

## Day 18

For all the millions of ways exploring another inhabitable planet could have gone wrong, things had been going great. Equipment failures had been a minimal occurrence. Finding sustainable food and water for the crew took barely any effort on their part. Every report sent back to earth for the past month came up roses and sunshine.

Until Karen woke up and discovered she'd grown a tail.

"What the actual hell, doc!?"

The young woman laid face down on one of the med bays, very cold, steel examination tables in a huff. Having to do so without any pants on sure wasn't helping her afternoon mood any. When setting up an outpost for a dozen people light years from any possible rescue, bare living necessities had to come first. This small dome among their camp barely had the basic medical equipment up and running for any serious alien pathogens. Expecting controlled heating, much less hospital gowns, might have been wishful thinking for the next couple of years.

"Honestly? Your guess is as good as mine." Ronald poked at the offending protrusion above the swell of her backside with some forceps. It was only a little nub, barely an inch long, but the fact such contact made Karen wince from a jolt of pain confirmed what the x-rays had already told both of them.

Somehow a human managed to spontaneously grow out their spine. Barely any muscle to it, but Karen found it twitching of its own volition and irritating her further when trying to wear proper attire over it. The only thing worse than such a tumorous growth was the fact it had a dense lair of white hairs. She couldn't even see the skin past it no matter how they tried to comb them back.

"It's definitely not a tumor," the mission's doctor said, as if reading Karen's thoughts. The forceps in one hand now held a small clump of the white hairs, which his other hand helped place into a glass container. "I've never heard of such an affliction causing a person to just grow more vertebra."

"Maybe it's a gamma radiation thing?" she offered, blowing loose bangs of brown hair from her eyes. They could at least put pillows on these tables. Her chin was starting to hurt.

"Someone's watched too much comic book movies as a kid," the older man chuckled. "But I've gotten all the samples I could for now. We'll have to run some tests and see what we can find out."

Karen took that as her signal it was okay to get off. Sliding her cargo jeans back on brought at least some comfort, even if she had to hang the back low like some tramp. "Really hope it's not the food. I've been liking those fruits we found last week."

"That seems unlikely, or all of us would be experiencing tails by now. Might be worth checking on the fauna again, though. In any case, keep track of any more developments and be careful with your work today."

"It's just a nub," she scoffed while flinging a leather jacket over her white tank top. A bit of fishing through the pockets brought out a thin metal chain which she threw around her neck. The large piece of polished silver that served as its pendent thumped into a landing on her chest before getting tucked under the clothing. "I'm not losing my ability to function or something."

Ronald was already typing notes on a data pad, barely paying her any attention. "Still, we can't afford anything serious happening to anyone. Especially with us still setting up shop."

"I'm the engineer, hun." Karen smirked, wrapping a tool belt across her hips to emphasis the point. "You got three of us, so I think you'd be good if I took a sick day."

"Just be careful."

"Yeah." She gave a parting grunt on her way out.

Planet Vulpes Prime sat in a galaxy nearly eighty years away from Earth on the best of ships. No one was sure what to expect when it turned out several planets were reading as able to support life. Karen had honestly expected to meet giant crab monsters or something. Instead, they got a place more akin to home than anyone could have guessed. Most of their assigned planet had ample amounts of forests, with a variety of plants that proved very nourishing for a human diet.

Most of the wild life wasn't too bad either. She especially thought the house cat sized mice were adorable. The carnivorous chickens, not so much.

Shame the proper colony ship wouldn't get here for a very long time. They were just the vanguard making sure everything was nice and tidy for the kids to play in upon arrival. At least the rich soil would make terraforming a breeze. Karen wouldn't be surprised if things got boring around here after just one year.

"Hey, gorgeous!?" the radio on her belt crackled to life and jolted the woman out of admiring the twin suns shining above. "You figure out that butt bump yet?"

Not being able to keep her little mutation a secret in this tight-knit community, however, was probably going to be a source of entertainment for decades to come. Karen couldn't wait for that.

"It's just a mosquito bite, like I said," she retorted into the receiver. "Got anything important to waste battery power over?"

"Bug bites don't grow fur, Karen." The man on the other end laughed before continuing. "Anyway, if doc is done poking at your rear, the greenhouse environmental system is

coming up red again. Could you go give it a whack? The guys are out dealing with irrigation...again."

"Copy that."

A repair woman's work is never done. Karen took a second to readjusting her pants, grumbling various curses at getting such a position. Traveling among the stars lost a lot of its glamour when it still required the same tedious chores as a mechanic's shop.

Also, she could have sworn these pants didn't hang so loosely on her hips last week.

