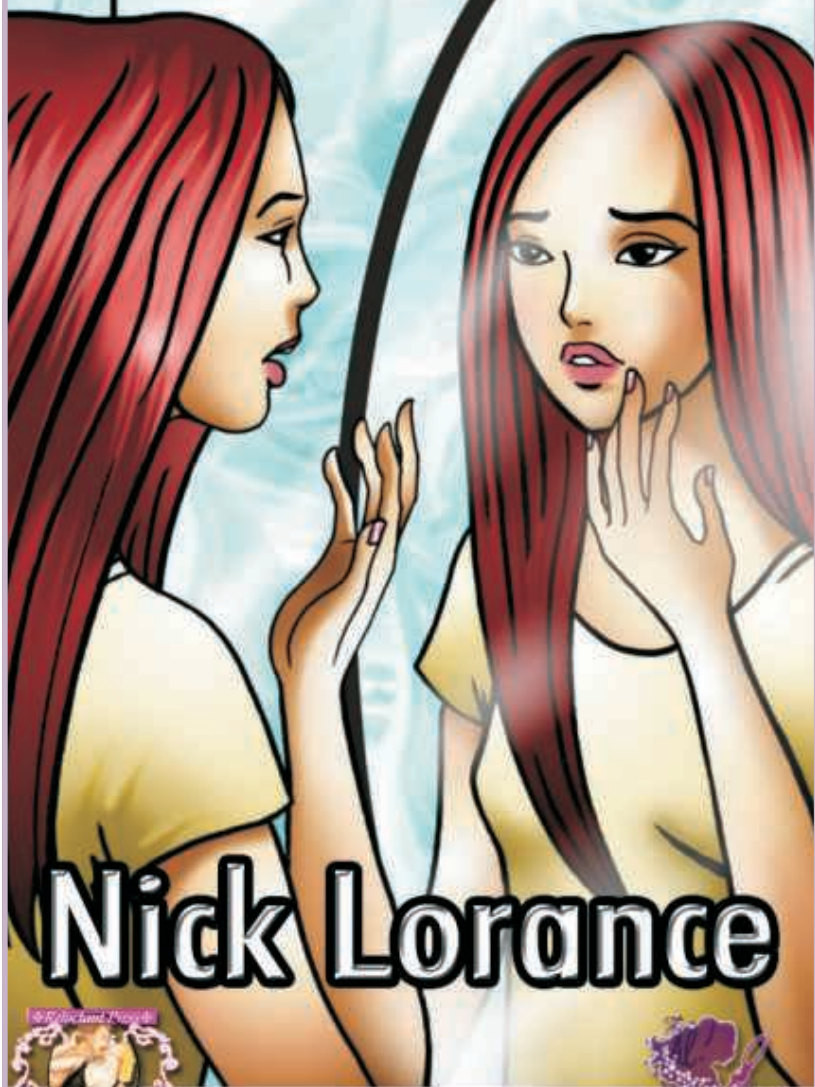


My Best Friend's Girl



Nick Lorance



A "New Woman" Novel



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My Best Friend's Girl

By Nick Lorance

I'm standing in front of the mirror, looking at myself. I still don't believe that is me. It sure isn't the Dan Foster I had seen in it up until about three weeks ago. So much has changed in such a short time that I am not sure where to begin.

No, I remember the Caterpillar talking to Alice in Wonderland. Start at the beginning, go through the middle, get to the end, then stop. So let's start at the beginning...

My early life

I won't bore you with it all. I was born in 1948, meaning I am now 65 years old. I am old enough to remember

President Eisenhower. But my present circumstances started much later. I was just some kid who spent his time after high school picking up spare cash by going down to a freight yard and helping to load and unload trucks, When it came time for me to serve my country, I joined the Air Force. My earlier life helped there.

You see, back then they had the draft. When you got out of high school, every boy had to worry that his number might come up. If you didn't have any skills that would keep you out of the infantry, or a college you were going to, you could end up freezing your ass off in Korea, or maybe in the new war in Vietnam. But the Air Force could use people who can load planes. If you were good enough to balance that load so the plane could carry the most, they kept you doing that. I was very good. So after Basic Training and Material Handling School, I was assigned as an assistant loadmaster, and stationed at Yokota MATS base outside of Tokyo.

For a kid during Vietnam, this was a dream assignment. You were close enough to Vietnam that any flights there automatically counted as combat with hazardous duty pay. You were far enough away that getting shot at was unlikely. Just a few miles away by bus and shuttle train were Tokyo and the Ginza. My dad had spent three years at the end of WWII as a garrison trooper stationed in Japan and when he got blitzed he'd reminisce about the place. To me as a child the Ginza was an adult amusement park, sort of like that new place, Disneyland.

