

A

PROBABILITY EXPERIMENT

TURNED ME INTO A

CLOCKWORK GIRL

AND I REALLY DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO MAKE OF IT ALL

For a while, neither of us spoke. The New Age-y music switched from "lush, spacey synthesizer" mode to "quasi-Celtic hobbit folk" mode; the waterfall bubbled almost vigorously enough to drown out the hum of the pump. I turned things over in my mind, feeling my brain chatter. Okay, she wasn't wrong that some changes were normal, but nothing about what happened to us was *natural*. And sure, you could belong in a group without perfectly matching everyone else, but surely there had to be some minimum overlap. And no, I couldn't think of much *specifically* that I couldn't find fulfillment in as a woman, but...

...But I couldn't stop thinking about the plans people had for me, the ideals for me to live up to, the parts I had to play. I knew that all too well - from the late nights chasing the stress away with tea and music, the constant gnawing tension that stuck in the pit of my stomach anyway, the endless wondering why I even bothered only to realize that there was no way I could just *stop*... Stress couldn't *consume* me in this form, but I felt my tempo accelerate anyway. I had expectations to meet, didn't I? Obligations to fulfill? It'd seemed so essential at the time, but now all I could think of was that nightmare-vision: the little figures trapped, endlessly acting out their assigned roles even as the cruel machinery thrashed them to bits...

"Huh, been ages since I had those things..."

I looked up, startled by the unfamiliar voice. Emma was almost as surprised, but she hadn't been all lost in thought. The speaker was an old man, bent and wrinkled, stubbly and wispy-haired; he seemed familiar, but I couldn't place him. He was looking at Emma's cakes, and the *non sequitur* quality of this was confusing to us both...

Emma looked up at him as directly as she could without turning her head. "Uh, you want one...?"

He shook his head. "Too many memories a' too many hard years in those. Taste always takes me right back... 's like I'm really *there*..."

I stared at him, wondering what he was talking about, then noted the veterans' cap and remembered - it was the man from the diner, back on that first morning. He seemed more focused; if his expression was still hazy, it was only from reminiscing.

"First had 'em in, ah, Bayeux," he said; his voice was soft and creaky. "Went all the way over there doing welding on a *Bayfield*-class, and never made it off the damn boat - so when the war ended, I figured I oughta see what I missed. Got 'em to leave me ashore while they were scramblin' to get us home for the holidays and spent a while drinking up what I got from the Navy. Fell for a French girl, got my heart broken 'cause she'd met some RAF guy and liked his stupid mustache. Then at Christmas, I get a cable from back home, says my pal'd been sent back on medical discharge and could I please come at once."

"Was he, uh, okay...?" I asked, wondering if there was a point here, or why he was even talking to us in the first place. Not that elderly people usually need a reason to spill their life's story to random strangers, but I remembered how he'd looked at me...

He paused just long enough for me to wonder if this was merely senile rambling. "He was my best pal," he said at last. "Weren't like brothers, but pretty damn close. Grew up together, fought together at school, enlisted together soon as we could convince 'em we were older'n we were." He shook his head. "And I'd seen the way some of the men came back from the landings; God *knows* what's happened to him, I thought. So I tore off back home - caught one of the last Clippers 'cross the Atlantic, y'know..."

There was another brief silence as he sorted his thoughts out. "Well, see," he continued, "I hadn't seen him since boot camp. We got our assignments and off we went; promised to write, but never got the chance. Only thing I knew was he got assigned to a destroyer they'd just laid down." He chuckled bitterly. "Just his luck it was the *Eldridge*."

I'd been about to check out and look for a polite way to make our escape when I heard the name of the ship. The *only* possible link between myself and this geezer; the very destroyer involved in the incident that sparked the Montauk Project, decades ago. I stared at him, wondering how much he knew, or guessed; was this another thing that some people could just *tell*? Was that what that funny look had meant, back at the diner...?

