

## The Cocoon

I winced as I felt the rental car slam down on another rock. On the one hand, this was a rental car, but they could charge me a decent amount more if they knew I was taking the car over a road this bad. It could barely even be called a road. The wincing was more about the fact that the rock had been in just the right spot so that it hit the car frame, which sent that jolt right into the seat and thus into my spine.

The car had been going at a crawl to avoid this type of thing, and I stared ahead at the even bigger rock that was in my path. It would be better to walk the rest of the way.

It wasn't as if anyone else was going to use this road. It was an old logging trail, I think. I was way off the beaten path, so the only people that would possibly go down this way were locals. What would they even think about an empty rental car here? Probably that the idiot that rented it had gotten himself eaten by bears.

Of course I had asked for a taller car but this was all they had. I levered myself out of the car and started going down the road on foot. If I did see a bear, I didn't want to mess with it. I was here on a different mission. In my bag was a super-zoom camera and a really nice pair of binoculars.

The good news was that the car had gotten most of the way to where I had planned to go (on the road), and I turned left while I could still see the car. Going uphill. As I went, both of the GPS devices I was carrying left digital markers that I should be able to follow back to the car.

The brush was thinner than I expected, which was nice. Game trails went across the slope, or sometimes downward, but I was headed to the top of the hill. My goal was to get an overview of the facility, which was about a mile from the top of the hill. I had done as much research as possible before going out here, but I also didn't want to run into possible security guards.

I caught a hint of the facility through the brush and decided that I was high enough. I stepped through the waist-high bushes and soon got a much better view.

It wasn't terribly big, as I knew from satellite maps, but I didn't know what was underground. They had a pretty good road leading to it, which had accommodated quite a few construction vehicles while the facility had been constructed, about three years ago. There was nobody currently around the building that I could see. I took a bunch of pictures, which didn't tell me much. The outside was mostly white. There were some vans outside, and a medium-sized delivery truck, as well as some other cars in a parking lot. The asphalt wrapped most of the way around the building, but I was pretty sure I had a fine spot for spying.

There just wasn't anything juicy happening outside.

Nothing interesting continued to happen for the forty minutes I had planned to stay watching. Short watching was important in the wilderness. No streetlights out here to scare away raccoons or wolves. I took three final pictures before turning around and heading back. I wanted to retrace my steps almost exactly, because getting lost would pretty much ruin any chance I had of being stealthy.

The car was exactly where I had left it, and started up just fine. The frustrating part was finding a place to turn around, especially since I couldn't see the rocks as well going backwards. Still, after another hour of navigating what barely counted as a road, I was back at the highway and on my way.

Three days later, I stood at the baggage claim in the nearby airport, looking for the person I would be meeting. I had lied to them and told them I was on a flight, so I had to be at the airport terminal as if I was getting off a flight. Fortunately for me, they would be meeting me outside the airport.

My driver was a local, who was mostly employed as a driver to the facility. No, she'd never brought anyone against their will. Most people she drove over were excited to go. She did say that she wasn't supposed to say

much more about what went inside. She wasn't the person who drove people away. Well, sometimes, but the people she drove back to the airport were often grumpy and didn't say much. Her name was Malani, and as she walked me in we talked about the spelling of her name. Malani said that it was because her mom was rather grumpy and very much made stupid by drugs, but at least it was phonetic and was close enough to a normal name that most people got it mostly right.

The first thing on getting there was to drop off my stuff. I had a room in the building where I'd be staying while the process happened. I had only the vaguest idea of what that meant. According to rumors, it was a rejuvenation process. Something about giving me a new body.

The next thing was to meet with a person who'd help me figure out my new body. This person was a lot more knowledgeable about what happened inside the facility, and suspicious about the questions I was asking. But this was supposed to be about me, and what I wanted. Almost everybody before me had a specific new body in mind, so we needed to make up what the new body would be for me.

I didn't pick randomly. There was reasoning behind my decision. I was, however, somewhat impatient, and the man I was talking with answered the most important questions with 'you'll find out soon enough.' I was never directly asking about a specific person, so I don't think they were fully aware of who I was.

After designing the new body, there was a lot of paperwork to sign. I figured I wouldn't get any answers unless I signed the papers, although I did notice that one of them was a non-disclosure agreement. That one I read a little more thoroughly, and asked more questions about. He wasn't a lawyer, he couldn't answer all of these questions. The paperwork also indicated that this procedure was a little more dangerous than the typical rejuvenation, and also ... experimental.

Maybe I'll break out of my room tonight and take a look around the facility while everyone else is sleeping. That seems like the best solution. I might have to leave quickly if they find me, though.

There was a camera inside the room I was in. A minor problem. One doesn't get far as an investigator without knowing the blind spots in security systems. Today's solution to that was simply to work under the blind spot (and occasionally come out so that they knew I was still there).

That is, that was my plan until there was a knock on the door.

He was wearing an actual lab coat, and acted as if he were the head of the facility. From my research, the leader should be Dr. Baldwin. He had a bottle of beer in each hand.

"Hey, I'm Doctor Gene Baldwin, I'm the head of medical operations here. You're our newest patient, so I thought I might get to know you a little. I brought some beer, some real craft stuff, not generic supermarket crap."

"Uh, thanks," I answered. I took the beer he offered. He was just being friendly, and the bottle cap was still properly sealing the beer. We both used the same bottle opener, a small one that was in a drawer.

"So how'd you hear about us?" He sipped his beer, leaning against the wall.

"Social media. It was a direct message, from my friend Bridget. Well, her username is NonaCat34, but I know her real name is Bridget."

"Mm, yeah, we've had to do things by word of mouth, direct messages only. I'd love to get more patients, faster, but I also don't want a lot of public attention yet. I don't think everyone is ready to know about what I do here."

"What do you do here, exactly? The notes, and this brochure I found in here indicates that you literally remake someone's body, but that's impossible. Once people are grown, you can't change their bodies, right?"

"Well ... that's what other doctors think. I took inspiration from nature. Amazing things happen in nature, like the cycle from embryo to baby, or from caterpillar to butterfly. Those are fundamental changes to those organisms, right? My process definitely works more in the sense of a caterpillar to a butterfly, though."

“That’s completely different from people.” This beer wasn’t my favorite, but he was willing to actually talk so I should be polite and drink it.

“What’s so different? They’ve got cells, they’re animals. Yeah, we’re not insects, and embryos are not developed yet anyway, but nature shows that it is possible.”

“You’re trying to say that you’ve perfected remaking someone’s body? That would be ... huge. Like, you’d be able to get rid of cancer by simply remaking the body without the cancer inside it. So many other things. Why would you even want to keep that a secret?”

“If it were perfected I probably wouldn’t have a facility in rural Alaska. It would probably be in, like, Seattle or Boston or California. Not everyone would be happy about every experiment I’ve run, so I’d like to remain under the radar until I can show that it’s safe.”

“This sounds like something I should tell authorities about.” I put my beer down, half-finished.

“You signed a non-disclosure agreement. Besides, every person that I’ve experimented on has been a volunteer. I told them the risks. As for you, I talked with Luke, and he seemed to be under the impression that you actually had some enthusiasm for a new body. But ...”

But what? I walked slowly towards my luggage, where I had a pair of handcuffs.

“You gave me a fake name. I found this out by looking up your phone number. You research things, I researched you. You’re actually the second private investigator that’s come here, and I doubt you’ll be the last. The first one I just kicked out of here, I don’t think he really learned a lot. I assure you, I try to be honest, and except for five people I can actually let you talk with the people that have gone through the process. And, um, I spiked your beer.”

My hands were weak, and I couldn’t quite open the zipper to the bag with them. The gun was right there. It kept slipping out of my grip.

“Instead of a sedative, I gave you a paralysis drug. So you can still hear what I’m going to say to you. Kind of villainous, but technically, you did sign all those papers agreeing to the process. I’m doing the procedure on you, even if you aren’t agreeing to it anymore. It makes it easier to tell you to stay here afterwards.”

“You ... babstut.”

“Yeah, well, because drugging you isn’t ... standard, I’ve also made sure that none of my employees have helped me drug you, and none of them are going to help me start the procedure, so honestly I kind of made this hard on me.” He leaned over and plucked the gun from my grip easily. It hadn’t been pointed anywhere near him (and wasn’t loaded). “I’ve got to go get a gurney, stay right here.”

He also took my cell phone. I didn’t even get to the phone on the bedside table before he came back with the gurney. Talking recommenced after he lifted me onto the mobile bed, grunting loudly.