Girls, shows, massage parlors where the girls would strip and walk on your back before doing a lot more. I wondered about it, imagining GIs in their neat uniforms boarding the trains. When they reached the Ginza, I pictured them jumping off nekkid to dive into a sea of willing women. I always wondered why he didn't bring back a girl, or L.O.F.M. as he called them. That means Little

Oriental Fuck Machine, compared to the L.B.F.M. of Subic Bay or Thailand, the little brown ones who were all the rage of the Navy.

He didn't because he'd already been engaged to Mom who was Pennsylvania Dutch, big as a Mack truck, with a wicked temper. She'd hear him talking or hear him teaching me what little Japanese he knew (mainly, "Hey sweetheart, care to polish my knob?") and come down like the wrath of the Old Gods; not JC and Jehovah, like the Norse Gods with bad attitudes. When he was drunk he'd fall back on his own father who was Scottish, so the arguments were in German (Her) and Gaelic (Him). That was why I could tell the recruiter truthfully I was conversant in two foreign languages, though most of what I knew was not for polite company.

So I went. I should mention that there were other things to do beyond dipping your wick and drinking yourself into a stupor. From Japan you could get to Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. You could take pictures of something beyond naked women, and I did a lot of that in those two years. I also picked up enough of the language that I could ask for something beyond eating, drinking, and fornicating.

But that ended for me in 1968 with the Tet Offensive.

Some smart little guy had found a way to slip a Russian made 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun in range of the glide path into position right before the offensive began. The first I knew about it was as the C130 Hercules I was assistant loadmaster on came in on final approach at Da Nang. I was checking the load before strapping in when I heard several thumping sounds like someone was running down the outside of the plane, hitting the skin with a hammer. Then I was on the deck. It felt like someone had smacked me in the back of the leg with a baseball bat.

I didn't feel pain beyond that first sharp jolt so I didn't know what had happened yet. I started to sit up and the first thing I noticed was blood spraying from my lower left leg. We'd had first aid training in Basic; I could tell it had to be bad, so I unzipped my flight suit far enough to pull off my web belt and wrapped it around my leg just below the knee. I put it there because I didn't have anything below that.

"Fos? Damn it, Foster, if you're fucking around back there..." I heard Sergeant Conners, the loadmaster, cursing as he unstrapped and came aft. He took one look, and whispered, "Shit." Then he was using the buckle of the belt to tighten it down hard enough that I grunted from the pain of that. I stared at my leg as I felt the wheels hit the ground. The next time I was conscious, I was in the hospital in San Francisco.

They told me I was lucky. The guy had been firing five round bursts and if he had waited less than a second, I would have gotten that first round through the gut. Picture pulling the innards out of a freshly-killed turkey for thanksgiving. But looking at what I had to deal with, I wasn't so sure.

Getting on with Life

I walked out of the VA hospital in the summer of '69 with a fake leg and a 50% pension. Fifty percent because that's what they award you for a lost leg or arm. It sounds good until you remember that a Loadmaster 2nd took home less than \$200 dollars back then so I got a little over \$100. Not enough to pay the bills on Civvie Street. I could have gone home but I didn't want to live with the folks and be an object of pity or scorn. Pity because I was a gimp, scorn because of how I came to be one. So I decided to stay in San Francisco when I got my discharge.

Public opinion was so polarized by Vietnam that you were either a super patriot or so against the war that anyone who came home was automatically a baby killer. The fact that 90% of us were drafted cut no ice; if you went, you were a closet homicidal maniac. If you really believed it was wrong, you went to jail. After about a year when people asked about the leg, I'd just tell them it was none of their fucking business. I got a job as first assistant, then lead dispatcher at a freight yard; I went through the rest of the time until the new century dawned sending shit from one place to another.

I also spent most of it alone. If I met a girl, the leg was going to come up. After all if she wants to dance, you have to explain why you don't. Or if she's feeling amorous, she was going to notice it when you stripped, unless she was blind or blind drunk. If she was one of those super patriot types I mentioned, she'd probably do you just because she felt it was her duty. If she was an anti-war type, she'd ask you how many babies you burned before some righteous little Charlie sent you home. By the 80s, most of them had forgotten the Nam, and you could lie about it. But I was an old man who just wanted to forget it all.

Let's face it; I was as social as a hermit crab.

In 2010 my military pension was around 1,000 dollars; thanks to thirty odd years working for freight lines, I had that pension as well. My company was moving into a new warehouse and the bosses asked me to retire. I took it well, at least on the outside. Sure I was just as tired as they were with it. Recent progress in prosthetics meant I had a leg that was a lot more mobile than my earlier one had been, but I still couldn't run or dance. I had fought a desperate rearguard action against applying for Social Security, especially when people pointed out I could have applied at thirty thanks to my disability.

