

A

PROBABILITY EXPERIMENT

TURNUED ME INTO A

CLOCKWORK GIRL

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

The wind howled.

For a long moment, I just stood there, that metaphorical sinking feeling *permeating* every cog, pawl, worm-gear, and God-knew-*what*-else in my body. There was no getting out of it now - she *knew*. Oh, sure, it was one thing for my roommates, for my classmates, for all my friends and acquaintances to know, here in this safe, isolated space - but for my family...my *mother*...?

I hadn't realized 'til now, but some part of my brain was convinced that, if nobody knew about this - for certain values of "nobody" - then it wasn't truly *real*; that the cat was neither alive nor dead until observed. Part of me believed - or *wanted* to believe - that if I could just muddle on through and get to the point of changing back without being discovered, that it would be as if it never happened, and therefore didn't "count." That I'd never have to face explaining to...to *her*...what I'd become...

This was patent nonsense - the odds of becoming the old me again were astronomical, if it was even *possible*, and it was absurd to think that if I became a male demi-human, it wouldn't raise nearly as many questions. And it wasn't like becoming what I used to be would *undo* what I'd been through in the last two months - everything I'd done, experienced, *felt*...

...and it didn't matter anyway, because now she *knew*.

It was absurd to think that this could ever have been avoided. I could hardly have cut off contact, vanished into the night, and gone to "start over" on the far side of the world even if I'd *wanted* to. But for the past couple months I'd been living under the illusion that everything here was somehow separate from my old life, compartmentalizing it and putting the issue out of my head. Now there was no getting around it...no way to avoid admitting the truth about what I'd allowed to happen to myself...

I couldn't get *consumed* by things like fear or panic the way I could as a human, not without that hormonal charge. I knew this by now. So why - and how - did I feel *this* suffused with embarrassment? She knew - *she knew* - that I'd screwed up, that I'd done something stupid, that *my life was never going to be the same* and it was all my fault. I felt my tempo slowly accelerating... What must she *think* of me? I was supposed to be going out into the world, fulfilling my potential, becoming something to be proud of...and now I was *this*. A freak, a changeling, a bizarro girlified *simulacrum* of her son...

"Stuart, *talk* to me." I whirled in surprise as the familiar voice snapped me out of my thoughts, accompanied by the familiar sigh. "It really *is* you, isn't it?" she muttered nervously, half to herself. "I wasn't sure whether to believe them, but I'd know those habits of yours anywhere."

(Emma looked like she was about to make a smart remark, but Tammy shot her a Look and brandished her caudal fin meaningfully.)

"I, uh..." I stammered, wondering what I could even say, "I...can explain..." But I couldn't for the life of me think of *how* I could explain in a way that didn't give exactly the same impression as a straight recounting of the events leading up to this would.

"I got the story from your roommates," she replied. "But can you *explain* why something like this happened to *my child* and this is the first I'm hearing of it?" Her voice was firm and cool, but began to quaver a little. "Why I've barely heard from you for two months, and when I asked, you told me things were fine? Why you were a no-call-no-show on Thanksgiving? God in heaven, Great-Grandma Drosselmeyer was asking about you the whole time and I didn't even know what to tell her...!"

...Oh. Right. *That*.

"Wait, did you seriously ghost your *mom*?" Emma said, astonished. The "smoke" billowing from her neck formed little surprised curlicues that I half-expected to turn into interrobangs like this was a *Felix the Cat* cartoon or something. *It'd make as much sense as the rest of my life right now...*

I felt myself juddering uncontrollably as mere embarrassment was drowned in a wave of real, actual *shame*. I sank onto the couch and buried my face in my hands, feeling like I should be blushing hard enough to self-immolate. *Why* had I done that...? Well, obviously, because it was easier to *not* tell her than it was to face up to it. But she couldn't just let it be, and I had to tell her *something*... "I...I didn't know what to say," I murmured.

"So you lied?" my mother asked sharply.

"I...thought I could handle it," I groaned. "I thought I could get this, um, fixed, and then..." No; it'd only be another lie to pretend that of *course* I would've told her then. "...I dunno."

For a moment I just sat there, clattering. I could hardly bear to look at her, and when I did, I saw disappointment, confusion, and injury in her face, which she never seemed to realize I could read. Her soft hazel eyes were damp at the corners, and her right eyelid was twitching slightly. Tammy reached over to put a hand on my shoulder, and I shrank away, wishing that the person she maybe liked wasn't the kind of person to do *this*.