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"What's up with your ears?"

Karen was halfway dressed for dinner time when Ted and Will came into the crew quarters. Running co-ed was one of many things on this mission everyone had to learn to deal with early on. So having her fellow engineer's barge in while taking off their greasy shirts wasn't that bothersome.

Getting such a blunt and almost random sounding question instead of a greeting, however, was more than a little confusing.

"What's that supposed to..." Karen half turned to glare at the young men, keeping her bare back turned to them. One hand reached instinctively for the side of her head at the same time. "...mean?!"

The bra fell from her other hand so she could grasp at her heads opposite side. Fingers combed along sensitive lobes, trying to process the fine layer of fuzz over their outer surface. A surface that seemed a lot more ample for a normal person and a bit thinner.

Forgetting all about clothing, Karen dashed towards the nearest bathroom sink. She gawked for a second at her shirtless reflection before pulling back shoulder length chestnut hair for a better look.

"What the hell is wrong with my ears!?"

"Uh, that's what I just asked," Ted offered with a nervous chuckle.

Both onlooking men didn't seem anymore thrilled than their coworker. Karen's ears had grown over the past six hours. Lobes stretched several inches upward away from her head forming into soft points. A layer of bright copper hairs formed on their backs, which would have tickled if not for the woman's rising anxiety. Some new kinds of muscles must have also developed, because they even dipped slightly to match her slacked jawed horror.

"You sure it's still a mosquito bite?" Will said after a very long silence.

While Karen didn't appreciate the guys attempt at humoring the situation, the question at least snapped her out of the daze her latest change had brought.

"Just shut up!" she barked. Stomping back to her locker, she finished dressing as fast as shaking hands could allow. "Ron will figure out what this planet is doing to me and have me fixed up by the weekend. It's not worth making a big deal."

One ear perked at picking up Ted's low voice. "Dude! You think she'll end up looking like those blue cat people from that one movie?"

Karen whirled with her shirt half-buttoned to snort at him. "Those movies suck CGI balls and should have never gotten nine sequels."

Ted and Will simply blinked back with renewed shock. It took her a minute to realize Ted had been trying to whisper to his friend from their bunk clear across the room.

"Guess those elf ears aren't just for show?" Ted offered.

"I'll see you dorks for dinner," Karen said, slamming her locker closed. She finished straightening her clothes on the brisk walk back outside. "If this is some new form of alien flu, I am not going to enjoy being it's patient zero."

She took a few steps only to stop and adjust her pants again. Stupid tail was making it even more annoying back there too.

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## **Day 25**

When light years across space there still wasn't anything as good as a hot shower. This damn planet had so many kinds of pollen and micro insects that the three Humvees brought for the mission got their filters clogged on a near daily basis. An obvious job for Karen, with her thinner frame that can reach its dainty fingers into spaces the big tough men couldn't.

Ugh. Universe spare her such an honor as a grease monkey. Another week of this mess was bad enough without her other problems progressively getting worse. Despite the doctor's best efforts, along with drawing an excessive amount of blood, her tail had upgraded from a nub to a lump. While she shook the excess water out of her hair, Karen could feel the weight of the soaked fur hanging halfway down her butt.

Most of the team got over their shock of her apparent mutations pretty quick. Now she was being referred to as the wrench bunny, among other colorful nicknames. Seeing her ears getting bigger and fuzzier in the mirror every morning didn't help efforts to stop the constant teasing any. They were even starting to crawl towards the top of her head like little red pyramids.

All the reason she was taking her mandatory shower in the dead of night. Everyone was either already asleep or preparing to do so. It cost a few hours of rest for herself, but Karen preferred that to their stupid antics. A caress of hot water on her skin, followed by the therapy of scrubbing with good old earthen oils became the closest thing to peace during these changing times.

If the water heaters weren't shut off at o-ten-hundred she would stay in there all night. Eventually things turned cold, forcing Karen out of the open showers and back into reality. A quick towel off and maybe she could get back to her bunk with only one or two of the nerds awake enough to comment on their freaky friend.

"What the..." Some rough resistance when rubbing said towel across her legs made Karen pull it back in confusion. Seconds later the empty bath house echoed with the latest series of unladylike curses. "Oh, come on!"

Despite shaving that morning, her thighs and shins were covered in a fine layer of hairs. In the dim light it was easy to tell these weren't the typical, nearly translucent ones she always dealt with. The inner thighs were a creamy snow white, while the rest had the same copper red at her ears. Shortly past the knees were the worst. Coal black hairs formed a natural sock all the way to her feet.