But I was a stubborn cuss. Besides, if the leg needed repair, I still had a free pass at the VA hospital until I croaked, plus a burial in a graveyard of my choice. Dad had died in '91, followed a month later by Mom. My aunts, uncles and siblings joked at the funeral that Mom had followed him so closely because she hadn't won that last argument. While I would have been welcome back in Texas, I had nothing in common with the relatives; My younger brother was ten years younger than me; my siblings they scaled down to the youngest, Becky, who had been born when Reagan was in office.

So after Mom died, I never went back. My folks had left the house and land to the ones who stayed at home, I had gotten a few thousand bucks which I just stuck in the bank and forgot about, except for going in and moving the money into CDs so they wouldn't think I was dead. But after retirement, all I was doing was marking time until the Black Camel knelt at my door.

The Statue

I lived near Little Osaka, what the locals call Japantown or J-Town for short. It's a six-block area bordered by Sutter and Geary at the north and south respectively, Running from Webster on the west, ending at Laguna on the east. It's the oldest enclave of Japanese society in the U.S. I chose it because the rent was low enough that I could pay it and frankly, I still had a fondness for the people.

A lot of the last two generations are as American as apple pie, but the ones my age still have that serenity and patience you expect. About once a week I would stomp over to the area to hit the restaurants for a taste of my past. Within months I was a fixture; the new immigrants who got jobs as waiters and waitresses got a chance to

meet someone who didn't think 'American' meant we were automatically better than them.

One day about a month ago, I was headed there when I saw a garage sale just on the edge of the neighborhood. The kid behind the table was one of those sour little shits who is a member of the X Generation. They called them that because they have no real plans for life; after all the government gives you everything you need on both ends. And in the middle? You take what you can. There was the usual stuff you expect at any garage sale, but on the table he was at was a Netsuke. They're a sculpture art form traced back to the 17th century where the artist creates something beautiful and alive in anything from ivory to granite. There was a coal black hematite Kitsune that caught my eye, and he saw me looking at it.

"Like that, Pops?" He ticked me off just by opening his mouth. The only way to piss me off faster than calling me 'Pops' was by using the diminutive of my first name. The kitsune wasn't carved like a cameo, it had been carved as if from life, crouching like a kitten waiting to pounce on a mouse, or a dog waiting for you to throw a stick. It had nine tails which I knew was the highest rank of the fox spirits. I picked up the statue and looked at the bottom.

Ten bucks. He'd taken something older than the United States itself, worth a small fortune to a collector, and was asking ten bucks for it. Obviously he didn't have a clue about his own culture; selling a netsuke at a garage sale is like taking your Grandfather's mint condition Stutz Bearcat and asking a thousand bucks for it. Of course he couldn't have sold it to a legitimate collector any more than you could sell the Mona Lisa to one.

"I like the statue. I was just wondering what your parents would say about you selling it without permission."

He started screaming at me. Like I said, the last two generations of Japanese Americans are like our own homegrown kids, as in just as ill-mannered. He would have kept screaming if someone hadn't stopped him.

A man about my age came up and shouted one word: 'Kyo.' It was probably the kid's name because he shut right up. Behind the man was one of those ancient women you sometimes glimpse over there in Asia. Women there seem to go through only four stages. First one is children where except for the clothes, you can't really tell them apart. Then suddenly around fifteen they go into this porcelain doll stage where suddenly they are women; you really can't tell their age until they reach about their forties. Then they turn into sweet little women who remind you of your mother, all smiles and hearty laughs. Then suddenly they transmute into wizened little apple dolls who are like the mountains themselves, ancient and mysterious.

The argument was getting hot and heavy as the old man picked up the cash box, tucking it under his arm. If I had been the average Gaijin — foreigner — it would have been less uncomfortable. But I could understand every word the old man was shouting and the kid was retorting with. Then the boy snatched up the Kitsune, raising his arm as if to dash it on the ground.

I moved without thinking, grabbing his wrist, and stopping him. The boy tried to punch me but the old man, his father, caught the other wrist. "I wish you'd just let me get on with my life and make money, you old faggot!" he screamed at me. I twisted his arm enough that he dropped the piece. I caught it in midair, then set it down gently.

"The first rule in life is to sell only what is yours, not what you can pick up," I replied in Japanese. They all looked at me surprised.

"Well, fuck you!" He pulled his wrist free, but his father took him to his knees with an arm bind.

"You have dishonored us by stealing from your Obaasan, and such language! No son of mine would act so shameless!"

"Then I'm not your son, asshole!" He pulled away from the old man's grip, grabbed his jacket and stormed down the street.

The man stared after him. The difference between someone raised there, as this man must have been, and the average Joe here, is the former are more polite. I knew he wanted to scream after the boy, and if he'd been like the boy, he would have. Instead he turned to me, his face slowly smoothing, then bowed deeply. "Sir, I must most humbly apologize. My son has acted shamefully."