“All right, I don’t know exactly who hired you, but unless it was, uh, the Binwell family, the McGadden family, the West family, or the parents of either Cory Lucen or Pamela Runapell, you’ll be able to talk to the person who was ‘kidnapped’ yourself. Well, if you can learn to talk again, that is. Most people have that trouble. I’m planning to go through the procedure after it’s safe for me to do so. You mentioned Bridget, right? I think she’s still getting used to walking, but she can write and read perfectly well.”

The gurney, with me on it now, traveled through two hallways before going to an elevator, which went ... down. I knew this building didn’t have upper floors. Where else would the elevator have gone?

“I have been allowing them to send messages to their family to let them know they’re alive, but it doesn’t surprise me that families want to physically see them to be sure. I keep them in a separate facility, away from prying eyes. I think you’ll understand when you see some of them. Actually, two people who’ve done the procedure live in this building, just underground. They like helping me, and they rather agree that going outside could be very dangerous for them. It’s not the bears. More than a few people shoot before figuring out what they’re shooting at. I have no idea if you’d be one of those people. I ... doubt it.”

We were in a room with a lot of tubes, pipes, and drainage systems. Despite that, it was very clean, and well-lit. I couldn't turn my head to look at what was on the table next to me, and he didn't show me. Instead of undressing me normally, he cut my clothes off of me. Frustrating, but they were just clothes.

"I really hope that I can get a better system than this," he said, picking up needles and starting to inject me with things. The first place was the throat. "I'm a little sorry for doing all this stuff to you, but it's just part of the procedure, and for you I think doing the procedure on you is better than creating a court order. I had to expedite the processing for your DNA profile, I think it'll be finished before you're too dissolved."

Dissolving me?

"Gotta inject a few sensors into you, and give you your breathing tube. Just waiting for the local sedative to work. I did paralyze you but I don't want you to actually suffer."

I did not like the contradiction in that last sentence, and I tried to make that as clear as possible. By blinking. My entire body was paralyzed; I don't know what he had put in that beer (or how) but it was quite effective. So I was naked on a table in a scary lab, starting a procedure that I agreed to on paper but was definitely having second thoughts about. So nice. I wish I could move my mouth, if only to tell him what I really thought.

Then he cut a slit in my throat. It was weird, all I could really tell was that his hand moved across my throat, with a blade, and the blade was red afterwards. I didn't feel it, not even any pressure. Then came the tube. That's when I wanted to flinch away, trying in vain to get my muscles to obey. They told me, nah bro, you'll be fine.

The tube was secured into my throat and then he went to a totally different table. I could feel how my breathing changed, but it definitely didn't stop working. I could still inhale and exhale, although doing it consciously wasn't working well.

Next to happen was to put me into a bag, apparently. I was paralyzed, but even if I wasn't I wouldn't have helped him. It was slow going, but after ten minutes the bag was over everything but my head.

"Your cocoon is a little bigger than most, since you picked a bigger body. You'll be getting the big tank. Give me a few more minutes, then you'll have started the process. It takes a while. Two months, usually. You'll be dreaming most of the time. I'll pipe in some music. I don't know what you like. It'll probably be classical or this zen stuff Zech found, we want people's heart rates to be low as much as possible."

A hood went over me, a plastic that didn't entirely block light. Occasionally I saw his shadow go in front of it in front of my head. There was a section that my new breathing tube went through, and I could hear chains rattling, before a few clunks and clicks. There was a whirring, and the bag started adhering to me. I was being vacuum-sealed.

Two minutes later, I was lifted up, mostly horizontally. The bag obscured my vision, but he had mentioned a tank. Soon, my feet hit a metal rim, then the back of my neck.

"Usually, people aren't paralyzed for this, so I'm going to have to drop you in a slightly different way," I heard. "Try to stay calm."

My feet were released, and they slid into ... some water, it felt and sounded like. I started sinking, the water compression much colder than the air. I was then lifted into the center of the probably cylindrical tank and released, sinking down. Some of what he had injected me with must have been another sedative, because this was okay, and I was still breathing okay despite being paralyzed, inside a bag, underwater. Well, I didn't sink all the way to the bottom, because I didn't really feel my feet touch down. My head felt underwater, though. Oh well.

I flinched when a fluid came into the bag, warm and tangy-smelling. I struggled a little bit, trying to get it away from me, which was hopeless. At least I had muscle control back. I don't know how much of it

eventually got put into the bag, but I felt it on every part of my skin. It also stung my eyes and nose. I could still breathe through the tube, so I couldn't drown. The taste was ... unpleasant. I doubt I could swallow enough to make a difference.

I guess I'll just let this stuff happen, now. This bag is really thick, and if I tore out my breathing hose that would probably only make me drown. I think there's a mechanism where the hose leaves the bag, but it's pretty smooth and sealed on this side.

I kinda wish I could play some phone games or something. It's so boring in here.

For a little while, I lost a grip on what reality was. My dreams had a lot more going on than reality. I wasn't in control of either one, but at least I could tell what was happening in my dreams. In a sense. I knew what was happening but it was a dream - things just happened.

Time was hard to keep track of. In theory, I should have been able to tell time when I was awake, by counting seconds or something. Didn't bother. Whatever sensations I was getting were muddled and my mind couldn't form cohesive thoughts. It was okay. It would all be okay.

There were times when there were actual, tangible feelings. I didn't fight them, and they went away. It wasn't noise - there was something wrong with my hearing - even with water in my ear I could usually hear something. Seeing was also not working perfectly, although better than hearing. Shadows and flashes were some of the feelings.

My senses were concrete the next time I was aware of something, but my brain wasn't engaged yet. It was being less than half awake, just barely lucid enough to remember that I'm a person. The pressure of fluid was gone, and it was cold. Somebody said some words, and blurred shapes did things in front of me. Someone pulled my body from a cold surface to a slightly warmer one. I was on my back. Mostly, I think. Maybe some part of me was twisted.

The shapes moved consistently. Hold on ... I was being moved. Okay.

Where I stopped was slightly dimmer than the room I had been in first, and probably ... bigger. I started looking around with my head to see things. I must be on my back, because all the lights are in front of me, none of them shining directly into my face. A new shape appeared, partly recognizable as a person. They got closer to my face, then shone a light directly into my eye. I couldn't tell what they did next, because of being blinded.

"You're still waking up, I don't know if you'll remember this. This room is where we teach people how to walk again. You'll have a bit more trouble than most, but I need you to learn to get around again because dragging you around sucks. That is, assuming you can still think. Anyway, I'm locking you in here for now. I'll see you in the morning."

The human shape left, and I was left alone with my thoughts. My thoughts were starting to form plans instead of just observing. Like, for example, planning to get to the door. Or at least seeing if there might be more than one door, and checking if he locked them all. First I had to get off the floor, right?

I tried flipping myself over. Usually, even stoned like I was, this shouldn't have been so difficult. My arms seemed to work okay, if slow and weak. But when I twisted the part with my shoulders over, I still felt like most of my back was on the ground.

Where are my legs? Those should really help in flipping myself over. I started the quest to find them, by using my hands to feel down the length of my body. This was becoming steadily more confusing, because finding my own legs was something I never imagined I would be doing. It wasn't that I'd grabbed the place where they ought to be and there was nothing there - my chest was just longer, or something. Way longer.

My eyes continued to clear up, so I saw that not only were the feelings from my hands correct, but my body had a new, colorful pattern. I decided to keep going in search of my legs. Even with such a long ... body, if I had my legs I might still be able to get around.

My optimism about walking declined steadily as I kept feeling my body from the top down. It was smooth, kind of unnaturally so. Sort of. Helping express the colored pattern were scales on the skin. My skin.

I remembered the new body that I had discussed, which now that I remember it was a giant snake with arms. No legs, snake head, the pattern of a common boa. Was that what I was now?

The funny thing was that it didn't feel like I was a torso with a giant tail instead of legs. It felt more like my chest just kept on going. I think there was a point at which it was tail instead of chest, currently out of my reach. There weren't any legs there, just more tubular body.

My face. Was my face really like ... I'm not sure. Probably. My head was long, and my skin was smooth if bony underneath. A mirror would have been nice. Oh, there was a mirror, over there.

How do I get over there?

Ooh, that's the question. How do I move with no legs? Snakes slither, right? That's probably the answer.

The good news was that I could keep time in this room - there was a clock on the wall. The bad news was that according to that clock I was frustratingly slow in my progression. As much as I thought it would make moving easier, the smooth floor (I think it was a heated tile system) made it much harder to get around. I found that I didn't just slide in the direction I wanted to go, I slid around with almost every motion I made.

