and more like rather sharp assortments of blades. I won't swear that that's what they were, but some looked more like the business ends of guns.

As Aggie herded us to some recognizable seats, interspersed between the less recognizable ones, she said, "We're not quite ready for a public show, but we've been rehearsing. Humans aren't the only ones who can put on a Shakespeare play worth watching."

I ended up with the lady with disturbingly inhuman hands to my left and the jumper to my right, and just in front of the pseudo-anorexic bird-lady.

"Popcorn?" asked the lady to my left, holding out a bag. Well, not quite 'holding'; her hand was on the side of it, but there wasn't any sign of how it was staying in place.

"Thanks," I said, demurring, "but I'm still not quite sure how to eat with this mask. At least, not without breathing in air I shouldn't."

"Okay," she agreed, taking the bag back - and picking up individual pieces of popcorn by touching them with the tip of her finger. "How long before you take the dive?"

"Pardon?"

"Aren't you here to join up?"

"Not... that I know of. On vacation, taking a tour, negotiating deals, then heading back to work in a few days. Uh... yourself?"

"Jumped in two years ago. Wasn't really expecting this," she waved her free hand at herself, "but I got over my agoraphobia the first time I dangled from the ceiling by one finger, and it's been a helluva lot better than my dad getting me married to the farmer next door."

"Ah. That's nice - I was wondering more about what you do in the present."

"Climb. 'S what I'm built for, and I'm better than anyone else around. Up, down, sideways, anything from hauling up construction materials to hanging the Christmas lights."

"And doing that, it's worth, well, the cost? No regrets about, say, getting a job in the city instead?"

"I didn't get a fancy education - all the jobs I tried, local city girls were better at. The People of the Eye took me in, and I could have stayed in a suit like yours, but figured it would be better to help 'em out. And here I am."

"Hm... and, by any chance, did someone suggest that you help out by sitting next to the rabbit-woman today?"

She flashed a wide grin at me, which I would have called 'innocent' anywhere else. "Can't pull any wool over your eyes, can I? Ron was supposed to be here, he ended up doing even better here than I did, but then someone heard you don't know sign after all, so I got subbed in." She leaned forward to look around me. "Wasn't Other Dave supposed to be in that chair, Morton?"

The mega-flea wriggled its forward limbs, and thrashed its feeler-things, for a few moments, and the gecko-grip woman rolled her eyes.

"Sorry," I said, "I missed that."

"He said he's just here to watch the show. Between you and me, I think he's mad at me - I can do a lot of the jobs he used to do, and then some, so these days he doesn't jump so much, and does a lot more crawling through tight spaces.

"I can see how that could make someone grumpy," I tried to be polite."

"You want grumpy?" came a new voice, from behind me. Turning around, I saw the underweight harpy lift a wing. "I'm a bird that can't fly. Not even a cool bird, like an ostrich or emu that can run like the dickens, or even a penguin; I could have gotten used to swimming. Anyone can see I'm /supposed/ to flap these things and get off the ground. But no, best // can do is keep from killing myself if I jump out of a tree."

"Um," I blinked, "If that's so, then... uh, why did you end up with that body at all?"

"Believe me, I've asked the same thing a million times. But that prick just floated in the middle of the big pile of jelly and said the Hive-

"Hey!" objected the handy woman, "'People of the Eye', if you please."

The bird woman resumed, "And said the /Hive/ needs someone like me when it gets this big. Never have gotten her to tell me what for. Nobody else needs to ask the question - they just figure out what they can do, and do it. Me, I don't have hands," she waved her wing again, sending the snail-woman back into her sphere with a curse to duck, "so I don't even get to help in the workshop.

Out of a slightly morbid sense of curiosity, I asked, "So, what /do/ you do?"

"Sometimes I herd the critters, sometimes I carry messages around... whenever I can, though, I head into town, and try to find the fanciest, most expensive drink any bar will serve to me. Officially I'm 'scouting' or 'providing public relation services to the locals', but I'm pretty sure even you can tell by now that that's just makework."

"If you're that unhappy here, why not leave?"

"What, and stop getting paid to go get drunk and look for guys who /really/ like feathers?"

From the front, a new voice called out: "May I have your attention please!" Our little circle of conversation, as well as a few others, died down. A man who didn't have legs, just a squarish pillar, was in the middle of the stage. "Thank you, everyone. As you may know, our theatre group is cooperating with one in town for an experimental production of Romeo and Juliet, where we play Romeo's family, and they play Juliet's. For our private practice, we have several people standing in for the human actors, and they'll be reading their parts from the script. The Montagues will be presenting their lines in sign language; and, for the benefit of our guests, we have a few people who'll be interpreting that back into the spoken word.

"We hope you enjoy the show."

\*\*\*

### \*Chapter Eleven: Off-erings\*

The play... wasn't great. I'd peg it around the level of a high school production. Of course, that's with half the cast literally reading their lines out of a book, and the other half having their lines interpreted by other people; so I figured that when they joined up with the other half of their cast, they just might be onto something.

I'd never actually watched *Romeo and Juliet* before. I'd absorbed all sorts of second-hand references through popular culture, and seen *West Side Story*, and had once gone through the Cliff Notes - but never the story itself from start to end. I immediately liked Benvolio for trying to break up a fight in the very first scene; and disliked Tybalt, whose irrational hatred was the only thing that was keeping the feud from dying out entirely, as it seemed to have almost already done (as demonstrated, for example, by Romeo being able to attend the Capulet masque).

I'll admit that I wasn't too fond of Romeo. First he thought he was in love with Rosaline, then turned out to have only been fond of her for her pretty face, being willing to toss her aside for Julia's prettier face, without knowing anything else about her. And, by Act II scene ii, he was willing to toss aside any idea of talking to Juliet's parents to try to arrange a marriage that would have settled the feud once and for all; but, instead, tried to live up to the young Juliet's adolescent ideas of secret messages and forbidden marriage. And /then/, even after Tybalt stabbed Mercutio (of neither house) and potentially faced the death sentence (which would have neatly removed the main source of friction between the houses), and all Romeo had to do to get everything he wanted was to be as quiet as he'd been a moment ago when he'd endured Tybalt's insults... the fool had to go challenge and kill Tybalt. Benvolio gets further props from me for his clever talking, reducing Romeo's sentence from execution to a potentially reversible banishment. Further idiocy abounded (this time in the form of Friar Laurence and his drug to make Juliet seem dead), and then the final stupidities of the twin suicides.

I wasn't feeling particularly cheerful when the actors took their bows, and was trying to stop thinking of how many ways any one of the characters could have known to do something different and get what they want when my chair was shoved forward, nearly toppling me. A quick turn showed the bird-lady rising from her seat and trying to fold her wings back out of the way. "Sorry," she said, her cyan markings glowing a little in what I was willing to interpret as a blush. "Instincts are one thing, practice is another."

I sighed, and would have waved a hand negligently if I could have. "Ah, don't worry about it."

The snail-girl pulled herself into her ball, closed it up, and rolled off, and while I tried to figure out how that trick was accomplished, the climber and jumper from either side of me, chatting with each other about something up on the rooftops. The climber turned to the bird girl, and asked, "Hey, want to come along? It's easy to get up, and you won't even need a safety harness."

"Nah," bird-girl answered. "There's a wagon heading to Story Town with my name on it, I just need to grab some sparklies first."

Ethel piped up, "'Sparklies'? Is that local slang for cash?"

"No, you know - sparklies. To look nice. Necklaces, chains, that sort of thing."

"Do you buy those, or make them? Are they owned by individuals, or in common, or-"

I gave a half-grin as Ethel tried to grill her on the local economic system, then winced as I stood, my arms figuring out they had to support my weight on the back of my chair when I swung them onto them.

Minerva came by, still clutching her be-bubbled pet, and said, "I think Toby the Dog is bored. Can I take him back to Munchkin to let him out?"

"I think I'll come with," I agreed. "I'd like to grab a cane."

For a spider-woman large enough for me to ride, Aggie could walk very quietly when she tried; I didn't even notice her, against the background of the other moving black-and-cyan bodies, until she was right with us. "The next stop on the tour may help with both your problems," she announced. "So how about we move along there, and then you can head back if you're still unhappy?"

"Eh," I shrugged, and in short order was back in the saddle as we took a ramp down, and then another, and so on. I asked the obvious, "How many levels do you have?"

"Just four," Aggie answered, then expanded, "Even though most of us prefer a good bit of solid rock overhead, we've been too busy getting the basics put in to focus on comfort. The first floor - that is, the first floor underground - is where almost everything is, the next two aren't much more than the stairwells, and all we've really got this low are some essentials."

Blue piped up, "Aren't we below the water table here? What do you use for pumps?"

"We don't need them," Aggie smiled, a bit tightly. "We're very good at building leak-proof tunnels. Now, everyone, please pay attention. We're about to enter a room that is very significant to all us People of the Eye. I'm going to ask for a certain amount of respect and decorum - maybe not what you'd use going into church, but at least as much as going into a hospital room, okay? There are a few people you're about to meet who I have a responsibility to, and they're... well, you'll see. If anyone thinks you can't handle that, just raise a hand, and I'll arrange for you to get to a lunchroom where you can take your filter masks off and breathe easily."

Blue groused, "Couldn't you have asked us that /before/ we came down all these stairs, and would have to climb back up without seeing the show?"

"Yes," Aggie agreed, "but I /want/ you all to come in. We've had a consensus for some time that letting outside people see this would be a bad idea, given how easily misinterpreted it could be, and how half-truths and rumours could ruin what little positive PR we've gotten so far. But with how low our PR metrics have gotten anyway, and especially now that we're getting ready to make some important bargains, the consensus has shifted to showing the truth."

I commented, "If this is such a disturbing sight, should we send Minerva up for lunch anyway?"

Minerva gave me a good old-fashioned teenager's glare, and Aggie rubbed the back of her head with one hand. "To be honest? Maybe. But from what I've read, she's already faced plenty of terrible things, and this isn't /that/ bad, in the overall scheme of things. I saw worse when I was growing up on my family's farm, dealing with the livestock."

"I'll stay," Minerva stated, and I shrugged and nodded, letting her choose for herself.

"Alright," Aggie said, as we reached the bottom landing, and another set of sliding doors. "Hokay. Remember - hospital room." She reached over to tap the wall-panel, the doors slid open, and my spidery steed stepped inside.