"Oh, *Stuart*," she sighed, in that matter-of-fact way that cut like a knife; then, more sharply, "Is there anything *else* you weren't telling me?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but it felt like there was a traffic jam in my brain; like the things I intended to say were about to be cut in line by things I was afraid to say to her, or to even admit to *myself*. "...Classes really are going fine," I said, after a moment.

She stared at me, visibly surprised; no doubt she'd assumed I was *also* screwing up academically... "That's...good, I suppose," she said, her face enigmatic, glasses glinting in the light.

"She's making friends, too," Emma put in - literally putting herself into the middle of the conversation, held out at arm's length - in an attempt to be helpful. "Not just us - Sue, you oughta tell her about Anne and the gaming group. And Gil," she added teasingly, cocking her head to one side and flashing me a sly grin.

My tempo surged as I tried to figure out how Emma knew about that - *he* wouldn't've told her, would he? No, surely not; was it another thing she thought she could read in my face? Or just a shot in the dark? - and whether my mother had caught on; but *she* was busy regarding the disembodied head in front of her with a more-than-mildly-unsettled expression. I could see her subtly flinch every time Emma made a gesture with herself, and I knew the look she got when she was visibly trying not to say something; I also knew that one of the few childhood terrors she'd admit to still being freaked out by was the old "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" cartoon. How could I tell Emma to dial it down without coming out and *saying* it...?

But she handled the issue before I had to make any uncomfortable decisions, moving away from Emma and sitting down on the other end of the couch. For a while, we just sat there, saying nothing; I stared blankly at the opposite wall, feeling my internals gradually settle into a more normal rhythm. I sighed, opened my mouth, and closed it again.

I'm sorry. Why was that so hard to say? We both knew I was at fault; it was my poor judgement and carelessness that'd gotten me changed, and my cowardice that led me to fudge the truth. I *should* be apologizing. But part of me wanted to push back against that idea, to argue that it wasn't *my* idea for me to even be here, in this program, and that if I *weren't*, I would never have been in the lab that night, and none of this would've ever happened...

...but I'd never have met Tammy or Emma - or Gil, or Anne, or any of the weirdos in the CS crowd. I'd never have gotten the strange little pet I was growing fond of. I'd never have met Grace, never talked with her about free will and determinism; and I'd never have met her little girl who was so taken with me that she might even choose to be like me. I might never have gotten to admit that my interest in metamorphic science was more than academic, more than just a job prospect. Would that be *worth it*? If I could trade all that away to never have come here, would I...?

My thoughts were interrupted by a tug on my skirt, and I looked down to see Lucky, who'd ambled over from the other room. Smiling in spite of the circumstances, I picked her up and set her in my lap; then I realized that my mother had caught me wearing a skirt. I hadn't thought anything of it this morning, I realized, as I glanced nervously at her, wondering if she'd noticed; but she was focused on the little mushroom-girl. Her eyes travelled back up my body, over my skirt, past the neckline where my cami straps peeked out from the collar of my ratty T-shirt, to meet my gaze.

"Who was she?" she asked acerbically.

It took a moment for me to understand what she meant, and I heard Emma snort. Had she really not noticed...? "She, uh, she wasn't a 'who,'" I said hastily, "she was a 'what.' A lab rat." To us, it was clearly ridiculous to think of a person becoming a mere...not-exactly-animal...but that was because we *knew* that kind of thing didn't happen; and she didn't know much about metamorphics.

"Mm," she murmured noncommittally, as I stroked my weird little ex-rat's cap. She was doing it again; that thing where she was clearly thinking *something*, but wouldn't say it. She was easy to read, most of the time, but she could be so difficult to figure out...

"They're called 'homunculi,'" Tammy explained. "Animal test subjects have a tendency to become more humanlike than natural animals, but they never cross the line into being *people*."

"What about the other way around?" She'd glanced pointedly at Tammy's fish half at the mention of the divide between people and animals, but hadn't said anything. I never could figure out what she thought about demi-humans; I'd never heard her speak badly of them, but she'd always seemed uncomfortable when I talked about the subject, and I'd learned to stop bringing it up.