Figuring out how to move different parts of my body had been the first challenge. My arms and my head I figured out pretty well. Unfortunately, those were not systems used for getting around. Actually, after hour three, I did start using my hands to drag myself around, although I couldn't get a good purchase on the ground with my hands either. Still, it worked better than trying and failing to get an 'S' shape with the rest of my body. Most of the time, I was making a giant 'C' and then fighting against myself to curve the other way.

By dragging myself with my arms I managed to get to the mirror and look at my face. It was a big snake, not my human face. But it was my reflection.

I was checking out the inside of my mouth when I heard something - my memory told me it was a mechanism, probably a key turning a lock. Where was it coming from? There were four doors to this room. I'm glad I can still hear things, although I might have trouble with direction. On a better note, from here I could see all four doors at the same time.

The door to my left opened. Well, for most of me it would be my right, but I had my head and, um, chest turned around. My shoulders and everything above them. That's what's going to be my chest. The rest is my belly, at least until it becomes a tail, and I'm pretty sure I know where that is.

I recognized the thing that came through the door as a human being, although they stopped when spotting me - and went backward.

"Wait," I said. Tried to say. It didn't come out at all. It was noise, though, and the person stopped retreating. Five seconds passed.

"Help." Again, the actual noise I made was nowhere near the word 'help.' Probably more like 'auph.' Still, the person looked over where the noise had come from - my chest.

"You're different," she said. It was a statement of surprise and of interest, of something she didn't expect. "Can you understand me?"

I nodded vigorously. I doubt any sound I could make right now would be recognizable as 'yes.'

She looked at me for three seconds, thinking.

"So, you're in here, and the door was locked. He's never done a snake before. I didn't even know that was ... possible. So you're new, you probably can't talk, and you have trouble getting around." She was basically

thinking aloud, but watching me if I shook my head at some point. “I didn’t think there was anyone in here, but you do look like you could use help. Hm. Here’s my plan. I’m going to get a whiteboard and a marker, so you can write things to me. We’ve got a bunch for people that need to re-learn to talk. I’m going to set up the room for Jenna, which is what I came here to do. And I’m going to have a *talk* with Gene. Okay?”

I almost asked her to stop as she left, but she had told me something that was very reasonable. Most likely that’s what she was going to do. So I should wait for her to come back instead of wailing.

I need to keep composure of myself. Becoming a giant snake has evidently changed my ability to get around, to talk, and other people’s perception of me. Probably how I eat, too. But I’m pretty sure that if I want to be treated nicely I need to act with civility. Especially when meeting new people.

She came back after less than five minutes, carrying the whiteboard she had been talking about. She offered it to me; it had a small eraser and two markers tethered to it, and it was good they were tethered. I nearly dropped the board twice, finding that the skin on my hands was very smooth. She patiently waited as I tried to write on the board.

I wouldn’t have thought writing would be a problem. My hands weren’t so different. Smoother, yes, but there were five fingers and I could grab the marker fine. I tried four times to write a word in small writing and each time it came out illegibly. So I wrote one big word. And a question mark.

“Name? My name? Oh, I’m Sierra, I’m originally a veterinarian but Gene recruited me because I worked with physical therapists while I was going through veterinary school, so I also kinda know physical therapy. Not many people with my skill set. What’s your name?”

I wrote my name, my real name, slowly.

“Huh, I don’t remember seeing your name anywhere. Well, Mike, I’ll probably help you out, but not right now. The other thing is, I only sort of know how a snake moves around. I’m not an exotic veterinarian, and even if you are a common type of snake, snakes are technically exotic pets.”

“So, how long have you been in here?”

I looked at the clock and did some mental math. I wrote down five hours. It could have been more, I was pretty out of it for a while.

“Well, I’m not going to make you stay. But I am going to talk to Gene. I’ll probably be telling everyone else around here about you, too. Don’t be mad, we’re really just trying to make the transition easier.”

She almost went off to do something before noticing that I was writing something new. She patiently waited for me to finish.

“Transition? It’s the transition to your new body,” Sierra said, under the impression that it was obvious. “I’ve really got to have a talk with Gene. If you want help ... I can drag you around a bit, maybe. I’ve got some machines to set up, too. Okay?”

Probably the treadmill and exercise bike against the wall. Not sure what else. I looked at myself in the mirror, wondering what question I would write on the board next. I need to practice my writing. My hand was really shaky.

She got out her phone and pressed buttons on it as she absentmindedly walked to a different machine. The first one she pressed a button, made sure it worked okay, and that the seat moved. Sierra paid more attention to her phone for nearly a minute, before bringing it to her ear and poking at the next machine, a treadmill.

I only heard one side of the conversation. Still, Sierra was unhappy and most of the talking involved telling him to come here and help. A little bit of it was telling him off for not warning her, or anyone, about me. Also, yes she knew what time it was.

Thirty minutes later, he showed up through one of the doors that had been locked. Sierra was checking out my arms, testing strength and flexibility. So far, it was pretty good, from what she could tell. Some testing

would have to be done with a table, which wasn't in the room. In short, getting around again was something I really did need to figure out. Other people could only help so much.

Gene stopped a good distance away from me, wary. "So, Mike, you should be aware that hurting me won't help you at all. I totally want to help you get moving again and talking again, but I also know that your last memories of me aren't entirely pleasant."

"Gene, did you actually give someone the treatment who didn't want it?"

"I'm figuring that out myself. He signed the papers. Anyway, Mike, I want to know if I can trust you. I want you to shake your head no, to tell me that you will not hurt me."

I shook my head. This was the rational thing to do. To get out of here, I needed their cooperation, even if I really did want to go back to life elsewhere. If I didn't want to have my old life back, because I was most definitely not the same person, then they seemed like they wanted to help me with a new life. In either case, hurting him would only get me tranquilized and confined to a room or worse.

"Good," Gene said. "I did a visual inspection of your body while you were recovering, but now that you're awake we can test your mind, your strength, your coordination, and get you learning to move around again. Your body is based almost completely on snake anatomy," he continued, walking next to me. "If you haven't figured it out, your tail is really only about this long. The rest of you is an extended ribcage that contains all your major organs. Your arms are mostly human, although there is a certain amount of modification so that it works with your more flexible ribs. Your neck is only a little longer than the longest human neck, and aside from changing the inner shape of the skull to accommodate your brain your spine also emerges from the bottom, like a human skull, rather from the back, as animals have."

That's so nice. I'm not sure that helps me slither.

"Okay, your main problem, I think, is going to be talking."

Oh, great.

"You have a snake head and mouth, which means that your airway is actually at the bottom of your mouth, here, while your tongue is at the very tip. The good news is that you could probably swallow a really big meal, like a goose or possibly even bigger, whole. I'm not sure that's what you really wanted, but it's what snakes have."

Gene was watching my reactions, making sure that I understood. Yeah, I understand, and also you haven't gotten to whether I can really talk or not.

"In theory, your trachea has structures on it I borrowed from birds. With practice, you should be able to make cohesive words. In the meantime, I think, that whiteboard's going to be really useful."

So the answer is *you* don't know whether I can talk yet. I'm the person that has to figure it out. That's great. That's really great. I wished at that point that my face had readable emotions, but alas, from looking in the mirror my facial expressions were very ... alien.

"Mike," Sierra said, "I'm going to go get Jenna, who needs to use this room for therapy. She chose a fox form, just to warn you. Gene, my studies on snakes were a bit limited, so I'm afraid I can't do a good checkup of Mike. But his brain, lungs, heart, and muscles are working, so that's half of it." Sierra's body language indicated that she wasn't happy with how Gene had handled the situation. Reading people's nonverbal language has been something that I've needed to do a lot in my job, and at least I can still do that. Other people will have a harder time reading my body language now. I don't know if that's a bad thing.

"Right. Well, other things we need to check on are your ability to eat, coordination, and a psychological test. Usually I test people's ability to eat about a day after they emerge from the cocoon, since the gastrointestinal systems work and start back up a bit slower than the nervous systems. So, I think I'll have you do a coordination test. I, uh, should have thought about what happened when someone found you in here, but I



was tired. Still am. So, I'm gonna go tell someone else to do these tests on you. And I'll tell my staff about you, because they don't like the idea that we're keeping prisoners."

Gene moved away, going to the door that Sierra had gone through. "I'll be seeing more of you, but for now, wait here for Zech."

Fine. Leave. Either I'll try to make noises in the mirror or I'll try moving around in a way that gets me around to where I want to go without using my arms.

I think I'll do the moving thing. I can write, not great but I can, I can hear, so I can communicate. Based on how hard it was to drag myself with my hands, I'm pretty hefty now, so being able to move by myself is going to be very important.

The only problem with the moving thing is that I don't know how to do that. I'm getting the impression that there's nobody to teach me either. Well, nobody who's also a giant snake. Sierra seems like she would be willing to help me learn, but is very much still human and can't make the same movements I can now make.