He let out a low whistle; I scooped closer out of renewed curiosity, as well as trying to read his expressions toward me. "There I was, back in Parrant Landing, just off the train from New York," he said. "Went to his house and asked his folks, where's Charlie? George, they tell me, go up and have a look in his room. I was dead sure they were sendin' me up to have a look at his body before they sent him to the morgue - but I get up there and lyin' in his bed is a goddamn *mermaid*!"

The old man shook his head, with another rueful chuckle. "I guess you kids wouldn't know what it was like. 'Course we'd all heard the rumors, and the War Department made us watch their picture, but time was when mermaids were nothin' but an old sailor's tale - and here was one just sittin' there pretty as you please, in the flesh! Felt like I stepped clean outta the world and into a dream - 'til she says 'George, 's that you?'"

"What happened to h-to him?" I asked, genuinely interested now. As infamous as it was, there was little contemporary information on the "Philadelphia experiment." Most of the studies conducted on the *Eldridge* crew had to do with mermaid physiology, and with the incident classified for decades, they weren't supposed to go talking about it. A couple hundred mermaids don't just appear in a society that considers them a myth without causing a fuss, but it wasn't an opportune time for formal study of the psychological impact of transformation.

"Well, Charlie was a mess, it goes without sayin'," he said. "Turned out it happened almost eight months before, and they'd been sittin' in the Navy hospital in Maryland with doctors pokin' and proddin' them 'til they figured they were done and sent 'em home. 'Course, it was all 'top secret,' and any enlisted man knows that means 'government SNAFU.' But Charlie and me were close - so I swore I wouldn't say a word, and he told me the real story."

He scratched the back of his neck; the background music changed to some melancholy elven ballad. "I think he woulda anyway - after most of a year never seein' anybody but doctors and shipmates, they were all about ready to talk to *anyone*. Probably why it didn't take long for word to spread about it." He laughed. "The brass never did try to push that stupid VD story after the first couple years, 'cause everyone who wasn't a sap *knew* by then."

I nodded. They hadn't *admitted* it until decades later, naturally, and the exact nature of the Montauk experiments had remained shrouded in secrecy, but once the transformees were released back into public life, the rumor mill ground into high gear, and by the start of the '50s the only people who *really* believed the official story were the types who'd spend the rest of the decade worrying about Communists in the pumpkin patch.*

* (Of course, there were enough of *those* to make it hard on the changed...)

"But it was rough, 'specially at first," he said. "Charlie kept talkin' about it like it was something that happened to other people; didn't wanna talk about what *he* thought about it. Could hardly *miss* it, bein' a sailor-boy nursing a broken heart, but I hadda keep my mouth shut. Didn't take Einstein to see what pressin' the point would do to her."

"How did...how'd you deal with it?" I asked. I sipped my tea and frowned; it'd gotten cold, and I'd been too wrapped up to notice. "How did *she* deal with it...?"

He shrugged. "Well, for a coupla weeks we just talked. Hadn't seen each other since we shipped out, and it was good to talk to Charlie again and it was good for Charlie to talk to *anybody* - so I'd just go over to visit every day. It was the damndest thing - she'd been that way for months, and she'd get around and take care of herself just fine, and never acknowledge that she was a mermaid instead of havin' her legs blown off or something. But I didn't know *what* to say, so I didn't say nothin'."

"Then one day - I forget what set her off, if it was anything - she just broke down crying. Just sobbin' like her own mother'd died. Didn't know what to do then, either, but I figured she'd take it bad if I comforted her like ya would with a girl - so I gave her a slap on the back, put a hand on her shoulder, and we sat there for an hour, with her bawlin' her eyes out. At the end of it, when she finally calmed down, she asks me, George, d'you think I'm a pansy?" He chuckled. "I told her I figured, any fella that went through this and *didn't* cry over it hadda be crazy."

"And...what happened?" I asked. I was surprised to be getting invested in a story some old man decided to tell me out of nowhere, but even Emma seemed curious.

The weight of the years showed through in his face. "Hell, it was still hard. I stuck by my pal, but it was a different time - the mucky-mucks couldn't figure how to handle all the girls that went to work while we were shipped out, and they *really* didn't know what to do with girls that useta be Navy seamen. Charlie got what she could with the G.I. bill, went to a women's college in Poughkeepsie 'cause she couldn't get into the men's. I went to New York and did welding and construction, and I'd visit her on the weekends."