After that build-up, what we saw was a bit of a disappointment. A sort of balcony, large enough for about twice our group, including a safety rail; beyond which was a more dimly-lit room, larger, round, smooth-walled. I squinted a bit, and for once in quite some time, the sparkles my eyes saw of polarization helped me interpret what I was seeing: a great big hemisphere of see-through stuff, reaching from below our feet to above our heads; embedded in the middle of which was a mostly humanoid figure, in the now-traditional blue-and-cyan, whose main inhuman feature was that from the waist down, he had a solid pillar instead of legs, a pillar whose brightening-and-dimming patches lined up with similar ones on the floor. Floating around him were a few odd-shaped blocks, rings, and less-easily-interpretable shapes, some rotating, others' entire surfaces glowing. The see-through stuff didn't reach to the edges of the room, there was a couple of metres of walking space - not that anyone could walk, as, in three spots, three people blocked that gap with their own bodies. At least, I assumed they were their bodies, as not only did they have simple pillars instead of legs, but those small pillars were attached to larger structures, each of the trio surrounded by a three-quarters of a cylindrical framework of inscrutable black-and-cyan stuff.

"Okay," Aggie said quietly. "This is what makes us... us. As we are now, I mean. When someone joins the People of the Eye, they walk in there, and get... rebuilt."

Hattie asked, "Oh, so it's your transformation zone?"

Aggie shook her head emphatically. "No! Or, at least, not really. Maybe zones use some of the same tech... but this is entirely under /our/ control. Whatever our people there," she gestured at the quartet beyond the rail, "decide to tell the rebuilding tech to do, it does. But

there's a price to pay for that technology - human minds didn't evolve to be able to hold all the biochemical knowledge to keep someone alive while their organs are rebuilt, or replaced with immuno-compatible creations. So, to make this work at all, some people have to sacrifice... parts of themselves." She crossed her arms over her chest, staring at one of the trio. "It helps if you think of them as being autistic, even though that's not really true."

I asked the most obvious question. "Did they volunteer?"

Aggie just about whirled, glaring at me. "Of /course/ they volunteered, what do you think we are-" She deflated a bit. "Sorry. That's just... exactly the sort of half-truth we want to avoid. You can ask them yourselves, in a minute - well, kind of; Johnny, in the middle there, can't really hear or speak, for obvious reasons, so I guess you'll have to trust that I interpret his sign language honestly."

"I'm going to guess," I cautiously felt out, "that you're also trying to avoid any hints that you abduct people to transform them into more of you?"

The corner of Aggie's mouth tweaked, and she gave me an acknowledging nod. "Exactly. Not only does that go against just about every possible sane principle we have, it's also downright infeasible. That big field of blackgrass, outside? We don't need anywhere near that much solar-collection area just to feed ourselves. A large fraction of its output ends up right here, to power all the hard thinking that's needed to rewire even a small part of a human's brain without losing anything. In outsiders' economic terms, it's /expensive/ for us to rebuild a person. Animals, not so much, since there's less ethical issues in rewiring their instincts, and plain old objects, like suits or wall-panels, are pretty cheap."

Amy spoke up, "I've read some psychological papers on cult indoctrination methods... and some of the other forms of convincing people to join a group, like a club or sports team. A shared physical appearance helps to form bonds in all of them. Are these suits we're wearing really necessary, or are they part of your PR campaign?"

Aggie frowned. "Well - you could probably take off the suits, if you left on the masks - I could arrange for the animals to stay away from you. And, if you didn't mind increasing your odds of lung cancer, you /could/ take off the masks, too, but I /really/ don't recommend it. Lost my pa to cancer before I left home, it wasn't pretty."

Ethel looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to remember something. "If I remember right, don't cults also get their members to donate as much as they can, to benefit the higher members at their own expense? Just because I haven't found a pre-post-state social hierarchy /yet/ doesn't mean there /isn't/ one, and-"

I cleared my throat. "People. Perhaps we can continue this conversation a little later, and finish the tour for now?"

Aggie nodded, I thought in thanks, rolled her shoulders, and straightened her fore-torso back up. "Alright. Minerva, could you bring Toby closer to the railing here?"

Minerva clutched her bubble a bit closer. "That's Toby-the-Dog," she said. "You're not going to change her into one of you, are you?"

Aggie smiled as she shook her head. "No, I just want Johnny, Willie, Georgy, and Charlie to get a better look at her, so they can make her a suit in the right size."

Minerva hesitated, then nodded, and walked up to the rail, shifting her grip on the bubble to just hold the bottom. Toby the Dog uncurled her tentacles from a what looked like a nap more relaxing than anything with a spine could manage, and raised her head to look around the new area. Aggie joined her, and started signing, the lines on her arms brightening. She explained as she did, "The four of them know you're outsiders, and are trying to be on their best behaviour... but they know they don't know how to behave properly, so they're trying to hold still. I'm telling them it's okay for them to, well, do anything, and asking them to make a suit for Toby. Sorry, Toby the Dog."

One of the trio, the one closest to our right, started sliding along the gap towards us, without any visible method of locomotion, until he came to a stop where the rail met the wall. His near-cylinder rotated, so that he faced us - well, until he faced Toby the Dog, who he stared intently at. He started signing as well, and Aggie looked to him, and started interpreting, "Charlie's asking to see Toby the Dog's underside - could you hold her up higher?" Minerva complied, and Aggie continued, "Okay, that's good. Now he's asking what you use Toby the Dog for, and making some guesses, and describing how a suit would be different depending on which use, whether she looks at things for you, or fetches, or - er, well, there are lots of things a pet with tentacles can be used for, I don't need to say them all." Her cyan patches flared a bit at that, but none of the other folk on the tour seemed to notice.

Minerva just answered, "She's, well, she's Toby the Dog. She does what every Toby the Dog does - I've got her trained to act in the puppet show, and do tricks for the customers, and carry a hat around for pennies after the performances... but I don't think she's going to do any of that in a suit, is she?"

Aggie shrugged a bit, then turned back to Charlie, and started signing again, though her words didn't seem to have anything to do with the signs. "She could, if you liked - a lot of us here don't get to go out to see shows, and I'm sure a bunch of us would enjoy whatever you and Toby the Dog could show us, once we're done here."

"Really?" Minerva perked up. "Nobody here in the city's liked /any/ of my shows since I got here. They think my stories are 'weird' or 'not right' or need 'just a few changes' to get right."

"It's up to you," Aggie said, "but in case you haven't noticed, we're not quite like the rest of the people in the city."

The pair smiled at each other, and Minerva said, "I'll go get my theatre out of Munchkin once we're back upstairs."

"Good," Aggie agreed, then stepped to the side. "Alright, everyone, here's the show. Such as it is."

In the transparent whatever, between us and Johnny, a swirling motion caught my eyes, though I wasn't sure anyone with more standard eyes would be able to make it out. Charlie turned, reaching into the wall around the corner, out of our sight, then turned again, carrying an armful of black stuff which he shoved into the hemisphere. It looked like it had the consistency of Jello, closing back up as Charlie pulled his arms out; and the black stuff unfurled, or was unfurled, into sheets of various sizes. They were pulled (or pushed, or whatever verb might apply) to the swirling spot, and folded, bent, curled, and generally rearranged into a roughly octopoid shape. Within a few moments, the loose shape tightened, until it matched Toby the Dog's current limb placements; and various excess bits were swept back towards Charlie. After a few more moments, in a wave from top to bottom, various parts started glowing blue-green.

"And there we go," Aggie announced. "Toby the Dog is small enough that we could use some of the scrap pieces from making other suits."

Minerva looked down at Toby the Dog, then the suit floating just inside the Jello-stuff. "... How do I put it on her?"

Aggie said, "Well, if you don't want to open the bubble in this air, you could take her and the suit back up to your Munchkin, and put her in it in there - or, if you trust me and Johnny, you could put the bubble in the tech and let Johnny put it on her for you."

Minerva chewed on the bottom of her lip a moment before she said, "Well... she's /really/ wriggly, and I don't know if I /could/ get her into that on my own..." She stepped forward, until her belly was pressing into the rail, and held the bubble forward. Aggie signed a few things, and the 'tech' bulged towards Minerva, until it engulfed her hands and the Bubble. It was a little confusing to make out what happened next, but Toby the Dog's suit floated toward her, there was a flurry of motion, and the tech-goop retreated, with a be-suited octo-kitty sitting in Minerva's arms, and no sign of the bubble at all.

And then Toby the Dog jumped down, raced to Hattie, and started clambering up her - presumably towards her own be-bubbled pet, the plushie parrot on her shoulder.

Two minutes later, the tech-goop had produced a leash and collar from a few more suit-scraps, which Toby the Dog was wrestling with as if it were a feather on a string, and Aggie cleared her throat for our attention.

"The other half of the demonstration isn't for anyone with a weak stomach. I'm going to have Johnny perform an induction on an animal. There's not going to be any pain or permanent harm, but there will be some blood and organs visible. Would anyone like to go up and get something to eat and drink instead?" She looked around at each of us, focusing for a few extra seconds on Minerva, but none of us backed out. "Alright. We've got a selection of

animals in the rooms around here, waiting their turns. But I offered Her Majesty here a cane, so Johnny is going to bring in a snake."

The figure on the left slid, as noiselessly as Charlie had, to a particular point along the wall, which, at no visible sign, opened into a cupboard-sized, red-glowing cubby, which turned out to be deeper than it initially seemed, as he reached in to withdraw about three feet of sleepy-looking snake. As he turned around to insert it into the tech-goop, Aggie continued to narrate, "I don't think this is one of the standard designs, but Johnny and the others are good at saving time and energy by combining bits and pieces from things they've already made." Charlie started signing, and Aggie continued, "It looks like they're going to rebuild it - no, her - so that when she relaxes, her muscles hold her rigid, and... I'm sorry, I'm not getting the chemical details, but it sounds like her skin will go hard, like an exoskeleton? And now they're discussing various options to make her a more useful tool, making sure she can coil up out of the way, and follow you around until you need her. Oh - Your Majesty, they're offering to let you keep her after you leave, if you want. If you do, they're asking for a sample of your - ah, more biochem again. It looks like they want your scent and some skin-cells, so they can tie her to your biology instead of your suit."

To cover my thoughts about the possible security risks involved in letting the tech-goop get a 'sample' of me compared to how many other ways the Hive could get some of Bun-Bun's cells if they really wanted, I asked, "I'm not sure that would be feasible - how would I feed her? /What/ would I feed her?"