"He has drunk too deeply of our culture," I replied, returning the bow. When I did, he bowed even deeper. "That is our shame and his. Not yours."

"You are far too kind," he replied, face burning with the shame of having to apologize.

"Let us not speak of it, sir. His words are like the wind, ever present with no news."

"No. There is one thing more." I looked at the grandmother, bowing to her. She picked up the statue, and held it out. "What he would sell, I would give."

"No. It is too much honor," I replied.

"What he did not understand was this was given to our family ten generations ago, on the promise that it would not be sold ever. It can only be given with a free heart and taken in the same manner lest the curse strike him who tries to sell it." She pressed it into my hand. "As was done then, in repayment of an insult, I do now. Please, it is yours." Her eyes begged me to accept. I did.

But to salve my own conscience, I bought every kitchen utensil they had for sale which I could use.

I know now that the events I am going to relate began then; with a chance meeting with that family, and the statue I took home.

The Wish

It started the next day. I had eaten dinner and gone on to the bar I hung out at sometimes. Remember the TV show Cheers and its theme song? Somewhere where everybody knows your name? I hung out at an Irish pub named Rhiannon. Good home-brewed Irish or Scots style beer. A Scotch selection including four I am sure never saw the taxman's stamp on either side of the Atlantic, and decent pub grub.

But most important, it had people who decide whether they like you or not over time rather than with a snap decision. That let you be you. If they don't like you, they still act polite but you get it soon enough and stop coming. But if they do, it's like being part of a big happy family.

I was sitting there with a pint of their best stout when Chris Miller walked in. He looked as if his last friend had died, though I knew that wasn't true. I was his friend and I hadn't been planted yet. I raised my glass and he waved and walked over, hands stuffed in his pockets. "Hey, Danny," he said.

I crooked my finger; when he bent over, I caught his collar and bounced his forehead off the table. He looked at me half-amused, half in pain, then fell into the chair beside me, laughing. "You old bastard."

"Never call me Danny," I warned him yet again. I raised my glass with my other hand open wide and Jane behind the bar nodded. He was still rubbing his head when the pitcher and another glass arrived. He poured a

glass and chugged it before pouring another. "What's you're malfunction this time?" I asked, pouring another for myself.

"The usual," he grumped.

"Women again?" I heard this an average of once a month. He'd meet some girl, they'd seem to hit it off, then he'd be here drinking my beer, crying on my shoulder. If I were the kind that minded paying for a pitcher occasionally, I would have thought he did it just for the free suds. But he didn't do it often enough for me to be that paranoid.

He nodded ruefully. I could understand part of his problem. He was in his mid-twenties, studying for a degree in history. Frankly I thought it was worthless unless you were going to teach in a private school or at the college level; the history they teach below that is baby food in comparison to what really happened. We got along because I had lived through almost three times as much history he had, and being there gives you a whole different outlook from reading the dry text.

We'd met in this very bar about three years earlier. He had just turned 21, studying American History at the local university, and had decided to celebrate by having his first beer. Unfortunately he'd brought a friend studying Middle Eastern History and they had gotten into a debate. I call it a debate, but it was actually a screaming argument. The problem is, to understand the Middle East, you have to have teachers who understand the region. That means most of the professors and guest lecturers are Arabs. If it were a peaceful region, it wouldn't have been that bad, but the average guest lecturer would have to get into the Jewish situation eventually. When they did, things got ugly.

The 'friend' had just spouted one of the usual lies; that the modern Jews were heir to the Nazi ideal. I replied with the truth, that the Jews fought so hard and took shit from no one because no one else had stood up for them against the Nazis. So instead of screaming at Chris, he started yelling at me. While he didn't notice, bets were flying.

He'd just been shot down by nothing but facts when he retorted, "Just because it's a fact doesn't mean it's the truth!"

I signaled for my second beer of the night. "By definition, a fact is something that actually exists, and truth is defined as something verifiable by facts. By that definition, you are full of shit."

That was when someone shouted, "Go Fos!"

"Fos?" The friend, who had been chugging two-to-one with Chris, looked toward the man who had shouted. "You must be Foster! The guy who got shot up during Vietnam!" He glared at me with a self-righteous air, laughing in scorn. "Well obviously you don't know dick about reality if you fought in the wrong war, Danny boy!"

"Do you have medical insurance?" I asked as I set the glass down, picking up the napkin from my fish and chips.

"You think you can take me, you old faggot?" He started to stand.

"Just checking." I caught him by the back of the head, and slammed his face down on the bar hard enough to break his nose. As he screamed, I stuck the napkin in his hand. Before it could get ugly, Ray the bouncer was there.