"No! I'm not doing this!" she fumed, storming over to her locker. After putting her lucky silver charm back on, a fresh razor was grabbed up with intent on fixing this problem right now.

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## **Day 29**

"Karen? Are you losing weight?"

Will was staring at her upon entering for breakfast, as everyone was want to do lately. They wanted to study their coworker in case she became even more of a freak than yesterday. Maybe find something new to make light of while Karen actually cared about doing her damn job.

"You're seeing things, old man," she lied like usual. Trial and error proved that being curt helped keep their banter to a minimum.

Truth was, she had dropped more than a few pounds since the fur started growing in the other day. According to the measuring chart in the crew's quarters, the woman had lost two inches in height. For the first time ever, Karen had to fasten her belt a few notches to keep her cargo pants from sliding off. At least the extra room made it easier to hide the accursed tail away from wandering eyes. Any lost height seemed to be adding to her extra spine, giving it enough length that it ruffled the fabric when it twitched.

"If you say so." Will sipped his coffee trying to hide obvious chuckle. Eyes still studied Karen while she waddled over to fix some of that sacred black brew for herself. Trying to

move without making her clothes look a size too large was another challenge. It wasn't like Karen could just go to an outlet store on her days off. "And when did you like bandana's so much?"

"You're just angry I've always had a sense for fashion, even out here in the boonies."

That had some nuggets of truth to it. Most of the crew had very limited things they could pack for personal use. Karen thought she'd been clever using her space to bring various kinds of beanies, scarves and hats. One could pack minimal and be prepared for any kind of climate. She never expected to be using her bandanas to hide animal ears.

Some of the younger crew made things worse by being anime fans. Would they really be so enthusiastic about their senior becoming a neko-whatever if they knew about the fur being shaved off three times a day?

Crap. She wished she hadn't thought about it. Now she had to fight the urge to scratch at her butt. More than just the tail was making her itch under these clothes.

"What's Ash got us messing with today?" she asked in hopes of a distraction.

"Ted and I are heading out for routine maintenance on the weather stations," Will reported with a bored shrug. Thankfully his attention went back to some book on his data pad. "Looked like you get to check on all the greenhouse environment systems again. You've been requesting a lot of solo base work lately."

"Heh. You all will thank me when we're eating watermelons grown from fresh soil again." She beamed at that and immediately hated how her furry ears pushed against her bandana in a reflexive perk. They didn't slip out, but she didn't need constant reminders of their existence.

"I'm more interested when I can enjoy corn on the cob." Will got a faraway look of childish joy for a moment. "Shame we can't do anything about getting fresh butter."

"Yeah." Memories of home gave Karen pause to look off at the wall. A hand absently teased the silver pendant dangling around her neck dreaming of chocolate made from real coco beans. "We're a space cow and pig away from living the good life."

"Oh, don't give me hope. If we find anything remotely close to pork on this planet it'll be a miracle from god." Will finished the last of his coffee and stood. Course he didn't bother cleaning his mug. Janitorial work went in a rotation, though Karen forgot whose turn it was this week. "I better head out. Going to take an hour just to drive to those stations. You have a good day."

"Be safe out there," she replied with most of her attention adding powdered creamer to her coffee. It was really going to suck if those science nerds didn't get their farming experiments to work. They only had enough freeze-dried supplies of the good stuff to last another two months. Still, the soil was proving fruitful for the first run of test sprouts. Karen remained hopeful for fresh coffee someday while she took a sip. "OW!"

Instead of smacking her lips and letting the warm, if mediocre, brew revitalize in a moment of bliss, Karen ended up biting into her lower lip. This sparked a chain reaction that stopped everything in mid gulp, leaving the poor woman choking over the sink for nearly a minute. When that had been cleared, there was still the problem she could taste blood from the wound. A few dabs with a paper towel eventually fixed that up. Just not before an idle brushing along her teeth made her eyes go wide.

"Crap!"

Karen dashed to the vanity mirrors placed on one of the mess hall fridges. Pulling back her lips with two fingers, she gave a guttural groan at seeing all her chompers. Every one had narrowed into sharp points, becoming a row of fangs that looked more befitting for an animal than a human. She ran a tongue over where her molars were and nearly cut it confirming they hadn't been spared either.

"Great! Now I have to make sure no one sees me smile too hard." There was no telling what kind of dumb new names everyone would come up with if they saw this latest development. Good thing the director, Ash, kept giving her the odd jobs far away from social activity. She sighed, resisting the urge to punch her reflection before heading on out without finishing the coffee. "I hope I can still eat vegetables with these things."