"No, never," Tammy replied. I was surprised to see a look of relief flash across my mother's face; had she thought that was one of the dangers of metamorphic research...?

"But there are limitations that come with these...changes," she fretted, getting that uneasy look I'd seen before.

"Well, naturally, yeah," Tammy said, a bit miffed; of course, my mother didn't know about Tammy's history, since I'd never told her about my roommates in the first place. "But there's no danger of becoming *less* than a person."

"And there's upsides, as well," Emma said cheerily, jauntily bouncing her head in her hands; I could see my mother squirm. "You can't breathe underwater, can you? Or be in two places at once? But we can, now. It's a trade-off."

"And what are the '*upsides*' of what's happened to my child?" she asked sharply. The question was aimed at Emma, but to my surprise, I found myself trying to come up with an answer. *Why?* What interest did I have in...in *defending* this to her? Was it some kind of futile attempt to prove that this wasn't a screw-up on my part...?

Emma spent a moment visibly trying to puzzle it out, canting her head this way and that and driving my poor mother to distraction, but for her part, she seemed as stumped as I was. No surprise; looking at it rationally, I was now completely dependent on other people and a sexless mannequin on top of that, and all I had to show for it (besides being the envy of my weird doll-collector friend) was being slightly better at the kind of math problems nobody does in their head anyway. What

could possibly count as an *upside* to that...?

Then Tammy wheeled forward. "You haven't seen her dance," she said. "When I saw her cut loose - saw her really let herself *go* - over Thanksgiving...that was honestly the happiest I've ever seen her." She got a strangely nostalgic smile at the memory, then collected herself and shrugged. "Whether it makes up for anything, I dunno, but Stu was definitely never like that before."

Was I really *that* happy...? I saw an expression of honest surprise and intrigue - perhaps, even, a hint of delight? - on my mother's face for a moment (and on Emma's - had Tammy not told her about that?) but she soured at the mention of Thanksgiving, and I felt another stab of guilt. She said nothing, but she was obviously brooding again...

While I tried to guess at what she was thinking, a sudden chirp echoed through the bathroom. "Oh, geez," Emma said with a start, "that's my-" She grimaced. "*Shit*, I gotta hustle. I figured I'd be all packed and ready to go by now, but then we had company." Trailing an agitated plume of "smoke," she grabbed herself and dashed into our room, hastily throwing her stuff together.

"When's your flight depart?" I asked, grateful for the distraction.

"An hour and a half," she called over, "but the bus takes forty minutes to get up to the airport, and it leaves from campus in fifteen. Then there's security..." She groaned and redoubled her efforts.

My mother fished out her pocket watch and popped it open. "The bus isn't running," she announced.

"*WHAT!?*" Emma yelped, still frantically packing.

"It was on the advisory sign over the freeway," she replied antsily. "The city line stopped service at five due to inclement weather. From the sound of it, they're expecting something on the level of the Halloween Blizzard."

"*You people have blizzards on HALLOWEEN!?*"

I patted Lucky fretfully, wishing there was anything I could do to help - but I hadn't bought a car, since the bus ran everywhere I needed to go, and I wasn't sure I could safely drive like this if I *had* one - not that I'd run down going fifteen minutes up the hill, but were my reflexes good enough? (Not to mention fitting in the driver's seat with my key...!) And I didn't know anybody we could call in a pinch - Tammy couldn't drive at all, Anne was probably gone, Gil left for home yesterday...

I heard my mother sigh softly, almost inaudibly - almost, but as usual, never quite to the point where I *couldn't* hear it. "...I'll take her," she said uneasily, getting up and retrieving her jacket from the coatrack.

"Really?" Emma said, surprised. "*Ohthankgod*. Gimme a minute, I'm nearly done here."

"Are you, um, are you sure...?" I asked; I'd seen how uncomfortable she was around Emma.

"It's the least I can do," she said, fidgeting nervously with her glasses. "I *did* throw off her schedule - and I can't leave someone else's kid stranded away from home for Christmas."

"I, um..." I bit my cloth lip, whirring nervously. "Look, just...drive safely, okay? Migizi Parkway's kinda scary even in *good* weather."

She seemed a little surprised for a moment, then smiled slightly. "I will, honey."