"He attacked me! You're all witnesses!" he screamed as Ray caught him by the scruff of the neck.

“Yeah,” Eric the barman that night said. “We all heard you screaming like a harridan about your opinions, and when someone challenged them logically, you called him a faggot. Ray, show him the door.”

The room quieted down after that. Chris was staring at the door, then turned those lambent green eyes on me. “Why did you do that?”

“No one calls him Danny!” the entire bar chorused. I glared around, but the winner of the bet (he’d bet I’d bounce him off the bar) sent over a pitcher with an apology. I split it with Chris, and we became friends.

“What is it about me?” he moaned. “Am I ugly or stupid?”

I looked at him, considering. I don’t like guys that much, and that way not at all, but I considered him objectively. He was a little over six feet tall, well-muscled because he worked out, though it was a swimmer’s build, not like a serious lifter. He had black shaggy hair that could use a cut, but I thought girls would like it. Under that was a face with square jaw and eyes that would have looked better on a cat than a human. He gave me a worried look.

“Kid, you clean up pretty well and when it comes to brains, you have them. But maybe you should have studied, oh, veterinary medicine instead. The problem is most people think history is a word in the dictionary, not something to actually study. Remember, those who do not learn from history...”

“Are doomed to repeat it,” he finished the quote. “Hell, did you know most of the people in my class over at the U don’t even know who George Santayana was?” he snorted, finishing his beer. He refilled both our glasses. “The best I could get out of them was that they thought

he'd started a rock band with his brother Carlos." We laughed together.

"Why veterinary medicine?"

I was nervous. "When I was a kid, I found a crow with a broken wing. I was always bringing strays home and this was another of them. I wrapped it in my coat and took it to Doctor Laine, the local vet. He built a wooden frame to support the wing and for three weeks I took care of the bird until it was able to fly. Then I let it go." I shrugged. "I wanted to be a vet back then. But I never got the chance."

Later I got home and my hand caressed that beautiful statue. I considered Chris and thought I wish I could find someone that makes him happy in every way.

That was when it began.

The first changes

One problem with trauma is the nightmares. I don't know how many times I relived those seconds in the first two decades or so. The worst was when I pictured the plane just hanging there in midair; as I ran frantically around the cargo deck the bullets would chase me like a sadistic cat. That dream almost always ended with me trapped in a corner as the bullets lazily cut closer and closer. Does a mouse in that situation feel relief when the claws finally rip it apart? Not long ago I read a book by Terry Pratchett where he commented that if cats looked like anything but purring furry bundles, we'd suddenly see what little monsters they really are.

I was dreaming about waking up and thought, Oh, this one. I'll look for my fake leg, then spend the rest of the dream crawling and hopping around because I can't find it. I almost decided to just stay in bed in the dream but my bladder began to complain. Fine. I rolled, swing-

ing my legs over the side. Yup, no leg down there. Then I pushed myself up to my feet... My feet? I looked down and almost collapsed in shock. I was standing on two real legs.

Usually this would segue into my being aboard the plane again but this time I was in my apartment, standing by my own bed. I could even see the kitsune sitting on the table... Wait. I had put the kitsune on top of the combination entertainment center dresser, a good six feet off the ground, not on the table. I walked across to it and paused as I started to pick it up. One of the tails was twitching as if it was trying to wag. I reached out, my finger touched the tail, and it flicked away like a cat's will if you touch it. Then it flicked back, brushing my finger, then away again.

I went back to sit on the bed and looked down at my feet. The first thing I noticed was that the left leg didn't look right. It looked smaller, more slender than the right one, as if some kid's leg had been grafted on. I stood and got dressed. Fine, if I had a real leg for a while in a dream, I'd make the most of it. I went walking, feeling the ground beneath my new leg, riding the streetcars through the night.

I reached the Tenderloin and heard something strange from an alley. Since it was a dream, I wasn't worried, so I looked in. About halfway down it, I saw a figure on all fours and heard gasps of pain. Then the figure looked up. It was Kyo, the kid from the garage sale. He was clutching his heaving chest and his face was a study in mortal terror. Then he seemed to recognize me. He held the hand not clutched to his chest out in a plea for help. Something leaped over me before I could move and I recoiled in shock.

It landed beyond him, and turned. It was a kitsune exactly like the statue, but it was the Kitsune from Hell. Think of the Thanator from Avatar, the predator that al-

most kills the main character and later allows Natiri to bond with it to attack the villain, except with four legs instead of six, and as big as a compact car. It turned and looked at me for a moment through silver eyes, then ignored me as it stalked toward the boy. He was cowering down, trying to make himself smaller. It leaned down and picked him up in its mouth with a curiously gentle grip, more like a cat or dog picking up a young animal to carry it to safety.