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## **Day 34**

"Hey, shrimp!" Tracy, one of the researchers, spotted Karen passing through the compounds halls before they could find a means of escape. "The heater in my room fried again. You got some time today to look it over before this planet's night freezes me over?"

Karen rolled her eyes, which hopefully went unseen through the sunglasses she was wearing. Today's surprise, after brushing her fangs, was to look in the mirror and see her usual brown eyes shine a bright emerald green. One more thing no one on this mission needed to see for as long as possible.

One thing getting a lot harder to pass off was her dwindling height. Reaching only four feet even as of yesterday made her the shortest human on this planet. Perhaps that wasn't saying much with only a dozen to work with. It still miffed her nerves that the foot long tail thrashed inside the pant leg she'd stuffed it in this morning. That damn thing really needed to stop growing sometime soon.

"Well, I was off today, but I'll swing by right now if you promise not to mention my size ever again."

Such a reasonable proposal got a harder laugh from Tracy than Karen felt necessary. "You make that difficult to do with you wearing such ridiculous get ups these days."

There was little to retort about that. Now that copper red and white fur was growing on more than Karen's lower body, she had given up on the preferred shorts and shirt attire. A full body jumpsuit was more than uncomfortable in this warmth but it hid the parts she couldn't shave twice a day. Granted it also sagged on her horribly and required rolling up a lot of sleeves.

That reminded her to pick up another razor from storage after this. All this extra self-care was dulling her supply too fast for comfort.

"Unless you know a good tailor, we work with what we have." Karen stuck her tongue out in indignation, which only made Tracy laugh again. Apparently, she looked cute when curling her lip and showing off the fangs.

"Okay. Okay. I promise to at least reduce the commentary. Will that work?"

"Just remember you're mocking the best electrician within six-hundred light years."

"Mhm!" Tracy's smirk was so dang punch-able, but the drastic size difference kept Karen's hand fidgeting with her silver pendant. "As long as you don't end up becoming our furry little mascot before the automation systems are finished."

"You're all just lucky I haven't become some gross monster that eats brains."

"Wait, you mean you were human before we left Earth?"

Karen knew she'd set herself up for that one before even speaking. That didn't stop her from flinging a random clipboard at Tracy's giggling retreat. It didn't get far enough to be much of a threat, given her arms were shorter and thinner than they were last week.

"Jerks," she grumbled while retrieving the improvised projectile from the floor. An act that briefly pinched her tail against the seat of her jumpsuit. Figures while everything else about her was getting smaller that damn thing managed to slink its way down to her knees. It's dense lair of red and white fluff itched in its stubborn desire to be freed.

This was fine. Karen just needed some work to distract her from all the other things going on. Mostly she'd rather not think how increasingly difficult it was getting to reach the higher shelves. Almost every section of her regular maintenance routine had a step stool within thirty feet now. A few of the other lab nerds were starting to complain about her hoarding habits. Even in space no one appreciates a girl's hard work.

Or her fuzzy ear problems.

By the time she got to Tracy's quarters a few hours later, it was the hard work Karen really wished people appreciated. It's not like their lives depended on everything in this outpost running or something. All this monkey wrench work got her hands stiff and sore, along with this annoying crink in her upper back that refused to pop. The damn fur had also already grown back with a vengeance across her body, turning the jumpsuit into a tiny sauna. She swore it returned denser every time to spite her efforts.



"Ah crap!"

The screwdriver she'd fished out for another busted heater job slipped from her hands in a string of curses. That wasn't a current priority as she continued staring at her fingers spread out in the air. They were definitely getting shorter and harder to move. Each nail was getting a lot darker shade of brown while developing sharp point at their unusually long ends.

"Flipping fantastic!" She growled, sounding too feral for her liking. Scooping the tool back up, Karen used both her tiny hands to start loosening the vent duck next to Tracy's bed. "Sure hope someone thought to pack a nail file or I'm about to use up some spare steel on the ship.

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## **Day 38**

The showers filled with the sound of brash cursing, like most nights this past week. Karen's new razor slipped from her two-handed grasp for a light clattering on the floor. She chose to ignore that for the moment. Instead, she rubbed at the area where the sharp blades had sliced some skin.

It was getting harder to shave with so much more chin to work with. The face in the mirror was simply bulging, for lack of a better word. Karen's nose was getting pushed on an extending bridge, growing wider and thicker in the process. And then there were the blasted whiskers. Those damn, thick, nearly transparent hairs kept bursting out of her upper lip and looking totally ridiculous.

