

This is part 1 of 3 for FORESTDIM Chapter 1.

Chapter 1: Monster Inside

It was night. Black sky faded to blue peaks. Pale yellow streetlamps stood guard up along a winding twisting road. At the road's end, overlooking the sloping mountainous terrain, sat a log building. Dew clung in a sheen on the tacky plaster that made up its faux wooden exterior. Its theme park-esque facade was crowned with an angled metal tin roof. Standing on its curb the off-putting weathered grin of a mascot held a welcome sign, though whether they were meant to be a bear or a deformed groundhog was impossible to tell. It was all these things that any visitor to "Jasper National Park" was guaranteed to see. No one, however, not even the most observant, could have picked out the small form scurrying through the grass. It ducked and swerved from roots to potted trees, over the grass which declined to worn soil to hard concrete. Eventually, it halted right under some metal benches bolted just outside the entrance of the monolithic building. Well, monolithic from her point of view.

Ophelia wavered, she motioned her ears towards the road and waited. Nothing. A minute passed, and then another, and another.

Come on Ophelia.

She thought less than confidently.

They're all gone, we should have plenty of time.

She readjusted her pack, nearly tipping her tiny fuzzy body over in the process. Ophelia steadied herself with a swish of her tail. Her nerves were getting to her. The world was intimidating to one so small. Trees creaked in the wind, chilled air bit at her

ears, and every sound larger than a pin-drop was cause for alarm. Yes indeed, it was an unforgiving world for a chipmunk.

Typically Ophelia tried not to fill her head with worries; after all, it is known that worrying about a thing doesn't make the thing you worry about any less of a problem. Today though, the stakes were high, and as she looked out from her hiding place into the cold concrete expanse of human presence, Ophelia found herself glancing back into the forest. Omens of the snarling elongated bodies of stoats came creeping from every shadow, the fluttering needling sound of wind rushing through timbers was surely the wings of some horrible bird, and every shard of ice between flint rock was a waiting fang. While this was beautiful country, it was mostly cold and unforgiving. She wriggled tighter into her coat, her literal coat that she was wearing, not her fur coat that mammals are born equipped with. Ophelia was especially proud of the buttons she had carved herself, they were perfectly mink sized.

Breathing into the coat brought back some warmth. After just another five more minutes, she tightened the strap of her pack and scampered across the wide concrete slabs. The humans called it a "side-walk", and it was impossible to travel on one during the day without being seen. Even at night, there were the same two humans who always walked between the visitor center and the park entrance. The small chipmunk craned her neck to admire the visitor center looming over her as she approached. No animals besides humans could engineer something like this. Rocks and boulders set in cement constructed the building's base, with some as wide as 5 feet, before turning to logs which made up the rest of the structure. Ophelia reached the edge of the wall, and following it made her way around to the back. Tiny paws pitter-pattered over gravel stones. The back was less decorated, with flat walls slated over with concrete. No attempts had even

been made to up-keep the gardens here, leaving them shoddy and wild. She lifted a hosta leaf and crept swiftly over mulch and branch, moving closer, closer still. There, in the densest part of the garden, hidden under a canopy of twigs and right at the corner of the wall, lay a humbly faded garden gnome.

Ophelia sniffed around it, inspecting it for any sign of disturbance. It was a human object. Something they placed for decoration, something Ophelia had seen many types of in “magazines”, and something that was the perfect size to hide a hole under. Careful not to make a sound, she peered underneath. Therein lay the hole, rounded and scratched out by rodent paws, which would take her under the building. Air wafted up from the dark of the tunnel below. The small chipmunk raised her head one last time, looking around quickly before sliding off her pack and tossing it down into the depths. Squirring in after it, Ophelia awkwardly tumbled over packed earth and frayed roots before arriving at the bottom. She stood and brushed herself off, there wasn't even enough light to see her breath. Feeling around, she reached into her pack and fumbled for a moment. A minute passed and she found what she was after, only it squirmed away from her.

“C'mon little guy,” she whispered, “it's time to come out now.”

Ophelia fidgeted between the oversized bag and the small elusive thing that seemed always just out of her reach. Finally, her paw squeezed around the wriggling creature.

Ophelia took out a small firefly, and it rather unceremoniously wriggled out of her grasp. It plopped onto the soft dirt in a huff and shuffled its wings. Ophelia smoothed her whiskers back and took a breath. Kneeling down into the soft dirt, she felt around in front of her until her paw brushed up against the little beetle. It chirped twice

and the air was illuminated in a moment by a wavering green glow. On, then off, then on, then off for longer, then on again. The neon light almost made the dirt walls feel alive. That little bug crawled ahead of her, and Ophelia followed. At times it stopped or stalled, and Ophelia simply gave it a little nudge to encourage it to go forward. Down down down through the dark. Their shadows faded in and out with the rhythm of the neon light. Did it know where it was? Did it feel curious, or did it just crawl forward out of habit? Ophelia thought about these things and more until her thoughts led her to bump her face into a wall of soil. Ah, yes. She took a few steps back and raised her head. Looking up one could see the tunnel continue vertically until stopping into open space. A soft red glow came through the crack, shining down into the hole where Ophelia stood.