“Help me,” he whispered. Then the monster leaped up to the rooftop and was gone.

I came awake with a start. Wow, I didn’t know what I had eaten or drunk the night before that was different, but if I found out, I wasn’t sure whether I would try it again or avoid it like the plague. That was some wicked ass dream. I reached over and touched the snooze button on my electronic clock, which also lighted the display. It was an hour before I usually got up but that didn’t bother me. I usually slept only about six hours anyway. I reached past it, turned on the lamp, then reached down to pick up my leg.

It wasn’t there.

If you’re missing a leg, you always put your prosthetic in reach when you take it off. It’s a pain in the ass to hop around like some kid playing hopscotch in the morning. I found that out the first time I got drunk and took it off to massage the stump, then forgot I had. Grumbling, I leaned out of the nice warm bed and began fumbling around under the edge of the bed, thinking I had kicked it underneath. I’d done that a time or two at first. But this time it wasn’t there.

I looked down and saw two feet under the sheet. Great, I’d forgotten to take it off. I had done that at the start too and let me tell you, it’s no picnic in the mornings.

The stump would move around in the socket all night; by morning when I tried to stand, it was like the socket had razors in it. I groaned at the idea, kicked my feet out over the floor, and set them on the ground.

Wait. No pain. Maybe I was lucky this time. Wait, Two feet were on the floor. No. I must be still dreaming. Just waking up in a dream after waking up in another dream. It happens sometimes. I reached across to pinch my right arm and winced. Shit, that hurt! Then I leaned down and pinched my right calf. Ow. I reached down and pinched the replacement leg. It hurt too.

Great, I was still dreaming. I got up anyway and started toward the kitchen when suddenly I realized I was still limping as I had for over forty years. I had a new leg in the dream, but was acting as if I didn't. I shrugged mentally. My mind had realized that the new leg was fake this time, so I had added my limp back. I made my usual breakfast, the type people call a lumberjack breakfast. My new doctor down at the VA hospital was on a health kick and had been trying to get me to go vegan for the last few years.

I smoked, I drank, I ate whatever I damn well pleased, and had for longer than he had been alive. Did I really want to live longer by eating food I hated? So I had a breakfast so heavy in starch and fat that I could almost feel my arteries hardening with every bite, and enjoyed every mouthful.

I had just finished washing up after limping back to the bed when the alarm went off and was getting dressed when the phone rang. It was one of those automated reminders that you have an appointment at such and such a time that doctors started using in the last decade. I always wanted to sarcastically answer the voice, but that was just silly. I hung up and went to the closet. Like in my dream, the new leg was smaller but when I pulled out my sneak-

ers, I paused, holding them side by side. The left sneaker was also smaller, around a size five beside the size eight of the right one.

Right. Whatever it was, I was definitely **not going to have it again.**

I left, stumping down the street to the bus stop. People I knew in passing greeted me, but I was in a surly mood, so all they got was silence. I hopped on, took a seat, and watched the city go by. It was a beautiful morning; if had been real, I would have been enjoying it more. I got off finally outside the VA and went in to see the doctor.

I had outlived or outlasted nine doctors in my time. One I knew had died, the others had been promoted or re-assigned; the new one was so fresh out of medical school he practically squeaked. I came down once a year to have the prosthesis checked; when you lose a leg, the muscles between the lost part and the rest atrophy, and you have to have it resized occasionally.

When he came in, he talked about my weight issue. I weighed in at just under 180 pounds, and he was worried, even though it was mainly because I was stocky rather than fat. He had me stand on the scale, one of those standing scales they use, and began adjusting it. I stared at the weight as he made a note, because it couldn't be right. I weighed 145 at the moment.

"Well, you lost a couple of pounds, so that's good," he commented, making a note. "But I'd still like to see you lose a few more."

"A few? Jesus Christ, doc, you think 35 pounds are a few?" I asked sarcastically. He gave me a look as if he expected me to start spitting pea green soup like the kid from the Exorcist.

He looked at the chart instead. "180? Last month you weighed 150."

I grabbed the chart, flipping it open. There on the page was a chart. Four months earlier, 180; last month, 150. New weight, 145.



“Must be the new leg.” I commented. I was used to that because back when I got my first one, it had been wood covered with plastic to look real, and was heavy as hell. The more modern ones were of space age materials, and lighter, but mine still weighed almost twice what a real leg would weigh.

“Leg? What about the leg?”

“The artificial one,” I replied as if he were slow.

“You have a prosthesis?” He took back the folder and flipped through the chart, looking even more confused. “I see no mention of one.” He handed me the chart again before I could snatch it back. I flipped back through it with growing alarm. According to it, I had first come to the hospital when I retired, not in 1969. Since I was a vet, the VA had allowed me to use their facilities instead of Medicare. I had originally come in (according to this chart) for an annual check up and until the last year, that was all the time I had spent there. This last year, however, I had been scheduled monthly for my weight issues.