Her expression curled in a growl at seeing the small bit of blood decorating fingertips when pulled back. It wasn't the fact she'd been injured that was upsetting. More that the skin around said tips were looking puffer and more discolored than yesterday. Almost like little welts nearly separated from the rest of her digits.

Granted, those weren't faring much better. Stuff was getting harder to grip with her hands shrinking in on themselves. Losing the second knuckle made it a chore to work things. Especially with one's thumb moving increasingly away towards the base of the wrist.

"You cut yourself again?"

Ash had appeared in the doorway giving a look Karen hated more than everyone's snickering; empathy.

"I'm fine!" she refused to look the boss in the eye while stepping off her stool. Things were getting so short It needed an addition thick book just to see her fuzzy body in the mirror. "Whoa!"

No sooner did feet touch the floor than Karen had to grapple with the sink to keep from toppling over. They were getting hard to call feet anymore with how toes were warping and growing claws as they also became daintier. Every time she checked, her heel was stretching further away. No matter how hard she tried they refused to stay flat on the ground for long. Altering bone structure insisted on raising her to hobble on tip toes.

"I said, I'm fine!"

Ash had started over upon seeing the near fall, only to be waved off by an angry, stubby hand. She was still human, damn it. Having to pinch the razor between both hands like a machine just to pick it up proved nothing. All this fur was coming off before bed.

"Just don't hurt yourself." The bigger man sighed his defeat. After a lot of silent deliberation, he could only shake his head before leaving to resume his own clean up. "We kind of need you to survive this."

"Yeah, it'd be a shame if you had the boys do any real work." Karen had meant it as a joke, but her irate nature at these current chores shined through. After another twenty minutes of creating bald spots along her fuzzy face to some degree she tried to turn in various directions looking for a reason to smile. "Damn, blasted...I hate foxes!"

Tossing the razor into a sink clogged with red and white hairs, she fumbled for the scissors resting beside the basin. Trying to clip these whiskers without cutting her big black nose was going to be difficult, but she always made it work.

"Now how do I keep everyone from making 'long face' jokes?" she mused in between trimming the thick strands.

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## **Day 42**

"Okay. This is getting ridiculous, Karen."

Site Director Ash thought it was fair to say he'd put up with a lot in the past month. Being responsible for the vanguard of exploring another planet brought plenty of stress on its own. A thousand things can go wrong every day with so many unknowable factors. All these dozen nerds had to rely on was each other, their ships refining machines, and pure human stubbornness.

Nothing seemed to embody that last trait more than watching his best engineer come shuffling in for a personal update on their condition. Reports had been trickling in near daily about the young woman that was slowly transforming into a typical Earth fox, keeping him updated on the whole process. Granted, most of the team had come to that conclusion after Karen's tail reached nearly three feet long and became adorably fluffy. Hearing their local doctor finally match her altering DNA to something at this point almost felt like a formality.

That much Ash could sympathize with. To her amazing credit, Karen was taking this change of species in great stride the further things progressed. He doubted someone with his army discipline could have lasted the first week without having mental breakdowns. It sure hadn't hindered her ability to keep the refrigerators running, nor the generators from catching fire. Granted there was now a lot more jury-rigged mechanisms around base to accommodate for the ever-dwindling size problem. Long as they didn't get in anyone's way, he didn't care about those, either.

What he did take umbrage with would be the way she stood before his desk now. If they were still on Earth Ash might have mistaken Karen for some kid trying to pass off a bad costume. The jumpsuit she'd been trying to hide her body in for the past several weeks sagged everywhere. Legs and sleeves overlapped with boots and gloves, almost hiding her extremities in them. Said gloves flopped around with her stiff gestures looking like they were scarecrow sticks. her boots looked the worst, reaching halfway up, what Ash assumed, were her thighs.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the woman underneath all that loose clothing said through a mouth mask. Like everything else, Karen had covered her face using her own set of head wear and glasses. Today was a very clashing purple beanie that looked ready to slip over her entire head.

The mask had apparently been a new addition over the past week. First as a way for Karen to hide that her nose was turning a space black. But then as time passed it was clear her entire mouth was pushing that piece of cloth further and further away from her face. Ash was rather intrigued she could still talk so fluently with a muzzle forming.

"I think you know exactly what I mean." He gestured to one of two empty chairs opposite his desk.

Karen had to climb up its edge to get a proper seat. In the process her boots slipped off with dull thunks, revealing feet lavished in black fur, thick paws on smaller, rounded toes, and duller brown claws. The heels looked particularly stretched, forming a modest arch.