"Even before these four start applying their tricks, reptiles don't need a lot of food-energy, compared to mammals. And in case you forgot, all us People of the Eye, including Animals of the Eye, can eat regular food - black-grass is better for us, but it's more like the ideal health-food instead of the only thing we can eat. You could let her hunt for herself, or buy meat - or, if you really want, we can even get you a keg of nutrient fluid to get you started with."

I wiggled my toes a bit, and my thoughts drifted in another direction. With my arm-bots blinded, even a cane would only help me so much - and Bun-Bun seemed to be in no particular hurry to regenerate our amputated arms, perhaps due to Streams absorbing all the free nutrients in our bloodstream. I felt a pang, missing Brenda being my arms, and briefly considered asking Aggie if Johnny and his friends could do anything to help with her, one way or another... but decided that I should at least finish the tour and sleepover, so I could learn as much as I could about them, before I entrusted these people with that particular one of my secrets. Aloud, I finally said, "I suppose that sounds workable. I'm going to assume that if she - does she have a name yet?"

"Not yet," Aggie negated.

"Well," I mused, "I've already called one snake-thing Yormy, so I suppose I could call this one Borey, after Ouroboros."

Blue piped up, "Wouldn't shortening that be 'Ore-y'? Or even Orey-borey?"

"Maybe," I shrugged, "but I'm used to nicknames that start with consonants - starting with 'or' just doesn't sound right. Now, where was I - right. I'm going to assume that if Borey and I get separated, she'll do alright on her own, until she makes her way back here?"

Aggie signed to the quartet, a couple of whom signed back. She said, "They could give her the instincts to come here, yes. But one snake more or less isn't going to make any real difference to us, so they're suggesting that she follow your trail wherever it leads."

I paused. "That sounds uncomfortably like," I didn't say 'the Imprinting and bimbofication in Erie', "brainwashing."

Aggie wiggled a hand. "Maybe kinda-sorta. But one, she's an animal; two, it's not really anything more than training her for a trick, just saving all the time that training would take, and three, if you ever did get in enough trouble that you got split up, don't you think it would be worth it for your friends to have a critter that can find you wherever you're dragged off to?"

"I'm a touch paranoid - if you can make a critter that can find me while we're friends, that kind of implies that someone who's /not/ my friend could do the same."

"Couldn't anyone who could do that, already do that whatever we do?"

"Hm. I hate it when the side I'm arguing against makes more sense than I do." I ran through a quick set of goal-trees, and the biggest negative that came up was if the Hive became unfriendly to me, or the puppet of someone else who was. Sure, they might be able to give Borey a 'Manchurian Candidate' trigger to have her attack me if they chose - but even if they did, even the inventory I currently had in my bare-minimums vest should be enough to keep my alive in facing a single unintelligent reptile. And, given that Aggie seemed to want me to feel favourable enough to the Hive to want to make a deal, and there were so many other things that they could do to me while I was in their home if they felt unkind, that there seemed little risk of any such unpleasantness in the first place.

I still made a mental note to assume that Borey would be rebuilt to have eidetic memory, and that the locals would be able to find out everything that she heard, saw, or smelt; and to take appropriate infosec precautions.

"Alright," I slowly nodded. "At worst, I can bring her back here, and you can have her do, well, whatever it is you'd have an 'inducted' snake do, right?"

"That we can," Aggie agreed. Eyeing the quartet of semi-immobile fellows, she said, "And I'd better head them off - they're brainstorming fairly wild ideas about what else they could rebuild Borey to do."

My ears raised, showing my curiosity even to the people who couldn't read my suit's bio-reading outputs. "Are you sure? I'm always up for a tool that lets me do something I couldn't before."

"There are ideas," Aggie said, "and then there are ideas. So far I've caught giving her a sharpened tail-tip and instincts to coil up and launch herself like a spear... letting her feed you by, um, bypassing your taste buds and regurgitating directly into your stomach... having her produce nootropics to inject with a bite..."

"Ah," I said. "Well, lethal instincts are a bad idea when children may be around, I have specialized dietary needs that that method probably wouldn't suffice for, and I have my own gadget to increase my brainpower when I need it. But if they really want a further design idea, how about be a bit open-ended, and let me have a range of choice as any given circumstances permit, and let her carry things for me?"

Aggie signed to the quartet, whose own signing changed character slightly. Aggie rolled her eyes, but turned back to me, and said, "Okay, they agreed to that, and are working out the details - something about letting her carry arbitrary objects without interfering with digestive processes." She leaned back, and whispered, "It looks like they're going to set up /all/ her orifices to allow that, but you don't have to use anything but her mouth."

"Say," Blue asked, "if Her Highness doesn't like the changes you make to the snake now, can she bring it back and have you change it again?"

Before Aggie answered, Ethel added, "That reminds me. I was talking to a woman who had been Changed - sorry, 'inducted' - into a shape that had non-working wings instead of hands. Why hasn't she come down here to get them changed back into arms?"

Miss Neckline also, finally, took the opportunity to speak. "I am also curious," she rumbled, "if your people here can handle increasing the number of brains an animal or person has, to something more useful than the raw material you start with."

Aggie rubbed the back of her head again. "Well, to answer all of you, I could just say 'it's complicated', but none of you would be happy. So, one at a time. Actually, the answer to the first two is pretty much the same. Rebuilding a body wouldn't be that hard; it's rebuilding the brain to be able to handle yet another new body that's really tricky. Our good fellows here use, well, I'll call them shortcuts, or maybe tricks, since they let them rewire a regular brain to one that can use their newly inducted body without rewiring a /lot/ of the brain. I couldn't explain the biology if I tried, but apparently, a lot of these tricks only work once. Ignoring the cost of the physical changes, taking a rewired brain and trying to rewire it again uses up more energy in the processing than rebuilding a full brain and body the first time around. Our population is still increasing, so if we need a particular body-form, it's less expensive to just induct our newest member to have it, then to alter one of our existing members into it. I could go into more details about our internal economy, and what something 'costing' energy means to us, but that would take long enough we should probably do that when you all can sit down."

Ethel started to say, "What about changes that don't need to change the br-"

But Aggie held up a hand, and deliberately turned to look at Neckline. "Rewiring a brain is hard and expensive already. Trying to come up with a brand new design to increase an animal's intelligence would be prohibitively expensive. And that's assuming we had any idea /how/. " She gestured at the quartet. "They know more about biology than I'll ever be able to learn, and so they could be said to be smarter than me. But they don't have any episodic memory. They know all their designs, and have a good idea how big the Hive is - but I'd rather not trade my life for theirs if I could help it. I /like/ the sunshine."

"That is not quite what I meant," said Neckline. "I did not mean improving any one brain, but adding another to a living body."

"Hm? Hm," Aggie considered. "Well, there's never been a reason to try, and a bunch not to, but if it ever came up, Johnny and the boys are clever. If we really needed two heads on one body, I expect they could work out all the issues. They'd probably even enjoy the novel challenge."

"That is still not quite what I meant," Neckline repeated, but her further clarification was cut off.

For just about the first time since we'd walked into the hive, Ida spoke up. "Where are the children? Why haven't I seen any children since we got here? What do you /do/ to all the /children/?"

"Ssh, ssh," Aggie pressed her hands down against the air, trying to quiet Ida down, glancing nervously back across the railing. "Hospital room, remember? Out of respect for the people who can't leave?"

Ida started, "I don't-!" but cut herself off. Her draconic jaw worked left and right a few moments before growling, "Fine. But I still want to know."

"That's fine," Aggie nodded, still looking like she was trying to soothe Ida. "Questions like that are why you're here, and I'm here to answer them. To start with, we don't induct children, and unless there's some medical emergency and the parent or guardian asks us to, we never will. We could have a discussion about when a kid becomes capable of consent, but reasonable people can disagree on specific ages and self-emancipation and competence and non-human growth patterns and all sorts of details. On a practical level, to keep from being lynched by our neighbours, we've got a working consensus to apply Metropolis's laws on when a kid turns into an adult and can make their own choices."

Ida crossed her arms. "And your own kids?"

Aggie lowered her hands to where her human-shaped torso met the front of her arachnid form. "In case you hadn't noticed, I haven't got the plumbing. As far as I know, even those of us who look like they do, don't. I mean, internally."

Blue blinked a few times, and leaned in. "So, wait, you mean you can't, you know?"

Aggie rolled her eyes. In a voice low enough that Minerva probably couldn't hear, she answered, "I'll just say that there's more to enjoying yourself than what's between your legs." Returning her voice to normal, she continued, "We put a lot of thought and effort into managing our growth rate, both in terms of our numbers, and in terms of room and black-grass and other, well, stuff. Even with some of our people built just for tunneling, digging is still hard work and takes time and energy. We've actually got more people from Metropolis, and the neighbouring agricultural belt, who want to join than we're really comfortable accepting, so that's where all our growth is coming from now."

Ida pressed, "'Now'?"

Aggie sighed just a little, but gamely continued. "This goes back to something Ethel asked. Yes, Johnny and the boys can change our bodies in ways that don't need brain re-wiring - and one of those ways is to let us have kids. When our immigration rate goes down, we'll do just that. One reason we don't is... well, every single one of us knows exactly how we can help everyone else out, and how much our work is appreciated. Changing our bodies almost always means we couldn't help as much."

I commented, "That's not quite what it sounded like, from what I heard from the winged woman Ethel started talking with."

"Ah. Well." Aggie rubbed the back of her head again. "As the saying goes, there's consensus, and then there's consensus."

Neckline opined, "I do not think that is actually a saying."

"Well, anyway," Aggie rallied, "there's work, and then there's work."

Neckline tilted her head. "I do not think that is a saying, either."

"Fine, fine. I know who you're talking about, and while gossip is a bad thing, being unclear to all of you is worse. Word around the campfire is that when she joined, she wasn't smart enough for any of the white-collar jobs, and adjusting her instincts so she'd enjoy physical labour would have needed a lot of brain rewiring, so out of all the potential jobs she could have been rebuilt for when she was inducted, the boys down under here pegged her for public relations and community outreach." She glanced back at the quartet, then back at us. "And it looks like they've settled on a design, so are there any more questions before we watch the rebuild?"

"I've got one," Blue said, forehead scrunched as if trying hard to think. "If everyone who joins you gets a new body picked for them, and maybe won't be able to, you know, and you get even worse press than regular Changed... how the heck've you got more people trying to join up than you can handle?"