I was still trying to think up a plan for how I was going to learn to move about when Sierra came back in the room, with a new person in tow. The new person was gently warned about me as they entered.

"Jenna, this is Mike. He came out of his cocoon yesterday, I think, so he's still figuring things out. Mike, this is Jenna, she's going to be using the treadmill and the weight training machines in here, okay?" As Sierra introduced us, we both gave each other a small wave with our empty hands. She was also carrying a whiteboard.

If I had to describe Jenna quickly, she would be a red fox mixed with a human. She was roughly the same height as Sierra, but I could see that her bare feet weren't the same shape as human feet. Jenna wore a t-shirt and shorts, presumably modified with a hole for the bushy, vibrant tail behind her. Her hand looked very similar to human hands, from what I could tell. Lastly, she had a fox's head, although scaled up to the proper size for a human body. Since she was carrying that whiteboard around, I doubted that she could talk clearly, but given that foxes are mammals it was unlikely that she would have as hard a time re-learning to talk as I will.

Sierra talked about what she wanted Jenna to do, and what the point of the exercise was, and Jenna was silent and obedient. The goal was to get stronger and steadier on the feet, right? Probably steadier with her arms, too.

I mostly watched. In time, I would probably get arm exercises to do too. Maybe not. My arms seem to be working well enough, with a few tremors and some weakness. I suppose I could practice writing.

I was writing my name for the eighth time when a new person came in. I suppose it was Zech. When they spotted me, they blinked a few times and took a breath before walking my way.

"I suppose you're Mike. I'm Zech," they said, extending a hand to shake. Unfortunately, only my left hand was free, since I was holding the whiteboard in my right.

Zech was human, as far as I could tell, but highly androgynous. Usually, I assign people a gender based on my first impression, which I'm pretty sure is what everybody does (occasionally I need to be corrected but I try to be open-minded). Zech, though, was so exactly in the middle that I had to say: Zech is not a guy or a girl. It makes referring to them in English more difficult, though. This was Alaska (I think), we all still spoke English.

"So Gene told me that I was in charge of getting a new guy, fresh out of the cocoon, moving and talking again. He failed to tell me just how big you are. For most people, when they can't quite stand or walk yet we use a wheelchair, but you're ... way too big for those. I'm not even sure how to tell you to move around." Zech paused for nearly a minute to think. "Okay. Here's my plan. I'm going to figure out a way to cart you around so you can go to the restroom and get dinner, and then after that figure out how you can move

yourself around. I bet half of the problem is getting coordinated. Your brain is still calibrating, based on a new body. The more movements you do, the better coordinated you'll be. Anyway, I'll be back."

So Zech thinks I need to learn coordination? They're probably right. Sierra remained mostly focused on her charge, so it looked like I could do almost anything I wanted, as long as it wasn't threatening. Actually, it would probably be smarter to work on coordinating my body rather than my arms, because at least I can make legible words. I can't even figure out how to quickly straighten myself out yet.

Snakes make coils, right? It seems like a good thing to try to practice.

By the time Zech came back, I was ... slowly getting myself to a more consistent coil shape. I wasn't getting help from the two girls in the room, although both of them glanced at me on occasion out of curiosity. Zech had brought a rolling cart, and set it next to me.

"Hmm, I dunno where I was really going with this. I thought, like, you might put part of yourself on the top and part in the bottom area here, but looking at you now I get the impression you're going to need something more heavy-duty." Still, Zech went to the casters on the cart and locked them in place. "Let's try to get as much of you onto this cart as we can, it might still work."

It did not work. The cart fell over with half of me on it. It was only slightly painful to slam my body into the ground, although my hands caught the most fragile parts of me (my head, basically). Zech was disappointed, and vowed to get something for me to move around with until I was coordinated enough to slither properly. This meant something wider, and lower.

Twenty minutes later, Zech returned with a pallet jack with a plywood board placed on top of it. Zech said that the board wasn't secured well, so that would need modification, and that it would be good to have a lip on the sides, and also, some sort of covering or treatment to make sure that nobody could get splinters from the plywood. It was unlikely that I could even get splinters due to my scaly skin, but one couldn't be too careful.

It took about fifteen minutes to get me balanced onto the board, much of that consisting of Zech trying their best to pick parts of me up and bringing it to the board. I tried to help as much as I could but I didn't really know how much that was.

In the end, I was on the pallet jack and Zech leaned on the handle, breathing heavily but pleased that I was now on a device that could be moved around. I was getting the feeling that I was one of the more difficult patients that Zech has had to deal with. From what I could tell so far, Zech enjoyed the challenge.

Onward we went. It was a good thing that their pallet jack was partially motorized. It was also fortunate that many of the doors in this area were made large to accommodate gurneys and wheelchairs.

"First door's a storage room. Next three are offices, Sierra's, mine, then Jude's office. On our right is the dining area, which leads to the kitchen. Let's poke in there, Jude and Clara should be most of the way done with making breakfast. I mean, it's only for ten people, well, with you it's going to be eleven, and when they're not in the kitchen they're cleaning up around here. Ah, there's Jude." First Zech pointed to the left, then to the right, and then let up pulling as we got to the dining area doorway. The pallet jack would probably fit, but Zech didn't necessarily want to do more pulling than necessary if Jude and Clara were willing to meet us in the corridor. Apparently, they were.

Jude had horse attributes, such as hooves for feet, a (mostly) horse head, and the hair-covered tail. I wasn't an expert on horses, but I was sure that Jude's head was not exactly like that of a horse. Still, it was enough to recognize what he wanted to be, I hope. He wore a chef's apron and wielded a spatula. Clara, who showed up about forty seconds later, was a similarly dressed human.

"This is Mike, he's pretty fresh out of his cocoon. He'll be in recovery room 3, but I'm taking him on a tour right now."

Jude was about to ask a question, and Zech interrupted.

“Yeah, I will need help getting him around sometimes. I don’t know how much he weighs - I’ll have to get a number from Gene, but I bet it’s more than ten times what people usually weigh. I don’t know why Gene thought it was okay for anyone to have this type of body, but it’s what Mike’s got now.”

The next statement took another five seconds of examination.

“Peena’s going to be terrified of him.” Jude leaned against the doorway, Clara looking at me from behind him. Neither of them seemed afraid of me, but were curious.

Zech sighed. “Well, I’ll try to keep them mostly separated. Um, Mike, in case it wasn’t clear, we take aggression very seriously, and Gene’s even suggested that for a really bad offense we would drive them to an even more remote spot and leave them out in the wilderness to fend for themselves. But. You wouldn’t hurt anyone, would you?”

Even after shaking my head, I wrote my answer (no) on my whiteboard and underlined it. I need your help. Not only that, if I were to find out more, attacking people at this point wouldn’t help. It would be better to become their friend. Although, that may be difficult, particularly for Peena, whoever she ... he? ... was.

Jude and Clara went back to cooking, while Zech started pulling on the handle to the pallet jack, all satisfied with my answer. The corridor turned right, and Zech continued the tour.

“That’s the restrooms, then there’s the recovery rooms, all five of them. Each one is kind of like a hospital room, with a private bath and complicated bed, and of course yours is the middle one. Past all this is Gene’s and Kirk’s offices, and all the medical equipment rooms. The main stairwell and elevator is past all that, to the right, and the cocoon room. There’s an escape ladder in my office, too, but I’ve never actually gone up and down using that. I don’t know how the hell you’re going to use stairs. Right now, I’m going to put you in your recovery room, and go help out Peena. In your room, I recommend getting more familiar with your body. There should be a packet with a bunch of information on it on the bed.”

Zech said bye and left, the pallet jack staying in the middle of the room with me on top of it. The room was a bit like a hospital room; there were two lightweight adjustable tables, two small chairs, a door clearly labeled for the restroom, a large adjustable bed, and a few readout screens and one larger entertainment screen. There was also a closet, and I spied two pieces of clothing that had escaped as something had been put into the closet. They were generic, but could easily have been mine.

Time to get used to my body. Figure things out. Reading that packet, which was indeed on the bed, would be a good start. Thank goodness my vision was doing fine. Having to wear glasses as a giant snake would not be much fun, although it would probably make me less intimidating. Seeing my reflection in the blank screens was occasionally disheartening.

This method of just kind of lunging my head and arms around probably won’t work to actually get anywhere. Damn. More experimentation required.

I was actually resting my head on the nice soft bed when the door opened. Did they even knock? Oh wait, I wouldn’t been able to respond anyway. Not with anything intelligible.