Karen had to cough before Ash was rocked out of staring at her exposed paws. "We can understand your frustration with all the teasing that's been going on. This is the crew trying their best to make light of a, frankly, weird situation. I've done my best to curb it for the sake of the mission."

"At least I'm still doing my job here." The small woman huffed and made a gesture that slapped her gloved hands together. Ash assumed she was trying to cross her arms, but her elbows didn't seem to want to rotate that way. She eventually gave up and left her arms hanging at the sides.

He couldn't help raising an eyebrow. "Can you even still make repairs like that?"

"Just cause they're smaller doesn't mean I don't have thumbs, boss."

"Uh huh. And how many more days is that going to last?"

There was a rumbling noise that he came to recognize as a growl. Karen couldn't hide that with the way it made her mask flutter. She seemed to relax a moment later without showing embarrassment.

"So why are you talking to me instead of them? I'm the one technically getting workplace harassment."

"It's this whole..." he gestured at the comically overdressed thing before him. "...thing you're doing. While I can understand why you'd want to do it, I'm at my wits end here."

Karen tilted her head, the beanie sagging off to the side enough some of a giant furry ear poked through. Looked like her hair was thinning something awful too. "I don't follow."

"Why are you still dressing like that?!" he stated a bit too bluntly for his liking. Even out in space he liked to uphold some degree of professionalism.

Karen gave her dainty shoulders a shrug. "This is what I always wear when I work. Sorry command didn't give up much room for fashion choices."

"Karen! You're more animal than human at this point."

"That's not going to stop me from being more than the mission mascot."

"I'm not saying...look, don't you think wearing clothes for someone four times your size is a little silly? This might be why the teasing has increased rather than letting people get used to it."

A look of genuine shock flashed behind those oversized sunglasses. "So, you want me to parade my boobs around for everyone!? Freaking hell, Ash!"

"...do you even still have boobs?"

"I'm still a mammal, damn it. One with her pride."

That meant she probably didn't. Ash was no zoologist, but he understood the gist of how canines worked. Nor was he interested in pursuing the topic. This was just making it weirder.

"Do I even need to bring up how you've gone through a year's supply of shaving razors in three weeks?"

"A girl needs to be smooth, you know."

"Just...consider your own safety in the coming months. Okay? That kind of loose clothing would be dangerous on a normal person working machinery. We have no idea

how far this condition of yours is going to go. I don't want to lose anyone, especially to their own recklessness."

"Fine!" Karen snorted, fidgeting to get her beanie back into place without it falling onto her glasses. "I'm sure there's something smaller I can wear. Are we done here? I need to run diagnostics on the environmental controls."

There seemed little point in arguing with that kind of tone. Ash gave her a small nod refraining from further comments. She was all too happy to dangle off the chair, somehow managing to slide her half-changed feet back into her boots. Shame it only took three clunky steps for her to slip and topple over.

"Are you all right?" Ash was out of his chair and by her side in an instant. Being this close was a bit freaky with how small Karen had really become. He was sure he could lift her up like a little kid.

"I'm fine!" Karen sounded even angrier, by contrast. She managed to roll onto all fours and pushed herself upright, only to fall back down again. This took two more attempts for her to seemingly find some kind of balance. It was only then Ash noticed how much she was hunched forward under that jumpsuit. "Damn hips haven't beaten me yet."

"Right..." The commander could only sigh. Much as he wanted to insist she take it easier, something told him Karen would just be out repairing his air filter as an act of disobedience in an hour. He let Karen turn again to leave when a flash on her chest caught his attention. The silver necklace she was always wearing had fallen out from its hiding place under her very loose neckline.

For some reason, seeing it triggered a new strain of thoughts.

"Hey Karen? Where did you find that pendant?"

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## **Day 43**

"Did I really have to be stripped naked for this!?"

Despite having fur, Karen still sat on the medical table freezing her butt off. Giant fox tail dangled off the other end swishing rapidly in her anger. Ronald had her reduced to nothing but a towel they'd tied over her front as a makeshift apron. Anything else would have threatened to engulf her at this point.

There wasn't much left to hide. As Ash had assumed, he could see her body was looking little more than a straight tube of red, white, and black fur. Any semblance of human anatomy was getting lost under all that fluff along with Karen's awkward gestures. She wasn't letting that stop her from still trying to sit like a normal person, though.

"I can barely believe it myself," the doctor looked from the pendant under his microscope to a computer showing all kinds of things Karen didn't understand. "This rock is giving us energy the likes of which human history has never seen. I can't find anything like it."

"But it's what's causing her to..." Ash started to ask, only to trail off as his eyes fell on Karen's folded ears. Poor girl had lost all but the last bits of her hair since yesterday and the whiskers she kept trying to trim off her muzzle were already grown back.