"There's no easy answer to that, since everyone has their own reasons. But it's not hard to cover a lot of cases: we can give people something they need and want, that they can't get anywhere else: a safe place to live, a family who'll accept and care for them, meaningful work to spend their time on. A lot of our members are younger children from large farming families, who aren't going to inherit any land, and until they found out about us, faced a choice between reclaiming enough land for their own farm from scratch or going to the big city to try to find a job and not get caught by any of the unfamiliar dangers of the urban jungle. Any other questions?"

"Yeah," Blue said, "Why do you all live here, instead of-"

"Any other questions that can't wait for a few minutes?" A brief silence, then Aggie nodded. "Right. Anyone with a strong stomach, line up at the rail for a good view. Your Majesty, would you mind pulling up your mask's neck a bit so I can get a few hairs with the roots? That seems the simplest way." I complied, baring my throat to her in a gesture that seemed to have a good bit of metaphor alongside the physical, successfully avoided wincing as Aggie pulled out a small tuft, and tucked the suit and mask back into place as she examined her prize to make sure it wasn't all just keratin. Leaning over the rail, she held it out towards the hemisphere's surface, which obligingly bulged out a hump to engulf her hand for a few seconds.

At which time Johnny started signing rapidly, and both Willie and Georgy slid up to each end of the railing. "Um," Aggie said, blinking a few times. "Johnny's upset. He says... you don't 'work'? He says you're going to keel over... uh, dead, any time now, but there's enough time for him to fix you if you jump in? Something... hormone levels? Epigenetic information?"

Getting a lot of stares from just about everyone, I chewed on my lip a moment before asking, "Not that I have any intention of dying - but could you ask him if whatever's wrong with me should have killed me already, if I've been walking around for a few months?"

Aggie turned from Johnny to look at me, frowned, then turned back and signed. Johnny signed back, and she interpreted, "He says you're a liar, you can't be more than a month old. Probably not even a week. ... I'm confused."

I nodded to myself. "Okay. I think I know what's going on. Try telling him that there's more going on with my biology than just the genes from my skin and hair cells." I didn't want to spread the info about Bun-Bun having her own personality running on our shared skeleton if I didn't have to, or her control over various aspects of our biology. I was, however, a little disturbed to find out that if anything happened to Bun-Bun's mind, I apparently had something like a week to live without her active management of our bodily functions. "I'm almost entirely certain I'm more than a week old, so he doesn't have to worry about me."

"Now he's asking if he can disassemble you to see how you work."

"I think you can guess my answer to that. We haven't even seen what that looks like on the snake yet."

"And he's disappointed, but I think he'll forget about that soon enough. I'll ask him again to start on Borey - and I'll tell the boys to make sure to let us see what they're up to."

As Ethel said, "And here I was only going to ask if the fact that all four appear to be male has any significance," I slid down from Aggie's back to lead forward and rest my elbows on the rail, and we all watched the snake's skin get unzipped, slid off, and then the rest of it get carefully disassembled - while its lungs still pumped and its blood still flowed.

Ida asked, a touch shakily, "That doesn't... /hurt/, does it?"

Aggie answered, "It didn't when I went in. They know how to rearrange neurons - I'm pretty sure they can control the signals when they cut and reweave them. If, er, Borey is awake right now, she might feel like she's curled up on a warm rock, or something else a snake enjoys."

At various places under the bottom of the large hemisphere, small doors opened, and bits and pieces floated up and out. (I had a brief fancy that we were looking at the top half of a spherical aquarium, with organs of all shapes and sizes swimming around down below.) They mingled with the broken-up snake, whose own pieces were shading into new colours, and Aggie said, "We can only see the most obvious part of what's going on. There's all kinds of microsurgery being done right before our eyes, tweaking existing tissues and cells and extracellular matrices - look, come down here often enough and you do pick up a /little/ biology - to Eye-People norm. I couldn't tell you /everything/ about what that involves, but it includes fixing our vitamin C cycle, and some other tweaks so we can get by without eating any of the 'essential' vitamins and minerals a baseline human needs. And... hunh, they're already reassembling her? Last time I was here, they had to just about take the liver apart to individual cells. Well, maybe they figured out a quick fix for whatever that was. And, Your Majesty, if you will kindly hold out your hand?"

Not without a little trepidation, I whispered a few words to my arm-bots, and reached over the railing, palm up; as the serpent, scales now matte black, slithered through what almost looked like midair in my direction. The hemisphere bulged, but only a little, not all the way to my hand - and Borey bridged the gap without a pause, wrapping around my wrist, then the rest of my arm, until her head was on top of my shoulder, tongue flickering at my cheek. As soon as she was in place, parts of her body brightened in the same shade of blue-green that my own suit was lined with.

"Well," I said, letting my arm drop, "I've had worse introductions. Um - how do I convince her to be more cane-like?"

Aggie gave a quick chuckle. "Try walking?"

I rolled my eyes at her, but gamely turned around, adjusted my stance to support my own front-heavy weight - and that was as far as I got before Borey twisted herself around, sliding down my arm until her tail-tip was on the ground, and her head held within my palm.

Fortunately, my arm-bot seemed to have at least some idea of what was going on, perhaps by listening, and took hold of her, at which point Borey finished moving by twisting her head into a gentle curve. I took a step - and Borey didn't just stay frozen in place like a piece of wood, but swung herself so her lower tip was ready in place to hit the ground and support my weight before I even thought to move her there myself. It took a few more steps before I got the knack of letting her do the work for herself; I turned back around, placed both hands on Borey's head right in front of my belly. "How do we look?"

Minerva answered, "With all that black? Like a comic-book bad-guy. When you take your suit off? ... I dunno, a pink bunny with a black snake still seems a bit odd."

"Eh," I sighed, walking back to Aggie and her saddle - I certainly wasn't planning on climbing all those stairs under my own power - "Anyone who doesn't like snakes already has to deal with Wagger."

"Yeah, but she's fuzzy and cute."

"Mm. Mm, while we're here, better make sure the two of them get along - don't want to discover they'll try to eat each other halfway to Erie." I swung Wagger around and forward, and turned Borey so they could face each other. Wagger's tongue flickered, and Borey un-stiffened enough to flicker back, and... that was it.

"So!" Aggie clapped her hands together. "Who's up for pizza?"

"That reminds me," Amy said, waddling over. "Time for your next dose. Don't ask me where she'd kept the pill-bottle - she'd probably been taking some concealment lessons from my own paranoid packing - but I quickly slipped one of the lozenges through my mask and started sucking.

Aggie looked up and down at me, and said, "Hm. Well, you'd better get aboard, Your Majesty - wouldn't want you climbing stairs in your state."

\*\*\*

\*Chapter Twelve: Off-site\*

In the clean-air room, Neckline and I skipped the pizza, much to my own disappointment if not hers, but the Eye-folk had also kindly provided a reasonable facsimile of Buffalo wings for the carnivorously-inclined.

"Alright," I said to Aggie, the two of us off to the side where the others couldn't hear us over the sounds of pizza-eating. "Are you really claiming that the worst thing about your group is the brains of Johnny and the others not working the same anymore? Or are you saving the real revelation for when the reporter isn't close enough to overhear?"

Lowering a bottle of cherry-flavoured carbonated soda from her mouth, she discreetly burped, then said, "I was hoping you wouldn't want to press further, but our consensus was that I should be ready if you did. Even with the new open-access policy, there are a few things we'd rather not emphasize to the press just yet... depending on how bad the reaction from today is, maybe not at all."

"Does any of it involve harm to the helpless?"

"Of /course/ not!"

"Then we almost certainly have room to work things out. So what kinds of problematic issues are we talking about?"

"There's two, really. Well, three - or four, if you want to count them that way. Five, maybe? But they all come from pretty much the same one."

I couldn't resist the slight snark of, "How /very/ specific of you."

"Yeah, yeah. You've got the easy job, here. I've got to figure out how to talk about all this in the way that best helps all my friends and family here. Even if I got picked as having the best chance of convincing you to help us, that doesn't mean I've got any /real/ idea what I'm doing."

I bobbed my unmasked head in polite acknowledgement, and went back to nibbling on a spicy mini-drumstick while she worked out what she needed to work out.

"Okay," she finally said. "I think I know where to start, and I've even got a good bridge. All of us People of the Eye? We've all got a good idea how everyone else is feeling. Nothing supernatural, and we can't read thoughts, but just by glancing at each other, and seeing how we're lit up, we just /know/. Well, /feel/. Both, I guess."

I hazarded, "Mirror neurons get strengthened when you get inducted?"

"Er... maybe. Anyway, it has all sorts of good points. But it also means we can get out of practice talking to outside people, like you. The suits you're all in today help some, but what they show is really fuzzy compared to what we sense from anyone else here. More about how you're doing physically than how you're feeling. Outside people who haven't got a suit? Most of us start feeling a bit nervous about how blank you are, which starts spiralling... I don't know how Helen manages."

"Helen?"

"The winged woman you and Ethel were talking to earlier. So we have some built-in troubles right off the bat trying to socialize with outside people. And compared to that, when two of us People disagree, we /know/ when we're arguing in good faith with each other, and what part of the argument makes us mad and not thinking straight, and so on... so we almost always

find a consensus without even trying hard, just because there's no point in trying anything else."

"Almost' always?"

"Sometimes people can have honest disagreements, even after all the bullshit is cut through. Like whether the risk of opening us up today was going to be worth the risk of negative publicity. Which brings up one of the problems of consensus being so common - when we really do have a disagreement, we don't have much practice in resolving it, so it just kind of... hangs out. If you weren't committed to leaving in a few days, we probably would have just kept disagreeing with each other until it was too late to do anything."

"So... a loose timeline leaves you paralyzed with indecision, but when you've got a deadline, you can work to it?"

"If by 'work to it' you mean, 'those of us who wanted to make a deal with you work our buns off trying to convince everyone else', sure."

"That still sounds a lot better than most political systems I know of. What's that old saw about democracy - that it's the worst government possible, except for all the other ones that have been tried? An imperfect overall decision-making process isn't necessarily evidence that you're doing anything wrong. In fact, being able to, as you put it, cut through all the bullshit sounds like it could be leveraged for all sorts of good."

"Our members are members of a variety of religions. 'Consensus' doesn't necessarily mean 'the decision that does the most good'."

"Ah. Okay, I begin to start comprehending the outer edge of your difficulties."