He sighed. "I think it was good for her she went to a girls' school," he said. "Seemed like it helped her feel like she belonged someplace and it wasn't the end of the road for her; lotta the coed state colleges back then, the girls only went for what they called their 'MRS.' But the country didn't have much use for a gal with a degree in marine biology then, veteran or no. And she told me before she graduated, she was afraid t' admit that she wanted men, 'cause they'd either try t' marry her off or figure her for 'one of *them*...'"

"But if ya mean, was she alright, well, yah," he concluded. "Ended up, she went to Fiji, stayed there for years; lived offshore and worked with folks doin' dive tours. I ended up back here, workin' on lake freighters, but I'd go see her when I could. She moved to Hawaii when they had all that trouble in the '80s - just swam straight across the Pacific, her and her kids. Went back after it settled down; we still write, y'know." He shook his head. "Yeah. Lotta hard years there - but she's alright."

While we sat there, digesting everything he'd told us, the barista, a dusky-skinned young woman in her mid-twenties, made her way over to the table. "Granddad, are you bothering my customers again?" she asked, with a wry smirk.

The old man chuckled and slowly, creakily, rose to his feet. "Just talkin' with an old friend, sweetie," he said, turning to me with a knowing smile. "Well, you ever wanna talk about it, ya know where t' find me." He doffed his cap, nodded *adieu*, and made his way out of the shop.

"Sorry," his granddaughter said, bemused. "He gets like that sometimes. Hope he wasn't a bother."

I shook my head in a daze; Emma waved it off. "No, no, not a problem."

She smiled and nodded, turning to go back to the bar. I blinked, shook my head, and took another look. She had her hair up; at the base of her skull, behind her ears, I could just make out closed-up gill slits.

Emma didn't say anything more about it, and we'd hit everything she wanted to, so we took the bus back to campus; I was in a fugue the whole way, lost in thought. It was confusing enough to deal with this *now*, decades down the line when demi-humans were fairly common and even transformees weren't that unusual; to be one of the first changed people in the modern era, having to come to terms with it with no one to support you but your fellow victims for months, trying to cope with prejudices that suddenly applied to you...

Much as I hated to admit it, at least I didn't have to deal with *that*. Not that it made the *real* questions any easier, but...well, if the most hassle I got from other people was my roommate over-enthusiastically trying to help me "adjust," then...it could be worse, as they say. Besides, even that paled next to the real challenge that awaited me down the road...

But I kept thinking about Charlie and the difficulties she'd faced - how strange that, after all that, she'd apparently gotten comfortable enough to...to bear children, to be a mother...I shook that thought out of my head as the bus pulled up to our stop and we disembarked and walked back to the women's dorm. That was all well and good for her, I supposed, but for other people...?

Tammy was at her desk, idly browsing Craigslist when we got back. "'Bout time, you two," she said. "I was about ready to just go for dinner myself. Em, you didn't work your pack mule too hard, did y-" She trailed off as she turned and looked us over. "Uh, Stu," she said, cocking an eyebrow, "this, uh...isn't a hostage situation, is it?"

I stared at her, confused, then looked down at myself. "U-uh, oh," I said. I hadn't realized I was still wearing the clothes, hairstyle, and jewelry that Emma picked out for me. "Th-this is, uh, it's, um..." I glanced over at Emma. "Uh, y-you can take these, now..."

Emma laughed, "Not a chance," she said, setting herself and her bags down and hanging up her jacket, "not after the production you made out of buying them yourself! They wouldn't fit me, anyway." She took her things over to our side of the suite and began sorting through the booty.

I groaned; I'd paid *how* much for clothes that I had no intention of wearing, just because she wanted me to try them out? What was I *thinking*? While I was fretting over this, Tammy shot Emma a Look. "No, really, Em, what *is* this?"

Emma cackled. "Well, Br'er Fox was so worried about letting me get one over on him, he threw *himself* into the briar patch!"