“Good afternoon, Mike.” Gene came through the door first, followed by Zech. “First things first. While Zech is very good at helping bipedal people get around, you are something else entirely. So, we’re getting a snake expert to help you. It’s going to be pretty interesting introducing you two. He won’t be here for another few days, though, so my plan is ... to allow you some internet access, so you can do research yourself. The problem with that, of course, is that I really don’t want you contacting the police, or FBI, or whatever to say I kidnapped you, or otherwise spreading too much information about my operation here. So it’s only gonna be while Zech or Sierra are looking over your shoulder.”

He kindly waited as I wrote my own question on the whiteboard I had carefully set down where I could still reach it. My question, more of a request really, was for me to send out a message.

“What will the message be about?”

Instead of being more concrete about what the message would be about, which would take a while to write, I instead wrote that it would be for the families of Lee Brooks, Oscar Twill, and Neya Indree. Those were the families I was essentially hired by, to investigate what exactly happened to those people. Each family knew a little bit, but wanted the whole story. I now knew a great deal of the story, but telling it to them was a different issue.

“Yeah, you’re not sending a message to them.” As Gene talked, I wrote additional words on the whiteboard. “Well, of course I would read it ... although ... hmmm ... maybe I *should* make a message like that. The more families that want to know what happened to their kids, the more investigators I’m going to have come poking around. Fine. Zech, you help answer any question Mike has, and let me know if there’s anything you can’t answer.”

Zech sat down on the bed next to me and popped open a laptop. “The easiest way for me to control what you do online is for it to go through me. This is my personal computer, by the way.” The desktop showed a serene landscape picture; I wondered if Zech had changed it before bringing the laptop over here.

“If I were you, I bet the first thing I’d want to research is how snakes move, right? Hmm, want something a little more detailed...”

As Zech moved through the list of results, I wrote something on my whiteboard, and gently poked Zech to get their attention.

“Do I want to change my body?” Zech read the question aloud. “To go through the procedure with the cocoon?” A lot less attention was paid to looking through the search results, but that was okay. “Yes and no. Yeah, being a new person, having a tail, sounds pretty cool. I’d have legs too, I don’t want to be a snake. The ‘no’ part is dealing with people out there. I think you know what I mean. It’s not necessarily the people that would mistake you for an animal, it’s the people that would be angry about you changing your body in the first place.”

Okay, yeah, keep talking about how much my life will suck from now on. Yeah, that’s okay.

Apparently, Zech could read a bit faster than I could, and soon I was reaching out to touch the screen to stop the scrolling. It did not work.

“Wait ... this computer has a touchscreen. See? Here, try pressing a little harder.”

That actually worked.

I’m not sure that this was actually helping, as I read. Nobody had personal experience with slithering, it was all based on watching snakes. Nobody could write from experience. Well, until me.

The one thing that was most illuminating to me, I think, was that there was more than one way of moving. Slithering wasn’t the only option. Moving like a caterpillar, lifting up sections of my body and inching them forward that way did work. Slowly. Technically, there was also contracting and expanding parts of my body, which was one of the primary ways for worms to move through dirt. I considered sidewinding basically the same as slithering.

The second illuminating thing was that the ‘S’ shape, moving from side to side, was not the motive force. The motion was done by pushing against other objects, and the ‘S’ shape was to go forward by pushing off of nearby objects.

Zech finally noticed that I wasn’t looking at the screen anymore. “Hey, uh ... was that all you wanted to look at? Do you think you’ve figured out how you’re supposed to move?”

Sort of.

I wrote ‘theory vs practice’ on the whiteboard I had.

Zech thought before talking. “Yeah ... that is your problem, isn’t it. For, uh, everyone else we’ve done, the difference between their walking and human walking is ... pretty minor. Oh, actually, except for Kallan.

Kallan wanted to have four legs - almost the same as a wild fox. A bit bigger, but basically the same. In any case, you're really different from what you used to be."

Zech continued. "I think I told you this, but I think the biggest stumbling block for you right now is getting your brain used to your new body. It's something that your body has to do itself. What we can do is give you a nice open place to wiggle around in. Do you want to go back to the therapy room?"

I shook my head, and then opened my mouth, pointing at it.

"Hungry, huh? That's another thing to get used to. Let's find out how to make that work for you."

It took fifteen minutes for Zech to haul me to the kitchen, although I did manage to get myself on the pallet jack almost by myself in just two minutes. A lot of that was just picking up parts of me and pulling them over to the pallet. Not dignified, although I think I was getting better at moving parts of me around.

After much pulling and grunting, I was inside the dining hall, which was remarkably spacious. There were only a few tables in it, and most of those had only one or two chairs paired with them. One of the chairs had a hole cut out of the back of the seat, probably for a tail to go through. This seemed a little unusual for me; all the chairs had their back separated from the seat - there was already a large area for tails to go through.

Not like any of that mattered to me. I didn't even have a butt for sitting on.

Clara made her way around the counter to the table I was placed at, as Zech took the laptop from on top of me to a table just out of reach.

"All right, Mike, since you came out of your cocoon, like, yesterday, today we're only going to work on soft food. Your teeth and jaw ought to be fully formed, but other parts of you might still be waking up. Usually people don't throw up, but it's happened that they're still full half a day later, even after a relatively small meal. Gene sent over your dietary requirements, it's about three times as much food as a normal human eats. Jude's already started cooking - your dinner will be ready in ten to fifteen minutes."

The clock on the wall said that it was four PM. After I pointed to it, Zech shrugged and responded. "It's an early dinner. Let me get you some water."

Zech came back with a straw, but didn't put it in the glass. "Um, I don't really know if you need a straw or not. Or can even use a straw. Most mammals can, but I don't know about you."

I daintily sipped. Apparently, I could close off the breathing tube in the front of my mouth and seemed to do it unconsciously. Swallowing seemed to work just fine, somehow. It was probably best not to think too much about how my body worked for now. Just so long as it worked.

"Oh, so you can drink water like a ... person. Can you try using the straw? Huh, I guess you can use that too. That's good."

It was when the first food, a bowl of chicken soup, arrived that I found a new thing. I couldn't sniff it. That is, I could not get my nose above it and inhale a smell. I ... didn't really have nostrils anymore for that. But snakes can sense smells, right? They ... stick their tongues out to smell things, right? Time to try that.

Zech almost asked what I was doing, but didn't comment. This was a bit nice of them, since it took me nine tries to figure out how to sense something about the soup other than it was a hot liquid. Once I did, I just kept licking (sniffing?) at it. I had to know more about it.

The soup cooled a little between me getting it and actually eating it. Having it in my mouth gave me a few more sensations, but that was more fleeting, as the soup quickly drained away down my throat. I could hold a considerable portion of what was in the bowl in my mouth.

"...I had actually forgotten a little bit how snakes are supposed to smell things," Zech said, after I put the bowl down, waiting for the next meal. "I almost asked you what you were doing. Most of the people that go through the procedure sniff their first meal deeply. I think it's an instinctual thing, but I dunno. You guys are supposed to have better noses, but regardless I understand a lot of your neural pathways were erased or rewired. You basically have to learn what good food smells like again."

That makes sense. I grabbed the whiteboard pen and wrote out my question. 'Can I smell you?'

"Um... I, um, I guess so? It, just, I, um, you're not going to eat me, right?"

I tried explaining it a little better with the whiteboard, but I still couldn't write fast or small enough. I could partly smell Zech from a small distance away, but I wanted all of the sensations, which I could really only do up close. And hey, I asked permission first. Zech could say no, and I would honor the request. Well, I would probably ask again later, when it was more established that I would not intentionally harm any of them.

I was trying to make up my mind whether Zech smelled nice or not, from my three seconds of tongue brushing, when more food came by. It was a casserole. A very tasty casserole, it turned out.

He came into the exercise room while I was just getting ready to try going across the room again. Learning to slither had been more tedious than I expected. It was probably a good thing that my instructors were just as, if not more, happy to have me get around by myself as I was. I overheard when Jude told Zech how much I weighed. I'd better not get into any small elevators - I might be over the weight limit all by myself.

"You ... you were serious."

Gene came into the room just after him, apparently as a tour guide for the day. "I showed you Renee, I would think that going between human and snake is not that different than going between human and cat."

"It is most definitely quite different. But that conversation can wait. You said his name is Mike?"

I nodded, and they came over to stand in front of me. That's almost rude, guys, I could've gone over to you. In about two minutes. It took a lot of concentration.

"He can hear us?"

"Obviously, he's not one hundred percent snake. Tree boas do not have arms. The modifications should have made him keep a warmer body temperature, hear sounds up to about twelve kilohertz, and make vibrations in his trachea that approximate speech, in addition to the skeletal differences. Most of the anatomy, through, I took directly from the animal he's based on. He hasn't gotten the speech thing down yet, so that's why he's got a whiteboard."