"You may think so now, but-"

Aggie stopped talking, and I turned to see Hattie, her parrot, and a plate of pizza wandering in our direction. "What's the word? Anything my readers will want to know about?"

I shook my head, and dissembled, "Sorry, I'm invoking the security clause of our arrangement. I'm always a little nervous when I'm this far from Munchkin, and Aggie and I are working towards a consensus on better security arrangements. I'd rather those not get publicly printed, even after the fact."

"Ah, pity. Well, do let me know when I can start listening in again, will you?"

I nodded, Hattie wandered off again, and when I turned back to Aggie, she had a peculiar expression. "You're wearing something close to a full-body lie detector," she said, "and I still can't tell if you were being honest to her, or trying to deceive her, or what."

"Everything I told her was true in detail, and it was true in the broadest possible sense. Maybe there's some middle levels where it could be called deceptive, but even if it was, I'm doing so to try to save the most lives and do the most good possible, so why quibble? Well, other than about the 'full-body lie detector', which sounds a touch more worrisome than a protective suit that displays some of my bio-readings... are you sure /I/'m the one you should be asking about lying?" I offered her one of my wider smiles.

Aggie rubbed her forehead in a fairly standard face-palm. "I hate politics."

"Welcome back to the human race. So, was this consensus-thing your one-to-five problematic issues?"

"Not hardly. Have I mentioned that transferring coffee - I mean, nutrient-fluid - is pleasurable?"

"... Do I want to ask 'how pleasurable'?"

"You know a lot about pre-apocalypse science. Do you know enough zoology to know what a 'bonobo' is?"

"... I'm not going to be the one to tell the other people on the tour what they were doing when they were transferring fluid from their suits to your animals."

I nibbled on another wing a moment, then Aggie added, "Some of our appliances use the same nutrient fluid."

I very carefully swallowed, then took a sip from my homemade soda to clear the pipes before managing to ask, "Does that mean you, uh, with your toasters?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. We've got electricity, and toasters are just resistors that emit heat usefully. Now, our air conditioners, on the other hand..."

I closed my eyes and took a breath, glad I'd taken anti-spit-taking precautions. "Well. I can see how that could cut down on your membership drive. But it's your business, and it's not like I haven't heard of stranger practices. ... You know, it's not even the idea itself that's disturbing - I've got all sorts of stories I could tell you, if it weren't for security blackouts - I'm just stuck trying to imagine an air conditioner that's capable of enjoying ... well, anything, really."

When I opened my eyes back up, Aggie was slumped a bit, but had a soft smile. "Well. If you can handle /that/ that easily, I think we're going to be good. Everything else that might be a problem is abstract, not... visceral. I think we really bet on the right horse, picking you as a potential partner."

"Eh, I've been buttered-up more often than I care for already, and I'm more than willing to change my mind based on completely abstract ideas. Wouldn't be here in the first place if I hadn't. So hit me."

She shrugged. "Well, there's the one question that's been looming over us forever, that nearly nobody actually bothers to ask: Where did the People of the Eye come from in the first place? Our system is obviously designed, and if Johnny and the boys are any clue, then it had to be designed by someone smarter than any human. And we don't have anyone we can ask, because all the original members died during the move from Cincinnati. ... It's kind of why they had to move in the first place."

"I could ask if you're sure those /were/ the first members, but that's probably another conversation entirely. There's lots of things running around these days, where we've got little clue about where they came from - giant monsters, new species, new subcultures. Why worry more about your group's origins than any of theirs?"

"At least in part, because all our brains got rewired when we joined. How can we know that we're really thinking straight, when we think about it? Nobody who's joined the People of the Eye has ever asked to be changed back; does that mean that something we should be worried about is going on, or that the consensus is right that life here is just really that good? And even if our individual lives are only improved, is there something going on with our collective behaviour, like how an ant colony is more than just the lives and actions of the individual ants?"

"Those are all good questions," I agreed. "You're not the only one who faces similar ones, these post-Singularity days. I've got a few of my own. About all I can offer is one piece of advice, which I learned long ago: try to figure out what difference any answers would make to your actions, and if you can't think of any, well, there's plenty more problems that have to be faced and thought about and dealt with."

"Sounds fairly... hard-nosed. Don't you ever worry about the big issues, even if you can't do anything about them?"

"Remind me to show you my First Proclamation sometime. When I've got downtime, sure, I'm as willing to gab about pointless abstract meanderings as anyone else. Oh, and in case you didn't notice, my particular approach has ended up with me needing a week of psychiatrist-enforced vacation, so take my advice with some salt. Hm... out of curiosity, out of all the answers you've thought of for these questions, what's your best-case scenario? The answer you like most, and most want to be true?"

"Ah. Well - what I /hope/ is that we were designed with a purpose in mind: that we're a backup, in case another apocalypse happens, like gray goo sweeping across the Earth. We don't need an atmosphere, just some rocks and a power source, like solar-power from black-grass or lots of stored coffee."

My nose twitched, and I tried not to grin. "So - your /best/ case is that everyone else on the planet gets wiped out, and you bury yourselves until you can inherit the Earth?"

"That's not-!" I stopped hiding my grin, and she snorted. "Fine, so it's not a /great/ answer. It's just better than any others I've thought of."

"Hm..." I looked off at the corner between the walls and ceiling. "Just how long /could/ you stay buried? No, put another way - how much power do you need to stay buried for, say, a year?"

She blinked rapidly. "I'm not /completely/ sure, but I think I can work that out. Lemme get a pen and some more napkins for the math..."

"No, don't worry about that - just say the numbers out loud, and I think I can work it out." I consciously avoided even trying to pat Boomer, regardless of the fact that my arm-bots were already at the limit of their programming getting my food to my mouth while blindfolded.

"Well, if you're sure. I know we get around two thousand, two hundred eighty hours of sunlight per year here, and that black-grass is around eight percent efficient at converting sunlight into sugars. Once we get our full fifteen hundred acres planted, we'll have just enough to feed all hundred fifty People of the Eye, plus all the animals, air conditioners, and so on, including socking away the consensus percentage into storage, and including giving Johnny and the boys enough to think up all the changes they need."

At a near-inaudible whisper, I nodded, "That works out to five point four terajoules per year." She blinked, as I thought some more. Munchkin's fusion reactor produced sixty megawatts at max output, which would use up around two hundred twenty-two kilograms of lithium over a year, which would produce near enough to nineteen hundred terajoules. The three hundred kilograms that Walter the Wizard had sent to the embassy would be enough to power a Hive with a population of a hundred fifty for... well over four centuries. Less, if they expanded their numbers. That would be a heckuva good length of time to wait for a wave of gray goo to die out... if I weren't busy using Munchkin to try to find a way to keep said gray goo, or whatever the Second Singularity might be, from starting in the first place.

But, for the first time since I found the November Files, I was looking at what could at least be argued to be a better use of that fusion reactor than I was using it for. I'd gotten rather used to Munchkin as one of the few fixtures in my post-first-death life, and even the idea of taking it apart unsettled my stomach. (I was /pretty/ sure that wasn't from the wings' hot sauce.) Which was probably a sign that I should spend more time seriously considering donating Munchkin to the Hive, at least to the point that I could look at the idea without flinching.

Aggie was thoughtfully letting me work through all this without pestering me, possibly cued by my suit. "Fifteen hundred acres isn't peanuts," I said aloud, aiming my thoughts in a direction other than Munchkin's confidential (if not necessarily secret, after that vehicle-wide X-ray that had been taken by an unknown party) power source. "Especially if you plan to

keep increasing your numbers. Munchkin only has so much cargo room - what would be involved in moving to a new site? Does that whole hemisphere thing Johnny was embedded in have to be moved at once?"

"There's moving, and then there's moving. A certain fraction of the People of the Eye produce the tech-goop stuff that hemisphere is made of, and, well, lay it like eggs. In theory, any one of them could rebuild our whole society from scratch, just by themselves... though they'd have to sacrifice their mind, to replace Johnny, to induct the first new member. ... In fact, Helen's real job is to be one of the Hive's backup servers, and letting her go out and get drunk and laid these days is... thanks and payment in advance for her future sacrifice."

"I remember some of Graves' theories on prehistoric Greek kings, who got a life of luxury for a whole year before being killed. If I ask Helen, is she going to know about this?"

"She knows. It's not something she likes to think about, so she tries not to. And yes, she knew before she was inducted - it was the wings instead of hands that really surprised her."

"Mm. I'll be double-checking on that, later. So - if you only need one, what do you need me and Munchkin for?"

"Risk management. The more tools, coffee, and people we can move intact from our current site, the more likely the new one will be able to weather whatever storms come its way. Not to mention, we'd rather avoid any of our people getting stuck performing inductions for the rest of their lives if they don't want to - I'll be happy if Helen keeps hitting bars for the next thirty years."

"Fair enough. Do you have a particular destination in mind?"

"In general, but we're not strongly committed to it, due to our lack of knowledge of geography outside the local area. Perhaps we could discuss this later, when we can go over maps while the other tour guests aren't waiting for us?"

"Mm. I have a spot I'm already thinking of, which could be to both our benefits for you to colonize; I'd just need some help dealing with a particular aspect of it first, and from what I saw of the audience at the play, it's possible your group may be one of the best possible to help me with that..."

--

I begged off a wagon-tour of the black-grass fields, invoking unspecified pregnancy discomforts. After visiting the little queen's room to take care of the discomfort I was actually feeling, Aggie and I huddled together in a room with a conference table, a plethora of paper maps of various scales and ages, and a duo of new Eye-folk - a vaguely lizardy one with wings so large, even folded, that they almost couldn't fit through the door, and one that reminded me of Johnny Five or the university's maintenance robot due to having a pair of treads instead of legs and a suspicious-looking, boxy pod above each shoulder. Aggie

introduced the former as "Otto, one of our numbers guys," and the latter as "Sergeant Dora". She added, "I was picked to get you on-board with us, but I'm not an economist or, well, sergeant."

I nodded and made polite noises of greeting, then said, "I may be willing to work with you, but that depends on what the actual work is, on both sides. I expect all of us can imagine ways this whole thing could still fall apart before we even really get started. I don't know about you, but I've only got so many hours in a year I can work, and I'd prefer the last day of getting to know you not be wasted."

Otto clambered onto a piece of furniture that let him rest his chin above the table-level. "There are deals, and there are deals," he said.

I gave Aggie a quick sidelong glance, and asked, "What, is that how you people come up with a saying for /everything/?" I only got a quick eye-roll in return before Otto continued.