“But the leg... I lost it in Vietnam! Why are they paying my disability if I have two?”

His gaze sharpened. “Let me see it, please.” I sat on the examination table, pulled up my pant leg, and he sat on the stool, examining it carefully. “I don’t see anything wrong with it, Mr. Foster.” I pulled up the other pant leg, and he looked at them side by side. Then he looked at me, more worried than confused. “I don’t see any difference.”

“Fine. Either you’re as blind as a bat, or I am out of my tiny little mind.”

“Well sometimes old people remember things differently.”

An old friend once said that English is the only language where you can take two positives and make a negative. He was correct. "Yeah, right." I pulled down the legs of my pants. "I just spent forty-five years of my life 'believing' I had a wooden leg." I hopped down. "Explain why I limp then." He watched me walk back and forth, but shook his head. Obviously he didn't see me limping either. He handed me the usual two scrips for meds, and I got out of there before he could have me committed.

I went through my normal routine for a Wednesday. To the market, back home, out to dinner, then to the bar for a quick drink. It was when I was in the back aisle at the meat counter where I figured out what had happened. The fake leg weighed about 20 pounds, but I wasn't wearing it. So my weight should be around 160. If I had grown a new one, that flesh and bone had to come from somewhere. But the leg was smaller down there, as if a teenager's leg had been grafted on. That would bring my weight down to about 150?

But that didn't explain where the other five pounds had disappeared to.

I walked past where the kid's family lived. The father, who had introduced himself as Koshiro Tamaki saw me and gave me a small polite bow, which I returned. His mother, Aoi, also bowed to me. After that first meeting we had become acquaintances, and the gift of Manju I had given them that day had been gravely accepted. We were on the edges of being friends, and since I liked them both, I felt good about it.

"How is Kyo?" I asked. They both looked sour.

"He has not come home since that disgraceful display." Koshiro replied.

"I am sorry I brought up such a sad subject." I bowed deeply.

“It was not your fault, Daniel-san.” He returned the bow just as deeply. “I have heard he is staying with his friends.” The way he said the last word, I knew what kind of ‘friends’ he meant.

“Perhaps he will learn better.”

“If twenty years of life has not taught him, can days?”

“I do not know.”

“I thank you for your concern for him.”

I went on with my day, had my drink and went home. But when I woke up the next morning, the leg was still there.

Rearguard action

I had picked up a scale at the store, and when I got up I weighed 140. I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but I was not going to lose weight like a good little patient. I made my usual breakfast; a quarter-pound ham steak, four rashers of bacon, four sausage links, six slices of toast, and about a half-pound of hash browns.

The problem was, I couldn’t finish it. Hell, I’d eaten that much every morning for my entire life, and seeing three slices of toast and half of the meat still sitting on the plate when I felt stuffed worried me. Sudden weight loss and loss of appetite are symptoms of some pretty serious things, though for the life of me, I didn’t know what. I just needed some exercise. So I went walking. I must have walked eight miles before lunch. I got home, pulled out the leftovers from breakfast, and wolfed them down, but I couldn’t seem to think of what to eat beyond that. Nothing appealed.

I’ve had dreams before that seemed to last hours, even days, though you could almost feel the dream fast-forwarding past the boring stuff. I had never had a dream

that felt real every second. But too much was happening that didn't make sense for it to be anything but a dream.

Human beings do not grow back lost limbs. Yet even if it didn't match my own leg, I seemed to have done just that. Medical files over forty years old do not rewrite themselves, excising all of that past, though since files are just paper someone could have removed the older ones, but why? Then there was the fact that while I met the same people every day **none of them noticed these changes.**

As Tuesday rolled around, I had lost more weight. I was down to 120. My appetite had fallen off and I had started making smaller meals, though I still ate until I felt stuffed. But even eating the richest food I could think of, the weight just dropped off. I didn't feel bad, in fact I felt good, better than I had before I came back from the war.

Exactly a week after it began, I found myself dreaming again. Among my shoes in the dream were a pair of high-heeled boots. I looked at them, wondering when I might have bought them, since only a newbie with a fake leg would wear knee-high boots, and heels were right out. After all, the first thing you do when you buy shoes is make sure they fit the artificial leg; you're going to have to put them on and leave them there all day. If they don't fit, the one on your prosthesis will rub until you have a fine pile of plastic dust in the shoe.

I knew it was a dream, but I was sure it was all a dream before the leg. But if it was a dream, it was as real as life. I still had to eat and excrete, and walking around on two legs had made the limp vanish. I just assumed the dream was continuing, so I sat on the edge of the bed in my pants, and pulled the boots on. They were a soft suede leather and the heels were a little higher than cowboy boots. They fit perfectly.