"While I'm glad that he's not a venomous species, a snake that big could easily crush a person," Peter said, a little more wary of me than I expected. "Are you sure it's safe to be around him?"

"He's still quite rational," Gene said, as I almost started writing on the board. I had a lot of incentive to learn to talk, but I still couldn't make more than a vowel sound or two. "Which is good, because if he did attack anyone we'd probably just put him in a cage and drop him off somewhere outside. Even if he wasn't killed by wildlife or by freezing, a fair amount of people here are shoot first, ask questions later types."

Peter opened his mouth for a second, then closed it. Two seconds later, he let out a short sigh. "Well, there's a first time for everything. This is going to be my first time asking permission to examine my patient."

"What about your patient being cooperative?"

"Some species are pretty docile, especially when fed. Mike, can I please examine you? I'll answer questions afterward."

He took a while to examine me, often kneeling down to get closer to my body and either feel or listen. He's the snake expert, but even so I think I'm going to know a lot more about snakes than I used to. I mean, for starters, I'm not actually sure what species I'm supposed to be based on. I know it's a kind of boa, but I wasn't even sure I knew before that there were different kinds of boas.

Peter's conclusion was that I seemed to be healthy, which made Gene beam. Jenna had left for lunch while I was being examined, so we were basically alone in the room. I already had a question ready, but it was frustrating that I wouldn't be able to write them as fast as he could answer them.

'Do you have any tips on slithering?'

The answer, which I expected, was: not much. It would probably be more useful to me to watch videos of snakes moving, which he could supply a few extra for me to watch. I was barely paying attention, writing out a new question.

‘Is there something about snakes that might surprise me?’ His counter was that it depended on how much I knew about snakes before ... changing my shape, and when I shrugged to indicate a relatively low level of knowledge, the answer was more concrete.

Snakes are more sociable than people think, Peter responded, and gave a few examples. Some of them birth live young, which wouldn’t affect me as a male, and he talked a little more about their reproduction. I was kind of glad that Jenna had already left. The other possibly surprising thing was that some snakes can be taught tricks, but like pregnancy, it wasn’t terribly relevant to me.

My next question was whether he would want to become a snake.

“...No. Well, I mean, not like you. Getting scales or being a different color might be kind of cool, but I am well aware of the usefulness of legs. I have to say, it’s awfully brave of you to volunteer to be the first person to go legless like a snake.”

I pointed at Gene, who was having a terrible time disguising his emotions and body language. Peter turned the rest of his body towards Gene, thinking about the implication.

“He did volunteer, *right?*”

“Weelllll...yes. And no. Legally, he did sign a lot of paperwork indicating that he knew what was going to happen and that he wanted it to happen. Strictly speaking, I think he was planning to leave before actually getting any modification. He was ... investigating, because people that come to me for modifications don’t go back into society. Not because I want to keep them prisoner, but because I want to keep them safe. How many people in the world would accept how Mike looks right now? I bet a large number would shoot him on sight. Even Vance, who became a humanoid Akita, would be treated with suspicion. In hindsight, making him into this form wasn’t the best thing I could have done, but I cannot make him back into exactly what he was. Maybe human-shaped, but not what he looked like, sounded like, or even maybe the same height. I just want a chance to get my technique publicly accepted. Mike, I, uh, can you please forgive me?”

Peter took a second after Gene’s monologue to think. “You wouldn’t turn me into a snake like him to keep me from telling anyone, would you?”

“Of course not. One: I’d legally be abducting you, two: you’re a bit more famous than a washed-up private investigator, and three: you told people where you were going. I’m ... trusting you to not tell anyone about what I’m doing here. I would bet that at least a few radical conservatives would try to shut me down and get rid of the people I’ve modified by any way possible. Only one of the people I’ve changed has any desire to fight back. Well, Mike here might fight back too, but violence isn’t going to get my plans anywhere. So please, just ... don’t tell anyone.”

“To keep all these nice people safe, yes, I will not report you or tell people what you’re doing. I do, however, want to be able to chat with Mike here. *Without* you censoring them or snooping through them. If I can tell you’re censoring him, I’ll come back here with a few more people. Got it?”

Gene took a second to relent and accept. After that, we went and got some food, Peter somewhat amused at seeing a snake eat with a knife and fork, cutting food into small bites. I did demonstrate that yes, I could swallow massive chunks of food, maybe even a person, but I figured that as long as I didn’t have to do that, it would be fine if I just ate like a person. One thing that Gene was able to convince Peter about was to not get a picture of me next to him. He wasn’t worried about Peter deliberately showing someone, but accidents happen, especially with social media and cloud backups. Gene already made the point that he trusted Peter: it was Peter’s cell phone company he didn’t trust.

I think Peter surreptitiously snapped a few photos of me anyway. While I would rather not a photo of me accidentally spread around the internet, I rather doubt that I would be the first one of Gene's subjects to have a picture taken of them. Good thing photo-manipulation software exists (so that it could be claimed that the picture was faked).

Peter left to go see the location where Gene sheltered the people he had changed, and didn't come back. That was fine. He wasn't going to teach me much about slithering anyway, and he had already negotiated a way for me to contact him.

That way was going to be a small computer of my own. It had a whole bunch of software limitations on it, none of which I tried bypassing. At this point, I was much better off trying to draw as little attention to this facility as possible. I may not like Gene, but at least he wanted me to stay alive.

I wouldn't say that I had mastered slithering around by the time Gene had me move into the 'Sanctuary,' as he called it, but I was able to get around by myself in a reasonable amount of time. Going up staircases was very slow, but I had been able to do it, and practiced almost every day. It had been forty-eight days since I had come out of my 'cocoon,' and I kind of wanted to get out of the building too. I hadn't seen daylight once in those forty-eight days (technically longer, but I had been unconscious).

Talking was far more of a problem. I had figured out 'aah' and 'ooh' and a few other vowel sounds, plus about eight consonants. Everything else was just blathering noise from my mouth. So, except for about five words, I communicated by whiteboard. This was kind of irritating for how slow it was and how I could never get a word in myself.

Moving into the Sanctuary was as simple as packing up my things (which I had barely used) and getting in a van that was driven over. The van's driver was Philena, one of the few people trusted with the location of both the modification facility and the Sanctuary. Neither Zech nor Sierra knew the exact location of the Sanctuary.

This van was used more for deliveries of stuff to the Sanctuary than deliveries of people, and it was showing its age. Philena said she kept bugging Gene and Vicky for either a new engine for the van or a whole new van. I couldn't really talk with her while she was driving, though, and had to stay strapped in in the windowless rear of the van.

Philena said she often listened to the radio when driving around, to cut down on the loneliness, but today, even though I would be silent, she still had someone to talk to. That was because another person was coming with me to the Sanctuary: Lucas. Lucas had chosen to become a snow leopard, and his mouth and vocal cord were close enough to when he was human that he could talk reasonably well, even just twenty-three days after his emergence from a cocoon.

As much as he could relay questions and answers between me and Philena, he didn't bother looking at what I was trying to say. His conversation was about what Philena would become if she ever got brave enough to try the transformation. Also his own life. And what he was hoping to see at the Sanctuary. And a few other things. Lucas was excited, and probably quite nervous, about going to a new place. I was curious, too. My thoughts were more wondering what my life was going to be after this. Gene's goal was not to keep us hidden forever, but to convince people that transformed people were only different from normal humans in their shape. Their morals, their thoughts, their feelings were all still human.

The good news was that some of the questions Lucas asked Philena were the same that I would have asked. Where exactly was the Sanctuary (we'd be staying there, that wasn't something they could totally keep from us). How long had Philena been working for Gene (since the beginning, actually). How many people were at the Sanctuary (thirty-six transformed, plus three humans that lived there full time). Where did Philena live (at



the Sanctuary). Did she like what she did for Gene (mostly). Did she want to get the modifications, and to what?

That question was a little harder for Philena, and she didn't answer for about fifteen seconds. It looked like Lucas was about to prod her for the answer (verbally, he was sitting behind her out of reach) when she answered.

"Part of me does want to become something else, but every time I sit down and design a new shape for myself it doesn't look right for one reason or another. The other reason is that Gene might not tell you this, but the process is definitely not finished and foolproof. Probably about fifty percent of the time, people have some issue or another. They don't have good feeling somewhere, or their fine motor skills never come back, or the shape of their body isn't what it was supposed to be. Most of the time it's a minor issue, though. I do know that someone is almost always looking over anybody that's in a cocoon, in case issues arise. I, uh, can't read your expressions really well, but I'll just tell you, if you've gotten on this van, you're fine. Any serious problems you may have had have been addressed."