"Long-term deals depend on trust. Trust depends on knowing someone. Knowing someone depends on evidence. We know very little about you, and you know very little about us. Would you like to move in here for a while?"

I shook my head. "Too many places to go, things to do. If we need to start to get to know each other, I've got another idea - we try collaborating on a single, short-term project."

Sergeant Dora nodded firmly. "Deeds, not words," she rhetoricked at us. "A much better foundation for an alliance. As long as you're not planning on using us as expendable cannon-fodder."

"Nothing of the sort. I do have a particular project in mind, which I'm sure would benefit me, but I'm only moderately confident would benefit you. If it's not to our mutual benefit, then getting your help may be too expensive for me, and we'll have to figure something else out."

Otto asked, "What do you need to know to figure that out?"

"To start with, if this city's citizens are so unhappy with you, why bother staying at all? Why not just pick a bit of land nobody's using, plant some black-grass, and dig in?"

The sergeant answered that one. "Monsters come in all sizes. Living in a larger city has problems, but we also enjoy protection. During the exodus from Cincinnati, we came across the remains of many communities that had been overrun. Cleveland is still standing. That's proof enough the locals know how to defend themselves."

"O-/kay/," I nodded firmly. "How interested would you be in a site that's been ignored by giant monsters, proven by its structures still standing, is a hundred clicks from any city with unfriendly un-Changed humans, and has lots of room for you to grow your black-grass and tunnel around in?"

The trio exchanged a few glances, which I guessed involved a lot more info being exchanged than my eyes could pick up, then Otto said, "That may be an acceptable site, subject to verification of other details."

"Alright. Short version. There's a castle shaped like a lion, currently run by what seems to be a hostile AI, that's possibly mind-wiped a number of people I know and, I hope, is still holding them prisoner. My plan, for when my medical vacation is done, has been to go back there with the new tech I've gotten and, ideally, kick out the AI and take the place for myself. A lot of my longer-term plans would be a lot easier if I get a hold of a place to retreat /to/, instead of just a vehicle to retreat /in/ - and a place to store supplies, data, people, and to have a stable foundation to work on long-term projects. But even without gaining the castle, I still want to get Sarah out of there, and everyone else, or... at least find out for sure that that's impossible."

Otto asked, "Why didn't you do this rescue /before/ your vacation?"

I half-gnawed on my lips for a few moments, debating how much of my limitations to share, and decided to focus more on the Castle. "The first time I went there, I had no idea that it was inhabited by robots shaped like skeletons. Not to mention, that the skele-bots use tech that make them invisible to human-standard vision. It's taken me a while to get hold of tech that lets me have even a fighting chance against such things. Oh, and to get past one of the castle's inner defenses, I'm fairly sure the entrance to where the prisoners are kept is down in the castle's well." I swept my gaze across all three of them, and added, "Having more people to help with the operation, even if it's just more eyes, would increase the odds of success dramatically. If it's people who can actually help out - and if they're people who, I'm hoping, might be able to get eyes that can see in the ultraviolet, and are independent of external air supplies enough to be able to do some diving, and so on... well, if you asked for the whole dang castle in return I just might say 'yes', as long as I still got to park there." At their looks, I shrugged, and offered a dry half-grin. "I know it's not traditional bargaining strategy, but I'm assuming you can tell more about how eager I am from this suit than I know myself."

Otto commented, "It's nice of you to offer, but we are less interested in above-ground buildings than you might think. Here, we are simply taking advantage of the existing structures to save on excavation time."

Sergeant Dora didn't look very happy. "Do you know how many of these invisible skeletons we'll have to fight?"

"I have a lower bound on their numbers. And before you ask, I don't know much of anything about what's past the well, or how extensive the underground complex might be. I could probably grab hold of some pre-Singularity geographical surveys - actually, you'd probably want those anyway, for your own tunnel planning."

"I don't like it," Dora said, crossing her arms. "Fighting through fixed defenses, then getting into a completely unknown situation, would put any of our people at significant risk."

"Oh, don't worry about the outer defenses," I breezily commented. "The castle itself, and its walls and such, I've got mapped out, and can get past. If you don't want to risk people, how about non-sapient? Got any guard-dogs, attack geese, ninja squirrels, or the like who could take point for the really unknown stuff?"

"Yyyeeess," Otto hedged, "though everything that could do anything like that is helping run our infrastructure right now."

Dora drummed her fingers on the table, giving me a brief pang of jealousy. "If we're seriously considering this, we should spend less time figuring out what to do if everything works, and more figuring out what we'll do if everything goes tits-up. If the Castle eats the Queen, we should have already used Munchkin for at least a few milk-runs. Carry enough of the seed of a colony to another city, so even if everything goes wrong here and at the castle, then can rebuild."

"That sounds reasonable," I agreed. "But if I'm going to be paying my good-faith money in the form of delaying my other projects and being an armoured taxi service, it seems fair for you to do something similar."

Aggie asked, "What sort of payment do you want? We're not exactly cash-heavy."

"Manpower. Or people-power, or whatever the word is. I want to hire some of your people on a long-term basis, whether the raid on the castle succeeds or fails or gets shelved. I'll offer them a proper contract, with fair compensation, vacation time to come back here every so often, and so on - your good-faith effort would be in letting me employ them in the first place."

Otto inquired, "What sort of employment are we talking about? Domestic help? Soldiers? Skilled professionals? How many? What sort of compensation?"

I smiled, and was about to settle into some friendly haggling, when Dora interrupted. "If we're /seriously/ planning on this, then we need to start doing a few things as soon as we can. Ultraviolet-sensitive eyes don't grow on trees, you know." She turned to face me directly. "How much power can you dump into our grid, to give the boys down under a boost?"

"Pardon?" I blinked.

"Your vehicle," she stated. "How much of its electricity can you plug into external loads?"

"Ah," I said, and frowned, hesitating before answering.

Otto, however, jumped right in, "It's not enough to make a difference, so don't worry about it?"

"Really?" the sergeant turned her glare on him.

Otto rolled his eyes, then spieled off, "We've got reports of Munchkin being clocked at highway speeds, let's say that's sixty miles an hour. I estimate that each of the five carriages weighs around twenty tons, for a total of a hundred. Doing some math, and making some assumptions about efficiency, if her generator powers the drivetrain directly, it produces about two point five megawatts. However, that's not likely, since we don't have any reports of Munchkin travelling continuously for any length of time, meaning that it probably has a smaller generator that's used to recharge batteries. Our own processes for using electricity to produce nutrient-fluid are around ten percent efficient, so even if Munchkin's generator is full-size, it's roughly equivalent to half an acre of black-grass."

I carefully kept my mouth shut during that, including not telling him that Munchkin's true power output was closer to thirteen acres of their solar plants.

Otto continued, "Which isn't even getting into the cost of whatever she uses for a fuel source." He gave me a glance. "Speaking of which, you may wish to consider us as a way to acquire diesel, gasoline, or other hydrocarbons - our own nutrient-fluid isn't the only energy-storage chemical we know how to make."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, wondering if the jet-fuel-lactating goats up by Buffalo had just been rendered redundant, and trying not to give anything away with my expression, and probably giving more away than I knew with the suit's readings. "Anything else you need me to get involved in before you start your... uh, whatever you need to start now?"

The sergeant huffed, then turned and rolled out the door. Otto stretched a bit, then said, "Let's head outside to finish talking about employment. I think better in the sun."

--

"I, Blanche Thomas, do swear, that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Bunny Waldeinsamkeit, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors. So help me God."

After haggling with Otto in the afternoon sunlight, which he spread his surprisingly enormous wings to soak up, we'd settled on two People of the Eye entering my retinue, plus Aggie hanging around with me for at least a little while to liaison. Once I'd checked a few things with Boomer and the rest of the tour group got back from the fields, we had a brief swearing-in ceremony. Blanche, officially my new maidservant, was the climbing specialist I'd sat next to at the play.

The second individual was to be my bodyguard, and while Otto had called her a 'scout runner', I suspected he meant that more in the sense of 'light cavalry'. She was quadrupedal, roughly the size and shape Brenda had been before my favorite griffin had been turned into goo, though shaped rather more like a gazelle; instead of wings, she had a pair of longish, narrowish pods sprouting from her shoulders, which she said were weapons, and that she'd give me more details about when we had more privacy.

While Blanche's terms of employment took the form of the common Canadian Oath of Allegiance, which quite a few pre-Singularity Canadian civil servants had to take, I chose a slightly different oath for my bodyguard, based on an Oath of Allegiance used in Quebec starting in the year seventeen seventy-four. Mounties and provincial police had generally had to take an Oath of Allegiance, too, and protecting the royal corpus seemed a rather police-like job.

"I, Lydia Martinez, do sincerely promise and swear, that I will be faithful, and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Bunny Waldeinsamkeit, and Her will defend to the utmost of my power, against all traitorous conspiracies, and attempts whatsoever, which shall be made against Her Person, Crown, and Dignity; and I will do my utmost endeavor to disclose and make known to Her Majesty, her Heirs and Successors, all treasons, and traitorous conspiracies, and attempts, which I shall know to be against Her, or any of them; and all this I do swear without any equivocation, mental evasion, or secret reservation, and renouncing all pardons and dispensations from any power or person whomsoever to the contrary. So help me God."

Once the formalities were over, Ethel leaned over to say, "That's a pretty primitive oath, don't you think? Wouldn't having just had her sign an employment contract been more advanced, let alone a more voluntary agreement?"

"Oaths may seem weird, but they have their purpose. She agreed to literally put her life on the line to preserve mine. One of the least things I can do is provide some pomp and ceremony to let her know I have some idea what that entails. And yes, she's got an actual contract, but emotionally, that just /feels/ like nothing more than paperwork. This oath is a symbol - the first of a bunch, if I have my way."

\*\*\*

\*Chapter Thirteen: Off-ish\*

Ethel eyed the bunkbeds warily. "Why, exactly, am I here, again?"

"Welp," I drawled, "I'm having a sleepover as, as far as I can tell, part of my socialization therapy. Amy's here to therapize. Aggie's here as our host. Minerva's here because I think she'll have fun. Miss Neckline is here to observe a foreign cultural ritual. Hattie's here to try to get another scoop. Blue's here because she's been hired to be my guide the whole week, Blanche and Lydia are here as my new aides to start to get to know me better. I think Ida's here to keep an eye on me to keep me from getting too friendly with the People of the Eye at the expense of Metropolis as a whole. I have a sneaking suspicion you're here because said People of the Eye lay out a good bar."