"It appears so." Ronald's gaze remained on the computer screen like it was his favorite show. "I placed a drop of my own blood directly on this thing and within a few hours it's been completely converted into fox DNA. Talk about an extraordinary reaction."

"Not the word I'd use for this, doc," Karen grumbled.

"Are we all at risk of being effected?" Ash asked, with higher concerns.

"It seems unlikely, otherwise we'd all have noticed some form of transformation taking place by now. The field is fairly weak, so only direct contact over a long period of time would take things this far." Ronald grabbed the chain with a pair of tongs, holding the jewelry at arm's length while he returned it to Karen's neck. "Unfortunately, the tests I've been running on her blood this week have all had the same results. Afraid keeping it off now would be too little too late. The changes are likely to complete themselves either way."

"Fan-flipping-tastic!" Karen threw her hands up in exasperation. They couldn't get that far past her head with the collapsing of her shoulders. Hell. Ash barely considered them hands with how those tiny digits spread their claws in the air. "Well, now we know this planet has a giant lump of metal we need to keep away from."

"Yes. You said you found a meteor of silver about three miles from camp?" Ronald was typing commands that brought up a map on his station.

"I thought it might have been a meteor anyway. The whole area was a crater decorated with silver chunks like this. Maybe it shattered on impact or something."

"That is very likely. I'd like to run some more experiments on this, for sure."

Ash stuttered. "Doc! Are you seriously wanting us to mess with irradiated materials that could turn us all into animals?"

The doctor nodded without hesitation. "Not just for our own sake, but for those that might join us in a few years. We need to figure out what Karen found does and how we might be able to protect against it. Or at the very least we need to contain as much of it as we can. Imagine if a colony ship gets here before we can send a warning. This planet would certainly be populated in an interesting way."

"Fine! I'll have the technicians ready our drones. But no one is going in that ditch. We need to avoid handling these rocks as much as possible."

"Of course!" Ronald turned to Karen, still huffing on his examination table. "Can you remember where you found the site?"

"Give me some credit, doc." The fox-ish woman snorted through her large black nose. "I've been clever enough to make this whole station run on string and duct tape."

That was less than reassuring for the mission commander. "Just make sure everyone is careful about this."

That got Karen to smirk. An odd expression to make with that fuzzy face. "Come on boss. How much more messed up can this get?"

She pushed off the table onto her digitigrade paw-feet. There came a sharp yelp as she promptly fell forward onto all fours. The two men could only watch as Karen tried to rear back, only to flop on her side in a series of curses. Rolling back onto hands and feet she tried again, keeping upright for five seconds, then falling onto her tail with an even louder curse.

"Could one of you help me stand up!?"

"Um..." Ash had no better way to say what was apparent at this point. "I think you are standing."

\*

## **Day 81**

Where people saw Karen as stubborn, she liked to think of herself as innovative. Thanks to her overzealous inventive phase as a kid, the entire base virtually ran on pulley systems and levers. Not bad for someone working with paws.

Of course, there were still some things a fox mind can't get around. She wasn't about to go asking the more able-bodied team members for help on those. Her teeth could work a wrench just as well as thumbs with enough force. And her chompers had a surprising amount of bite to them.

Radio static from the back of her vest broke the tedious trance of grease work. The only garment her tiny body could wear anymore. Also, the only thing she could put on in such a state.

"Yo, Karen? How the hell do I work the espresso?!"

The fox rolled her eyes. With a careful jerk of the neck, Karen spit the wrench out of her muzzle so it didn't clang against anything important. Now she could push a button on her right breast with a paw and speak freely.

"The knobs on the floor have clear instructions, Phil. I can only explain this so many times."

"I have hooves you dumb fox!" The yell cut out into a series of bleats that almost broke Karen's cool. "What am I supposed to turn them with?!"

"Well, you clearly have a mouth."

"That's disgusting! I don't know who else is biting into these?"

"Then go without caffeine, you old goat."

"I'm four years younger than you!" There was a sudden snap followed by what might have been a mix between braying and cursing. "And now my radio fell off again. Karen? Help?"

The fox's muzzle curled into such a high smile it touched her enormous ears. She had to pause to savor the catharsis. "What's the magic word?"

"I can head butt you, you know!"

"Good luck trying to catch me." She giggled with her paw still on the button, just to rub Phil's bearded snout in it more. "Hang onto your horns. I'll be right there."