Well I would kind of like to dispute that last point but I didn't say anything, choosing instead to keep staring forward out the window. Lucas took a little while to think up his next question.

"Are there any other snow leopards?"

"No, but we've got a lion, a panther, a cheetah, and a house cat. I wouldn't worry about not fitting in, Lucas. Sometimes it feels like I don't fit in as much as even Kallan does, and he's got four legs. Kallan was one of the stranger modifications, that's for sure. It's a good thing he turned out so well; it was the first time Gene had tried anything other than a bipedal template. Having two legs definitely makes things easier, even if you've got a big tail, like Famma wanted. I wonder ... Mike, why did you go for the snake body instead of two legs and a big long snake tail? It would probably have made things easier."

"...He wrote, 'It's complicated. Maybe later.' Well, Mike, if you're in the mood later, we'd love to hear."

Yeah.

It took me over two years to be confident enough in my voice to not carry the whiteboard around with me. I had actually gone through three whiteboards, breaking when they were accidentally dropped, or for one of them, thrown into a wall out of frustration (the wall also needed repair).

The time was spent almost entirely at the Sanctuary, either doing odd jobs or acting as a mediator between parties. Both were common for me to do before I became a snake as a private investigator. For a while I had even worked as a limo driver. Driving wasn't something that I did at the Sanctuary, though. I didn't even fit in the little golf cart that was often used to shuttle people around that were tired or lazy.

Things happen in two years. I actually made friends at the Sanctuary, although not very many. Two people I was kind of forced to become friends with because I was assigned to teach them to slither. Thomas became a cobra naga, the name typically given to snakes without legs, and Jenna had a more or less human upper body and the snake body of an anaconda. Two of my other friends were birds - people sharing the misery of trying to talk using a very different system to make sounds. One of my other friends was Kallan, who was still one of the only 'taur' people that existed (four legs and two arms, based on a centaur shape). Apparently, Gene had been warning people to go only with bipedal shapes, but a few people simply insisted. There were still no mermaids. Either Gene had been refusing them, or nobody was dumb enough to get a new body that really couldn't go anywhere on land.

My mission of assuring the three families I had been hired by that their children were not dead, and that the messages they had been getting were accurate, had finished only a week or two after arriving at the Sanctuary. Most of that had been me being a mediator between the 'missing' person and their family: how could I show that this person who they could not see was their child, and that they wouldn't come home for the foreseeable

future. We deferred to Gene's judgement on sending pictures or video, although there was quite a bit of back-and-forth on that.

Whether or not Gene approved, more and more of the nearby countryside was getting wise to the fact that some of their neighbors were not really human shaped. One requirement was that anyone who could possibly be confused for a wild animal had to wear bright colored clothing while outside, but that only prevented them from getting shot from a distance. What happened more often was that a human and a transformed human were riding in a vehicle together (occasionally people were allowed to tag along for errands) and somebody noticed. They would ask the human later about it. Although Gene said that it would be better if as few people as possible knew about his operations, he also acknowledged that some people were better at lying than others and that he couldn't control everything.

At any given time, there were roughly a half-dozen people watching the perimeter, looking for anyone trying to sneak into the Sanctuary. There was a fair amount of paranoia about people finding out about us, especially from those who were from ... less understanding families than others. Although sometimes they did go outside to look with their own eyes from a balcony or the roof, more often people were watching the camera feeds from the many cameras placed around the facility. Despite one of the residents trying to create filters that only spot human movement, wildlife popped up on the feeds quite frequently, and many of the residents with little else to do double-checked to make sure that every notification of movement was a false alarm. Unfortunately, the rate was about ninety-nine percent; between once and twice a month, a human either wandered onto the property or was deliberately trying to find out what was here.

The Sanctuary consisted of a large hotel-style building, which was supposed to hold everybody, but after it was built a lot more (smaller) buildings were created; some of them were used for storage, some were stores, and quite a few were used as independent housing. In fact, I lived in one of the outside buildings, mostly because I didn't like the elevator or stairs in the large building. In the winter, I had to be careful not to spend much time outside. I could still move through the snow easily enough, but the colder I got the slower I moved. Gene was pretty sure that I would at least survive if my general body temperature stayed above freezing, but below freezing all bets were off. Thomas preferred living inside the hotel structure, and didn't even venture outside during the winter, but Jenna the third snake hybrid was definitely thinking about moving to one of the exterior structures. One thing that I was happy about was that the buildings and sidewalks all had under-floor heating (on the outside it kept the pathways clear of snow). Most people didn't appreciate just how much I could feel the ground and in that aspect it was really nice to have other naga friends.

I was summoned to help deal with a human interloper once. Most of the time, they were politely turned away by whatever human was onsite. The few that refused to leave after being politely told this was private property were shot by long-range tranquilizer guns. The tranquilizer guns had a short-term memory suppressant, so usually the person didn't remember anything about the Sanctuary (or at least, didn't remember being shot with a tranquilizer gun). I was called because the person in question had noticed the tranquilizer gun and had brought out his gun and threatened the human (Brittany, who managed repair crews) who came out to tell him to leave. It was a bit weird having a seven-meter long giant green snake to do hostage negotiation, but for some reason I was considered the best candidate.

His name was Jonas, and he remembered trying to get onto the property before and waking up at the local bar (there was a quiet agreement with the bartender which involved exchanges of money and alcohol), so Jonas figured that maybe this was a government site that had something very important and he needed to know what. After some back and forth negotiations, he decided to believe me and let Brittany go. Then, I took him on a tour of as much of the compound as I could. This is what we're hiding: people. People that don't want to be attacked by religious zealots and are worried about our personal freedoms. We just aren't quite human anymore.

It was actually a little fortunate that Jonas found us, because he was able to convince a significant number of people to leave us alone. He also felt like we shouldn't hide, but at least had the brains to respect our decision to stay hidden. I did imply to him that if he was a little too open about what he found that he might find himself waking up one morning with significant differences from his current appearance. I mean, it wouldn't be *me* doing that. I was quiet moving around, but I had no desire to forcibly change a person.

Jonas was given a pass to visit us, after promising that he would not bring anyone else with him. He may or may not have helped spread news of our presence among the locals, but after two years from my arrival at Sanctuary, Jonas made it pretty clear that the people that didn't straight-up acknowledge that he was friends with 'animal people' did still know about us.

One issue that I hadn't really predicted was what to call the people who had been modified, like myself. Gene's suggestion was 'Anthro People,' while most people were less sure. Non-human people? Animal People? Furrries? (the last term only applied to about eighty percent of the modified people, though.)

Legally, this wasn't the problem. The legal problem was ... significant. Apparently, that took up nearly a quarter of Gene's waking life, cutting significantly into the amount of time that he liked to take managing the cocoons. I thought it was ironic that he sometimes came to me for when he wanted to talk confidentially. Apparently, I was considered a good person to keep secrets, being someone who used to look for secrets as a profession. In any sense, he called me remarkably more often than many other people at the Sanctuary.

Gene knew that he could accelerate the legal process by doing illegal things. The fastest legal shortcut that he figured was quite simple. Gather up most of the people from Sanctuary, ship us to Washington, DC, and walk into the Capitol building. He was already doing lobbying and other processes, but getting nearly a hundred 'Anthro' people to suddenly show up in such a public space would make it so the world would have to pay attention. The question was whether the world was ready to give us the good kind of attention (or at least not the murderous type of attention).

Three and a half years after I arrived at Sanctuary, that's exactly what we did. It was ... interesting. At least nobody was shot.

Not everybody came to the ... rally. The restriction that Gene gave was that you had to be able to talk clearly enough for someone else to understand you, but that only actually prevented four people from going. The rest of the people didn't think it was worth the risk of getting shot by the national guard. None of us wanted that to happen, but we also didn't want to invite it by setting up a betting pool.

Of course, getting a hundred and thirty-one people from a rural part of Alaska to the Washington, DC capitol mall without being noticed was an issue of the rally. We didn't want to go through any border crossings, airport terminals, or other areas with either a lot of humans or cameras. The way it was eventually solved was by chartering an airplane and using a private hangar. I was told by multiple people that I didn't want to know how much that had cost. To get to the airport we used chartered buses, which were remarkably available (which was because of the tourism industry in Alaska). This was also how we got from (another hangar at) Dulles International Airport to the capitol mall.

Two humans went all the way from Sanctuary in Alaska to the capitol mall with the rest of us (Gene and a few other humans met us in DC, taking other, cheaper routes). They helped us get food, some of which was scheduled ahead of time, and materials for writing posters. As much as we could all talk just fine, posters allowed us to send a simple message without becoming hoarse. Multiple people pointed out the homophone with that, thinking they had found a clever pun. I was more curious if I could even become hoarse anymore.