"Ah. Right. Join me in a drink?"

"Sorry," I patted Streams, and for once got a kick in return. "Even if I weren't a teetotaler normally, I'd be one with her in here."

Lydia stuck her vaguely cervine head through one of the bunks to look at me. "Your abstinence does not apply to opioids?"

I blinked at her a bit before answering, as accurately as I could, "The only drugs I take are the ones I'm medically prescribed."

"I understand," she said, and started to pull her head back, but I flicked Waggoner to catch her attention. (Easier and faster than trying to whisper to my arm-bots.) "When you say 'opioids', are you just picking a class of substances at random?"

"Of course not."

"... I'm guessing you already know a lot about what's going on in my body from this suit."

"Of course."

"Thank you. ... Amy! Where are you!?"

After a few moments, my otter-shaped mind-doc waddled out of the bathroom. "Yes?"

"You're /sure/ what you're giving me isn't going to harm Streams?"

"At her current stage of development, and at your current dose, there is a small risk she will be born with a physical dependence, but even if that happens, it's easily handled."

"And am // 'physically dependent'?"

"Nope," said Amy, but Lydia near-immediately stuck her head around the one bunk to contradict her with a "You didn't know you were, Your Highness?"

"'Bunny' when we're in private, please - saves us all a lot of effort. Would the two of you care to explain this difference of opinions?"

Amy crossed her arms. "You are taking an extremely small dose, and have been taking it for a very short time. I've been closely monitoring your condition. There's no reason to think you've started to become habituated."

Lydia's dainty hooves clopped on the floor as she came closer. "The only People of the Eye who don't know you're an opium addict are the ones who haven't been home since lunch. Aggie saw your heartbeat when you took your pill, and your muscle tensions, and all sorts of other things. They did not... spike, I'll call it, anywhere near what they should if your body was unaccustomed to the drug."

"... It's possible," I said after a few moments, having a bit of trouble trying to engage my brain cells instead of being annoyed at Amy, "that my body's unusual healing factor is pulling some trick here." I noticed I was tapping my foot, and made it stop. "Amy. Opium. /Really/?"

"What did you expect? You needed my help - and these aren't the days of large-scale chemical industry. If we don't grow it, or brew it from something we grow, it doesn't exist, and I can't prescribe it. No mood stabilizers. No antipsychotics, no anticonvulsants, no calcium-channel blockers, and only a few useful sedatives. And with you being pregnant, that cut down, well, just about everything. With the state you were in last week, this was the best of a lot of bad options - and I handed over running the shelter to keep a close, personal eye on you to make sure 'bad' didn't become 'worse'."

I took a couple of deep breaths, counting in and out - ironically, one of the exercises Amy had demonstrated to me, though I hadn't actually felt strongly enough to need to apply it, until now. "I think I understand your point of view," I said, closing my eyes. "I'm still not happy. I've always had part of my self-image that I'd never get addicted - that I was smart enough to know not to take the first dose. I think I can shore up my self-image by changing that ego-support to something like, 'I only take the drugs I'm medically prescribed', but I haven't incorporated that concept, and I'm still uncomfortable. Cognitive dissonance."

Blue swung her head down from one of the upper bunks, staring at us upside-down. "Hey, can // use that excuse when // start taking drugs?"

"No!" was the immediate, unanimous chorus from all around the room.

--

"The decoy ship heads back to earth and the Dragon turns around," sang Minerva, from her puppet theatre. "The race to the moon's forgotten 'til he shoots our heroine down. But as the fuzziest astronaut lands safely on the ground, Two hundred thousand miles away, Apollo touches down."

As she repeated the chorus a few times, I was tied between giggling and damp eyes. I leaned over to Aggie to whisper, "I admit I'm flattered, but I'm not /quite/ that old."

As Minerva came out to take her bows, and Toby the Dog wandered around carrying a hat in a few of her tentacles begging for coins, the audience reaction was pretty mixed - me, Amy, Miss Neckline, and all the Eye-folk applauded enthusiastically, but the Metropolitans were obviously just being polite and pro-forma. Minerva smiled at us, but then turned to Blue and looked frustrated. "Agh!" she said, spreading her arms. "What does it /take/ to get you to like something?" As the suddenly-cornered feather-head started to hem and haw, Minerva continued, "It's been like this ever since we came to this stupid city. Everyone /not/ from here /likes/ what I do, but /nobody/ from your town does! Look, even the Hive people liked it, and they /live/ here!"

Minerva stepped forward, pinning Blue with her eyes. "You barely touched your hands together after the Christmas one. What was wrong with it? What made that one worse than the others?"

"Um..." Blue awkwardly rubbed the back of her head. "The third one, right? Uh. You had your first two, where Bunny and the Dragon are fighting and trying as hard as they can to kill each other. And then... just because of some bells, the Dragon doesn't finish off Bunny, but they have a drink and both go off in different directions?"

Minerva nodded firmly. "Yes?"

"... And I'm supposed to take this seriously?"

"Yes! Why /not/?"

"People don't /do/ that. That's not how they act. If you're fighting, then you're fighting /for/ something, so why would anyone stop fighting just... for no reason?"

"Argh!" Minerva turned to me, spreading her hands to ask for help.

I didn't quite manage to suppress a snort - trying to get /me/ to explain the idea of Christmas spirit to someone who seemed to lack it was all kinds of ironic. But I didn't want our budding puppeteer to be discouraged by a lack of positive feedback, so I said, "Believe it or not, the story is kind of based on a historical event. During a war so much bigger than any that had happened before that at the time they just called it 'the Great War', which ended up with more casualties than the number of people who might be alive on this whole continent today... on Christmas, in some places, the soldiers from the two sides didn't just stop fighting to celebrate the holiday. They didn't just pause the shooting to recover bodies and exchange prisoners. They went up to each other, exchanged rations, showed each other photos, played football, sang carols. The generals weren't happy about it, of course, but it really did happen."

"There, see?" Minerva crossed her arms.

Blue frowned harder. "So maybe that happened. That still doesn't explain why the Dragon would do anything like that. It's, well, a Dragon, not a soldier."

I gave her a 'really?' expression. "Maybe you missed the line - 'Why it didn't shoot, well, we'll never know'. I'm not the one who put on the show, so I'm only guessing, but that could rather be the /point/ of that whole play. Just because something looks like a dragon, and usually acts like a dragon, doesn't mean you understand dragons enough to /know/ what it's going to do next. Sure, it'll probably try to flame you - but maybe it'll hear some bells and decide not to."

"Aah," Blue waved a hand dismissively. "/People/ aren't that complicated, and you think a /Dragon/ could be?"

I blinked at Blue, then turned to Minerva. "So, anyway, I was wondering - what sort of trick did you use to get that snare drum sound?"

--

"There's a minor here. We are /not/ comparing sizes!"

--

"Can I dye your fur lavender?"

"Tell you what. If you can actually find lavender fur-dye, sure, go nuts."

"Your Highness - I mean, Bunny - we /do/ have a selection of dyes in our chemical section which are non-toxic and would be quite suitable..."

"... I was just about to say 'crap', but it's not like pink's ever really been my colour, anyway."

--

"Do not pass 'Go', do not collect two hundred dollars."

"You know, I shouldn't be surprised that /this/ game of all things survived the Singularity, but somehow, I still am..."

--

"You think /you/ had it bad with Albert? At least you got to knock him on his a...anterior. Posterior. I have to work with him day-in, day-out..."

--

I grimaced at the latest suggestion. "With all the confidential data I have to deal with, I'd have to pick 'Dare' every time, and I really don't want to chug all the marvelous flavour combinations that you can invent."

Aggie said, "Hm. There's another game we could try. Still a lot of questions, but nothing that should hit anything sensitive for you."

"Hm?" I tilted my now-pale-purple head.

"We called it 'Fall in Love'. Go somewhere private, ask each other the questions, stare into each others' eyes for five minutes, and come back and tell everyone if you fell in love."

My eyes flicked halfway to Minerva and back. "And by 'stare into each others' eyes', you mean..."

"Well, when // played it, we just stared."

The only other proposal on deck being trying out a Ouija board, which was vetoed on several fronts, those of us still awake enough to enjoy a silly party game - no longer including Ethel, happily snoring spread-eagled in a bunk, and Neckline who was curled up on her back in an excessively cute feline fashion - paired up and spread apart. Through whatever unconscious social shuffling process was involved, after Aggie shared the questions around, she and I found ourselves in one corner, me sitting on the edge of a bunk, her with her spidery-half's legs curled up and her hind-body on the floor.

A good number of the questions were just banal ice-breakers, like 'Would you like to be famous?' or 'Do you rehearse conversations?'. I'm afraid that some of my initial responses tended to be more on the snarky side than they should have been. For instance, to 'For what in your life do you feel most grateful?', I answered, "I haven't really been feeling much gratitude, lately, I've been focused on getting things done. Also, I find the concept of free-floating gratitude a bit weird, instead of being able to thank some particular individual for something." To 'If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?', I responded "Inform my younger self that time-travel is possible and that you can change things about the way you were raised," which at least had the benefit of accuracy.

Aggie was putting her own spin on a few. When it was my turn to ask, 'Can you name three things we have in common?', she was quick to pipe up with, "We both spent our first years on farms, both of us are still getting used to our new bodies, and we're both carrying other life inside us. I think I'm carrying more cleaner-eels by numbers and mass, but I'm still having an easier time of it than you."

By the time 'If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?' was the question, I was settling into the rhythm of things. "Being sufficiently smarter than I am now to figure out the solution to any one of the problems I'm currently dealing with." Which, I figured, was probably why the first questions were throwaways.

Aggie was settling in, too. 'What's your biggest unfilled dream, and why haven't you done it?' elicited, "Help get my parents out of debt. And because city bankers seem to hate dealing with farmers, when we get all our income in one big burst each year instead of a bit every day like a store-owner, and they get the people in charge to outlaw co-op credit unions."

When Aggie asked, "What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?", I took a few moments to work out my answer. "Tricky, since all the consequences aren't in yet, but... either keeping the Berserker from killing any more cities, or getting the heliograph network going."

To 'What do you value most in a friendship?', Aggie gave a short-and-sweet "Honesty."

I just gave a short response to "What is your most terrible memory?", since the school in Buffalo was what immediately jumped to my mind, and I didn't want to think about it.