She looked back at her companion. "Wait here," she whispered, "I'll be right back."

Not like you can even understand me. She thought.

The bug did not understand her, it was not even pretending to listen. Instead, it skittered against the wall absentmindedly.

Ophelia braced herself, then leaped up into the passage. For a moment, it seemed the soil would give way, and she slid down before digging in with her fingers. Thankfully her claws were well suited for such terrain, and even with the tunnel narrowing, she made quick work of the ascent. Reaching the top, Ophelia hoisted herself out. This was the underneath of the building, and it was just as imposing as the thing itself. The underneath was a void, populated only with cobwebs. The ceiling here, which was the floor of the place above, consisted of aching planks supported by old wooden beams. Relying on the red glow still emanating from the crack in the floor above her, Ophelia

looked for her way in. Snaking from that opening was a pipe, which sharply went down before reaching the ground, turning at a right angle, and disappearing off into the dark. This part was always trickier. Ophelia approached the pipe and mentally prepared herself for the climb up. Reaching into her pack again, she pulled out a thick rubber band. She took it and wrung it around one paw. Ophelia then slung the band around the pipe and wrapped the end firmly in her other paw. She leaned back, took a deep breath in, and kicked off the ground. As she fell she leaned back, letting the friction of the band connect with the metal. With her back feet against the pipe, it was enough to hold her. Back and forth, kicking off the pipe and maintaining a hold with the elastic, she slowly ascended shinnying up the pole.

Ophelia felt a burning in her forearms, and the contact of the rubber on her paws was starting to sting. Alternatively, the thought of falling down and starting over was worse. It likely only took a few minutes, but Ophelia was breathing hard by the time she reached the end of this last climb. Arriving at the part where the pipe went through the flooring, she could finally rest her back against the wood. Sticking just the tip of her nose out through the hole, she tried to detect if any human was in the building. There were no recent scents, and Ophelia slowly lifted herself up through the hole and out onto the floor. It was a most curious floor. It was not like the dirt of the forest, the rock or sand of a cave, or even the human slabs of pavement. You would almost think it was wood, but it did not smell like wood, and it was far too glossy to be of a tree. It was just, strange. Humans made so many strange but wonderful things. Like the rest of this place. Wood that is not wood, plateaus made of shiny material, and objects of all sorts everywhere. Of the few buildings that existed in the park, this one was the most enjoyable to explore.

The gap opened out beneath a metal cabinet, and the pipe continued before turning into the wall. On all fours, she crept out and looked about. A wide hallway, with the cabinet sitting against one wall, a metal door shut to the left, and to the right the hall continued before reaching the main area of the center. Above her, a red glow emanated from a lone source, a flat thing that hung from the ceiling in front of the heavy-duty door. Ophelia could read the twisting red lettering as “Exit”.

Still odd to think about, she thought wincing up at it, having a sign in front of an exit that reads exit.

Ophelia continued to creep to the right, down the hall, going ever closer to the wonder of the visitor center. The hallway ended, and beyond it was where the best aspects of this place were. The room was massive, a large pillar of cobbled stone stood in the center within which lay a fireplace. Rows and rows of shelves were splayed symmetrically like monoliths on either side. Barrels of items and rotating towers displayed more of the trinkets and oddities that humans seemed to cherish. Ophelia understood that desire. That wonder. At the front of the building were floor-to-ceiling glass windows, but perhaps at that point you would just call them walls. The doors too were glass, and magically would part for oncoming humans during the day. Ophelia had never gotten them to work for her, much to her frustration.

During the day people drove from, wherever it was they came from, and entered this building before moving on to explore the park. They would pick up food and other things, and then leave. Ophelia never got a chance to see the place inside during the day, she'd only see humans go in with nothing and come out with stuff in their hands and smiles on their faces. She imagined what it would be like with the sun shining in through the windows, what the humans did inside here. Now it was only dark and grey.

Scanning the room she could see no cause for alarm. She reached into her bag and pulled out a book, her journal.

The old thing, yellow and tattered felt weighty in her paws. She flipped to the latest page and a slip of thin paper nearly flipped out, but Ophelia snatched it before it could. On it was her written note,

“Simon Bartowitz, A Guide to Mammals of the Alberta Territory, 1993”

Before she could set out a sharp snap and crunch of stones caught her attention. She jumped and slipped on the waxy floor before scurrying off behind the closest shelf. Her whiskers flicked as she shakily peered out to the front doors. The moonlight shone uninterrupted into the expanse of the room, and for a moment it seemed all was well. That was until a shadow loomed, passing over the tables and shelves, only coming to a stop outside the doors. It was one of the rangers.