Emma came back over already bundled up, clutching her head and purse in one arm while the other hefted a travel suitcase and her laptop bag. She set herself down and came toward me; I set Lucky aside and got up from the couch. "G'bye, Sue," she said from the dresser as she hugged me, her flesh-and-blood body pressing softly against my sculpted metal torso. "I'll see you after break, okay?"

It was still a little weird being embraced by a decapitated body, looking straight into that weird shimmering haze above her shoulders; but I smiled despite the stress I was feeling, and hugged her back. "Bye, Emma. I'll...yeah, see you then."

She went over to Tammy, said goodbye, and gave her a hug as well, but I could see her silently mouthing *Tell. Me. Everything.* as she did; then they went down to the parking lot. When they'd gone, Tammy wheeled around to face me and placed her hands on her hips, at the base of her pectoral fins. "Okay, what the *hell*."

I groaned as I sank back into the couch, picking up Lucky and holding her close. "...I don't know what else there is to say," I sighed, feeling my internals stutter awkwardly. "You heard...all that."

"You really *did* just cut off contact?" She didn't sound as aghast as I'd expected, more just surprised and confused. "I...look, I don't mean to pry, but...is there a history here? 'd you have a *reason* not to tell her?"

I thought back across the years; thought back to countless little things, expressions she didn't realize I could read, quiet sighs, that palpable unease that crept into her voice when the subject turned to things she wasn't comfortable with; thought back to long, awkward conversations about a future I was supposed to be planning for, about how it would be a waste not to capitalize on my natural talents, about how glad she was that I took after-

I shook my head, snapping back to the present. "I, uh..." I stammered, as I tried to think of what to say; how to frame this so that Tammy understood my perspective, so that she didn't think I was being-

And there it was again; my natural inclination to try and put the right spin on everything, to hide the aspects of myself that I didn't want people seeing, to massage the truth *just so* as to keep people happy with me, as if reality would change based on how I presented it. Why was I *like* this...?

"...I dunno," I sighed, stroking Lucky; she nuzzled into my hand. "I guess...I was afraid she'd be disappointed in me." *And I sure avoided that by lying to her, didn't I...?*

"For getting caught in an accident?"

"I mean, I was the one who left the door open," I said glumly.

"You were also the one trying to talk sense into Emma until the last minute," she said. "And the thing with the door was a pretty exceptional coincidence. None of us think that was *your* fault."

"A-anyway," I said, "it's...not so much whether it was my fault as...why was I involved at all? I only got caught up in this whole big life-altering mess because I can't say 'no.'"

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a Look, fins raised in exasperation. "That's a funny way of saying you were looking out for your friends, there."

"*That's* a funny way of saying I was fooling around irresponsibly due to peer pressure and got myself in trouble," I sighed, rattling in mild irritation. "Look, point is, I'm *supposed* to be here studying for my degree, not getting my whole *life* turned upside-down by extracurricular shenanigans."

"I mean, you *are* doing that, though," Tammy said. "Apparently it's the one thing you *could* be honest with her about. And honestly, who *doesn't* do some crazy shit in college? At least you got in trouble with something related to your studies and not, like, developing a drug problem or getting someone pregnant."

I grimaced. *No danger of that anymore...* "I'm not sure that helps, much," I said. "She's...not too comfortable with metamorphics, I don't think."

She cocked an eyebrow. "You think that's what that was?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "We had a...pretty involved talk about that when I applied. I still don't get *why*, but she wasn't really on board with it."

"...Huh." She nodded thoughtfully, her pectoral fins twitching. "And you didn't just 'get in trouble,' you got *transformed*..."

"...Yeah." I sighed heavily. "I...I thought she'd think that...that I did this on purpose. That I *wanted* this. And...I was afraid to have that conversation. But I was fooling myself thinking I could actually get out of it, I guess..." Lucky nudged up against me, and I smiled a little in spite of myself.

Tammy sighed and shrugged. "Wish I had a nicer way to put this, but yeah, you were. Look, I...I don't know what help I can actually *be* here, but...I'm pulling for you, okay? You can't change the decisions you already made, but...it's up to the two of you to decide what actually comes out of this."

She wheeled over next to the couch, leaned over, and put an arm around me, gently squeezing my shoulder. I sighed and accepted the embrace, wondering what outcome I *did* want as I sat there, waiting quietly, trying to prepare myself to weather this...