Eventually, following the script, I asked, "What's something you wish you had someone to share it with?"

"I miss playing football. Soccer, I mean. But once I got these legs, well, I'm a whole team to myself, and I still kept winning. If we're going to become close friends, what would you want me to know?"

"There are jobs it's important to do - so important, that it's worth trying your hardest. It's possible to learn how to come up with better answers than the ones you can think of now. Mm - what's the next one?"

"What do you like about me?"

"Seems a little narcissistic to ask straight out."

"It's all part of the game, don't worry about it. Let's see. I like... that you know exactly what you want, and you're working to get it, and come Hell or high water, you're not letting anything stop you."

"Don't let the royal PR machine fool you - I've been stopped lots of times."

"You have a machine for that? Kidding, kidding. Okay, what's something embarrassing you've done?"

"Does showing off a bit too much of my pelt when that apprentice tried to duel me count?"

"Are you embarrassed about that?"

"Not particularly. Hm. Well, I /do/ feel kind of like hiding my face behind my hands when I think about how much of my life I wasted thinking things like, 'It's not /im/possible, so it's /possible/, so it's really worth trying to see if I can flip the light-switch without getting out of bed by trying to push my will out my fingers.' That's just downright... well, yeah, embarrassing."

After a few more backs-and-forths, with only one that I had to veto for security, Aggie asked me the last on the list: "Share a personal problem and ask for advice."

I gave a deliberately fake sigh, hiding the real one. "My biggest personal problem is that I don't have any personal problems, because all my interpersonal relationships are currently at a professional distance. My smaller personal problems are being dealt with. So I don't have any idea how I can ask you for advice."

"Does that include Minerva?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you holding /her/ at a 'professional distance', too?"

"I suppose so. Any reason you're bringing her up, as opposed to anyone else?"

"You're not her adoptive mother, or guardian, or something like that?"

"Ah. No. She's got her own guardians back in Erie, and she'll be going back to them once this vacation trip finishes."

"Are you sure about that? I've seen how she looks at you when she doesn't think anyone can see - I don't think /she/ thinks your relationship is just 'professional'."

"Agh."

"Didn't you notice that all her puppet shows star you, even if she calls the rabbit-puppet 'Coney'? I think she's desperately trying to gain your approval."

"I say again, agh. Even if that's true, I'm completely unqualified to notice it, let alone deal with that particular thing, let alone be anything resembling a parental figure."

"You're going to end up as a mother anyway," she nodded at Streams' obvious prenatal development. "Why not start practicing with someone who's already gotten through the diaper stages?"

I stared at her eyes for a long moment, toes tapping, before stating, "That sounded rhetorical, but I'm going to give it a full answer anyway. I deal with scary shit. One of the people I've tried to be friends with, Injun Joe, I think now only exists in the form of Bear Joe, whose skull isn't big enough for him to realize how much danger he's in. Sarah got hooked on some kind of addictive game and may or may not still have enough brains to be human, and that's assuming she's still alive. Brenda... got run through a zone that made her fall in love with me, got turned into living slime, and then, protecting me, lost much of her mind, turned psychopathically murderous, and... I've had to make choices about her. Minerva is one of the few people I've interacted with, who I can claim to be friends with, who I still have hope that they're going to survive being anywhere near me. I want her to have a nice, long, happy life, as far from me as she can get. If she ends up with some neurosis because I didn't smile or hug her enough this week, that still probably leaves her better off than having her tag along, or, if you'll pardon my French, God help us, trying to /help/."

"... Oh. I'm going to guess you're not going to respond to letting her run her own life."

"She's still a minor. If I'm still booting around when she's eighteen, and if she doesn't want to stay as far from me as she can, then maybe."

"If you apply that logic consistently, you're going to end up a lonely old woman."

"Woman, hard to deny. Old, I can only hope. Lonely, I can deal with."

"You've given up hope of... anything more?"

"I'm not expecting this 'fall in love' game to work, if that's what you mean."

"Ignore me for now. ... You know what I mean. If you /could/ spend your time with someone, who would you /want/ to be with?"

A bit to my surprise, a name popped right into my head; I looked away from Aggie to a wall and wondered whether to say it aloud. After a few moments of thought, I concluded that it wouldn't break any of the secrets I thought important to answer, and said, "Out of the people I've met so far... I think... Brenda."

"So why aren't you doing anything about that already?"

"Among other reasons, because if she came into this room, everyone but me would be dead. It was hard enough finding a way to keep that from becoming a regular occurrence once - trying to come up with some way to keep her reliably contained, /and/ try to figure out some kind of treatment? I could spend the next ten years working on that one thing alone, with no guarantee of success... but /with/ the guarantee that I'd stop doing anything /else/ useful, like find a way to keep every one of us from getting wiped out the next time an apocalypse sweeps through."

"You know, you don't have to do /everything/ yourself."

"So I've been told. And, if you care to recall, I'm in the process of rectifying that, such as by testing out this proto-partnership between me and your people. If that works out, or even if it doesn't but I find some other group I can work with... then, maybe, I'll have enough slack time to find someone who can fix whatever went wrong with her. But, for now, the best thing I can do for Brenda in the long term is just what I'm doing."

"That's a very adroitly-reasoned plan, which seems to cover all the bases."

"I should certainly hope so."

"It's also bullshit."

I blinked a couple of times, then cracked a quick smile. "Well, at least it's nice to know Crocker's Rules are still in use."

"Pardon?"

"Nevermind. Pray continue calling me out."

"Er... right. It sounds to me more like you decided that you're not going to find anyone to be happy with, and you're afraid of being hurt more, so you're just using all your clever tricks to figure out how to justify avoiding that."

"Throw out the 'afraid' part, and maybe."

"Have you got a clever trick to figure out which of us is right?"

"Eh, don't forget the law of the excluded middle - both of us could be /wrong/. But that said... hm. Ah. Well, there's one piece of evidence that we could pick up in the near future, which would be different depending on whether one of us is right."

I paused, and after a few moments, Aggie asked, "What's that?"

"Darn, I was hoping you'd figure it out: if this silly game somehow hacks our limbic systems so we /do/ end up friends, even if we don't actually 'fall in love', then that would be evidence that I'm right about just being busy and focused on my plans, while if that doesn't happen, then you could be right that I'm just trying to avoid interpersonal entanglements. Though I'd still be pretty sure it's not because I'm feeling any sort of fear on the issue."

--

Staring into someone's eyes for five minutes straight was... interesting.

--

I groused, in reasonably good cheer, "A few hours of increasingly painful membrane-stretching hardly seems like a good foundation for a long-term relationship..."

Miss Neckline, catnap finished, agreed with, "Many people's lives can be improved by feeding some kits to others," which just about everyone but she and me took as an amusing hypothetical.

Nobody seemed to have fallen in love with their partners, though we were still mostly hanging out in our pairs - not counting Ethel, who'd been snoozing for a while, and Minerva, who'd joined her with the benefit of far less alcohol being involved. A deck of cards was scattered around, but nobody'd really gotten into playing in the first place, since nobody'd been able to figure out a game all of us knew how to play. (Well, except for my suggestion for Oxford Stud poker, which nobody /wanted/ to play.)

"It could be worse," Lydia mused. "You get to give birth just once for each kid. When I'm not on outside duty, I get to lay eggs full of tech-goo... a /lot/ more often than I like to think about. The boys downstairs say the tech just keeps wearing out and has to be replaced, but sometimes I wonder if they've just got some kinks they don't want to talk about..."

Blue wriggled in her seat, and laced her fingers together. "You think /you/ have it bad? Imagine living in a home full of kids who aren't even related to you, being on diaper duty, and-"

Whatever one-downmanship would have followed was cut off as the room's lights dimmed, pulsed a couple of times, then slowly returned to their previous norm. All of the tourists looked around in confusion, but Aggie, Blanche, and Lydia had all risen to their feet, and at least turned in the direction of the door.

"Excuse me, folks," Aggie said, turning back to us. "That's a security alert. One of our outer scouts has reported that a mob with protest signs is coming down the road from the east."

Neckline asked, "You learned all of that from just a few flashing lights?"

Aggie shrugged, "This isn't our first rodeo. We've got a system in place. We're all safe here - even if they try to do more than picket, there's all sorts of security doors between there and here. And Lydia isn't the only Person of the Eye who can dissuade anyone who tries getting past a closed door."

"Mm," I frowned, grabbing hold of Borey to rise to my own feet. "That's well and good for you, but there are things aboard Munchkin I don't want anywhere near even a heated argument, let alone torches and pitchforks."

Lydia took a step towards me. "Your Majesty," she said, with a touch more formality than had been present a few moments ago, "I can't recommend going anywhere near the crowd. You cannot persuade them by reasoned argument, and any more physical interventions would put you at needless risk."

"I'm not thinking of going near them, I just want to get to the garage, to give Munchkin some instructions. Don't forget, Bear Joe is still aboard."

Aggie asked, "Do you have to be next to Munchkin? How about a speaking tube?"

"Um," I said, "I expect I can probably /give/ instructions that way - but don't forget, I don't understand any of your flashing-lights stuff, so I'd have trouble knowing /which/ instructions /to/ give."

"Well, it's a step," Aggie said. "Follow me." I followed, closely accompanied by Lydia, while Blanche started talking to the tourist group about other kinds of emergencies the Hive was prepared for. As we went, Aggie continued, "Standard procedure for this is for a few of us to hit the hangar's roof with some shotguns, to be visible enough to keep any protesters honest. Last I heard, someone was going to string a tin-can intercom up there, and there's a few speaking tubes from the hangar to some of the workshops. Should be able to come up with a relay. And here we are, mind the bandsaw. Let's see if anyone's there."

She cupped her hands between her mouth and what looked more like a piece of plumbing sticking out of the wall than a communications device, and shouted, "Hello! Is anyone there?"

I tilted my own ears towards the thing, and as everyone held their breath, I was just barely able to make out some sounds... a voice. "... dee... Ay..." were the blurred syllables I could pick out, and I didn't think anyone without parabolic microphones strapped to their head would have been able to get even that.

Then I heard, much clearer: "Fire!"

And the lights went out.

\*\*\*\*\*

Next Book:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGL06G89TsvHG0bjWWsFA56vVc5an\\_ZNU36aMynEo6Q/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGL06G89TsvHG0bjWWsFA56vVc5an_ZNU36aMynEo6Q/edit)