With a happy flick of her tail, Karen trotted out of the environmental controls in high spirits. Front paws slapped a pressure plate on the floor just in time for the exit doors to slide open without halting her pace. Another necessary fix for the smaller member of the team that couldn't be picked up on motion sensors.

About a foot out the door her nose bonked into an absolute pillar of a brown furred back leg. The big grizzly it belonged to shot her a sour look over its shoulder.

"Watch it, you dumb fox!"

Karen's smug grin never faltered while her paw did its best attempt at a military salute. "Apologies, mama bear! Apparently, I still have to teach some of you how my Goldberg machines work."

Wide nostrils flared at the end of the bears snout in a snort. That was enough of a retort that Tracy turned to continue thumping along her current task. Much as one of those paws was capable of flinging Karen across the compound, no one would dare put down the snickering vixen now.

As it turned out, a pebble worth of space silver was weak enough that only prolonged contact had transformative effects. Collecting about four hundred pounds of it into one place, on the other hand, generated a radiation field about two miles wide. Boy. The teasing at Karen's expense stopped fast once everyone started growing their fur in odd places, among other things.



She couldn't deny some of the team were way worse off than being a fox. Karma is brutal.

Entering the cafeteria found mostly what she'd expected; a very disgruntled goat in a hat was trying it's damndest to slipped a radio mounted vest like Karen's back on. Its main problem was the obvious fact hooves sucked for picking thin cloth off the floor.

"Here, Phil. Let me help." She couldn't keep the amusement out of her yips, though the goat reluctantly let her snatch his uniform in her teeth. The movements needed to help get the thing back on a stocky barrel body without hands was awkward the first few days. By now they both went through the motions with near perfect synchronization.

"Thanks." Phil's gratitude sounded almost painful to say, though it could have been the growling caused by his changed throat. He still didn't spare Karen so much as a glance. "Now, how about that coffee?"

"Whatever, ya baby!" Karen gave her toothiest grin before skipping over to the kitchen counters. Empathizing with everyone's plight of being animals wasn't going to stop her from at least a little attitude payback.

It had taken a lot of ingenuity on a crunch to get everything set up while most of the team still had hands. Now everyone was grateful to have things set up for almost perfect automation with just a few string pulls and knob turns. Not bad for an excessive use of duct tape and spare parts. The fox's mighty jaws turned one knob, pressed a button with her hind paw and they both heard a satisfying whirling from the espresso machine from above.

"Happy now?" she asked with a paw flourish as a cup with spill-proof spout slid down one of the delivery ramps before the pair of animals.

"You forgot to set it with extra foam," Phil grumbled. He still picked up the fresh drink by his teeth and put it in a specialty vest pocket.

"It'd help if one us had turned into a cow." Karen's smile turned devious. "Or, you know, if you became a lady goat. We'd have plenty of cream then."

Phil snorted again, though she could catch the edge of his muzzle twist up ever so slightly. "You're not cute."

"You all were calling me adorable a month ago!"

A fluttering of wings halted further banter and the pair looked towards the entrance in time to watch a rainbow feathered toucan come sailing in. It seemed to ignore them for a moment, flying straight for the counter where Karen knew a bowl of extra coffee had been poured.

"Thanks for the coffee, Karen." A crackling voice flitted down from the bird perch.

"Anytime, Ash!" the vixen bent to scratch at her ear with a back paw. An instinctual act that made her curse and force it to stop seconds later. "How's Roland coming along with that cure?"

Ash's colorful beak dipped over the counters edge to gaze back at her. "Well, despite being a badger, he's got the science behind it figured out. Something about applying that last strain of humanity we have that lets us talk into the radiation field. With any luck we'll all be walking upright again in a couple months. Just in time for us to welcome the colony ship."

"But they won't turn into animals too?" Coffee spilled from Phil's goat beard while he asked. "Right?"

Karen had no idea toucans could make such a violent looking face.

"I assure you, every last bit of silver on this base is getting launched back into space soon as I'm able to make it happen."

"Oh good." She chuckled as a paw knocked the pendant around her neck. "After I get thumbs again it might be years before I even touch silverware again. We should stick to plastics."

The radio on her back shrieked to life, making the other animals jump.

"KAREN! The shower's broke again!"

"Ugh!" Karen rolled her eyes and smacked a paw to her vest button. "Of course, Mary. I told you not to push your hoof too hard on the lever!"

Ash cocked his head in a disturbingly bird-like manner. "Why is our horse worried about a shower?"

"Same reason I wanted to wear a jumpsuit, you jerk." Karen scrunched her muzzle in a raspberry, not caring how silly it looked. "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me. A repair vixen's work is never done."