A requirement put in place was that we all had to wear at least one piece of clothing on our torso (this particular wording was mostly for the people that preferred to only wear stockings or hats). I wore a vest going around Sanctuary anyway; most people wore at least one piece of clothing for the same reason I did: pockets. Still, there were a few nudists that were reminded several times that not wearing clothing would result

in rejection from the rally. Three people at the rally did not wear pants: me, Jenna, and Panack. Jenna and I had snake bodies; pants got in the way of moving around. Panack was a taur based on a wolf, and basically refused to wear pants, often making the excuse that they made him too hot. He was extremely fluffy, that was true.

I don't know why the news crew came to talk to me. I carried a sign, yes, but most of us did, although my slogan was a little different than the rest of them. Whatever the reason, local news channel six moved around a deer, a dragon, and two foxes to get to me and ask me questions.

This was while we waited to get into the building itself. Capitol security was ... not pleased about having more than a hundred unscheduled visitors, and I was under the impression that a large number of panicked phone calls were being made. By the time the news crew got to me, there were three helicopters in the sky that I could see, and police were starting to set up a barricade. Mostly to separate curious humans from us. They had weapons, sure, but we were obviously not wild animals, nor were we a rowdy crowd. If we acted like we would actually hurt people, I imagine they wouldn't have even let the news people get close. But there were humans among us who were supporting us, which helped. I think.

First the news correspondent asked my name, what our rally was about, and after hearing the answer got confused. Wait, why were we asking for equal rights if we were just humans in costume?

I'm pretty sure that having the reporter's brain break on live TV was not ideal (although it probably did help ratings). I patiently waited until he rebooted and asked me the next question. The cameraman didn't seem fazed at all. Other people in the rally nearby kept pretending there wasn't a camera there, as instructed, although Philena was making her way through the crowd toward me. Gene was already handling another news crew.

The next questions were not surprising: how did it work, how long have I been a snake, how did I pick to be a snake anyway (a question I avoided the true answer for), where I'd been hiding, and so on. The reporter then asked a different question. Could this process be used to cure diseases? Has it been studied by the FDA?

Philena helped answer this. It could, potentially, treat a vast number of diseases, but it hasn't been studied by the FDA because of how different it is fundamentally from almost any sort of treatment. The person who went into the cocoon was genetically and physically a very different person than who came out; if they didn't make sure the brain stayed intact, they wouldn't have any memories at all (let alone of the person they were).

That was why we were at the capitol. We needed to have a bunch of laws that made me and the others people, but also supply answers regarding what made us the same person we were before. If we weren't going to be the same person as before the change, then at least we should get ways of getting ID, licenses, and the like.

The news reporter was in the middle of asking me how I could even drive a car (I haven't even tried since losing my legs) when an important-looking security officer (he had a tactical vest over a suit) came up next to Gene. I immediately held up my hand to interrupt and said I needed to go help out and talk with Gene. The announcement was made as I slowly made my way towards Gene that he would go into the building and talk with the speaker of the house, along with three 'animal people hybrids.' Gene and I locked eyes briefly, and he made a hand signal for me to come over there, which I was indeed already doing.

Naturally, he wanted me to be one of the three to go with him. He gave me a few reasons: one, I was pretty good with words, in case I needed to speak. Two, I could appear scary, although I had good self-control and had actually only hurt people who deserved it. Three, I was practically as old as he was (mentally), so I was a little more versed in political history than most. Lastly, I did not and could not wear pants, due to the whole snake-body thing. Probably another reason was that I was a good instance of how much difference he could make from the human body.

The other two people that were coming with Gene and I came over and gave as much information to the security officers as they could. The news reporters then interviewed other people while we gathered together and waited for the security check on us to finish. They couldn't really verify that we were the people that were pictured on our ID (I had given them my old drivers license, which had expired a while ago) but they were going to give us the benefit of the doubt that we weren't assassins. We were still getting searched for weapons and an armed escort of a dozen people. If they thought we were truly dangerous we probably wouldn't be allowed any closer to the building than we already were. It probably helped that I wasn't venomous.

Two hours later, we were escorted through the various halls and corridors to the personal office of the speaker of the house. I was happy that it was on the primary floor; stairs were frustrating to me. Going with Gene and I was Nina, a bipedal german shepherd and Caroline, a human with horse ears and a horse tail. I didn't know either of them too well, although I had talked with Nina once or twice before. We left our signs with the others at the rally. The plan for the rally was to stay outside until the sun went down, then go to a hotel that had been reserved for all of us. One tour bus had stopped by the hotel to make sure that they would be okay with having us there, and from what I heard the answer was yes. I mean, we weren't pets, which were accepted by hotel policy anyway. The problem for the hotel would be shed fur and feathers more than anything else.

The current speaker of the house was from Iowa, and she was quite a seasoned politician. I didn't really like her political party, but that shouldn't be important today. Today was bipartisan work. I hope.

She started by trying to get the facts straight. Gene was a scientist doctor. According to him, he made it possible to create the people ... things in front of her. According to him, and what the hybrid people themselves were saying, they used to be human; they had human memories and mostly human mannerisms and voices. Gene had tried to introduce legislation and notify people in positions of power for the last four years and gotten nowhere, so today he showed up with a large group of hybrids to draw attention.

Now, what, exactly, did we want?

This wasn't directed at just Gene. She recognized that Nina, Caroline and I would have opinions of our own of what we wanted. This was a good thing - she didn't see me as an animal with arms, but as a person. Maybe it was the vest I was wearing.

Basically what we wanted was for us to have the same rights as any human american citizen, and for it to be illegal to discriminate against hybrid people the same way as gender discrimination or skin coloration. I also pointed out the problem that after a person goes into the cocoon, there's no way to definitively identify them as the same person from before. This was problematic both in terms of proving their citizenship or education, and with their personal property.

The transformation process would have to be regulated. This was when she asked Gene about the people that were already transformed. How did he find them? Were they all volunteers?

Gene wasn't lying when he said that all the people who had gone through the cocoon operation had signed papers saying that they understood what was supposed to happen and what could happen if something went wrong. But it was not the full story, and I think the speaker saw that when I darted my eyes toward the others and all around the room. I became the center of attention next, even as Gene explained that he had been recruiting people quietly through social networks and inviting them to his laboratory.

I was wearing a nametag, but she asked me my name. Then, she asked me what I wanted to do after this rally - should I become a normal citizen.

I had not given this kind of question much thought before. Part of the problem was that even before my transformation, I had kind of gone through life without much of a plan. I nervously clacked my thumb tips together as I came up with the answer. My plans for afterward were ... to sell my house in Denver, move to somewhere quiet in Arizona or New Mexico, maybe try to get into a police academy or something. I also

wanted to figure out how I could drive a car. Maybe I'd try to be a trucker, if I could drive well enough. Of course, I might just work as security for Gene, although if I was to do that I would definitely want a warmer climate to work in.

Gene did not know I still owned property, and almost said something. The speaker merely nodded and after a few seconds of studying my reptilian expression went to Nina and asked her a very similar question. Nina's answer was that she wanted to be a model, and failing that, a fashion designer for hybrid people. Caroline wanted to go back to school to be a doctor or a nurse. She didn't think about how much she would have to be wearing some sort of fur-trapping garment whenever she was on duty, I bet.

Either way, the answers seemed very satisfactory to the speaker of the house, and after thinking for a second, she went to me. She wanted to talk about clothing. Animals didn't wear clothing, humans did, so what did hybrids wear? I clearly didn't wear pants, and although I was not strictly opposed to wearing a kilt it would not really cover up any more of my body than a simple shirt would. What was my opinion on indecency laws?

My opinion was that I did not want to be arrested for public indecency. I didn't really care how the law worked, only that I didn't get hassled for wearing nothing to cover up (and often nothing at all). Now, other people were a different issue. My thought, more or less, was that it had to be dependent on each individual for what was considered indecent. I suppose I could help with making that happen, although it wasn't something I particularly cared about.

After another two hours of asking about details of things that hybrids had different, or could or couldn't do, the speaker of the house said that she had all the details she needed. Now, we were lucky that she was presiding over something easily delayable today and that she was even able to see us. Either tomorrow or the next day we would be seeing the president, and after that, probably the United Nations.

If there was something we wanted hidden in our lives, well, it was too late now.

Gene gulped. I didn't mind. Oh no, they might find out that I had two children and an unhappy ex-wife. It was a part of my life I wasn't really proud of, but I am not a perfect person. I don't think I'm a bad person. Or a bad snake. For now, my life was at least interesting.