I was just finishing dressing when something made me look at my apartment door. Something was outside; my heart leapt in terror as I found myself walking over to it. I pulled it open, then stepped through.

It was the same alley I had seen in the first dream. Kyo was curled up as he had been before, and as he looked up and saw me, he made the same 'help me' gesture. Then a pair of silver eyes opened beyond him. They were almost eight feet off the ground and as I stared at them, a mouth with huge teeth gaped in a yawn. Then as if forming from the shadows themselves, the Kitsune padded forward.

Kyo saw where I was looking, and spun around. He gave a scream of terror, his hands raised in supplication. The Kitsune yawned again but this time a green mist shot from its mouth, enveloping Kyo. He screamed again in mortal terror, then his clothes exploded away from his body. They swirled in the air like a flock of birds, still covered in the mist, then began to change.

First from the cloud came a pair of girl's panties. They floated toward the naked boy; he scooted backwards, but from the cloud now came a pair of opera-length gloves. They waved, as if they were just hanging on a clothes line. But then the hands flexed and shot forward like twin snakes. The hands closed around his ankles, lifting his feet into the air, and the panties slid over his feet. Once they had reached the ankles, the gloves released him.

He fought to keep them away as the panties slid up his legs. Now a pair of stockings floated from the mist and began to slide up his legs. He tried to fight them off, but it was as if they had a life of their own and the patience of a Venus Flytrap. If he held the panties away, the stockings would slide below his hands and inch up the legs. If he tried to stop the stockings, the panties would gain a couple of inches. And more was coming from the mist.

Next was a Merry Widow corset; it slid beneath his arms as he still fought the first clothing. He lost to the panties as he grabbed the corset, trying to pull it free as the clips in the front clicked into place. The gloves came back, again grabbing his wrists, and he rolled as if someone had kicked him onto his stomach. The stockings were almost all the way up and invisible hands began tightening the corset, each tug drawing a grunt from him as it began slowly compressing his waist.

The stockings inched up, then the garter clips shot down, threading under the panties that were now snug on his butt, snapping closed. A pair of high heels now floated over, sliding onto his feet. He lifted himself on his hands and knees and from behind him came a blouse. The gloves were back and they caught his wrists, snapping him up onto his knees. Instead of letting go, the gloves threaded themselves through the short sleeves, pulling his arms through them.

Now a short leather skirt came floating down. The gloves lifted like chains on his wrists, pulling him up until his feet hung and the skirt slid up his hips and around his waist. Like snakes entwining a branch, the hand portion of the gloves extended away from him so that the upper end was what bound him. Then he was lowered to the ground; his arms dropped until the hands of the gloves could zip and button the skirt. Then they leaped to the buttons of the blouse. Only the first three or four buttons were closed. Except for the short hair and sharp features, he looked like a prepubescent hooker.

He had stopped screaming, but now he was mewling in terror and moaning, begging for mercy. The Kitsune came toward him, circling to sit, then staring down at his face, head cocked as if considering. Kyo fell to his knees, his hands up to ward off an invisible blow from the Kitsune that stood over him. Then its mouth yawned.

I came awake with a start. The situation was becoming more and more strange every day. Why was I dreaming of Kyo? What was happening to me? What did what I was seeing him going through have to do with me?

I showered, weighed myself. I now weighed 110. As I stepped off the scale, I happened to look in the mirror. My hair looked shaggy, which surprised me, since I had worn a buzz cut since my time in the Air Force. Easy to maintain, since you don't even need to comb it. Yet now it was hanging past my ears. I leaned forward.

My beard and mustache was gone. When I got heavier, I had grown the beard to hide the slight double chin I had. But at my present weight, the extra chin was gone. The mustache had been around since I was in high school; I'd even been sent home one time because I hadn't shaved. But I was part Indian way back in my ancestry; if I shaved, I could wait a week before anyone noticed. But that was gone.

I looked more closely at the hair. Do you remember the old Touch of Gray for Men ads? I looked like I was using it because my almost totally gray hair was now only slightly salt and pepper. The changes were still going, and they were starting to accelerate.

No help for it. I got dressed. Another thing, my wardrobe was changing to fit my new form. I used to wear size 34 pants, but they had shrunk to size 26. Every thing was the same, right down to the stains on my T-shirt and one ripped sleeve. Except, I should mention, for my shoes.

I had always worn laced shoes because the one on the fake foot fit better if it didn't have to stretch. Stretching to conform to the fake foot would make a shoe loose over time. But with laced shoes, you could tighten them down every time they grew loose. But starting that last week, my shoes had been slowly replaced with slip-ons until

now, when everything was slip-on. My real leg had shrunk until it matched my left one; now all of them were size fives. I knelt to grab a pair and that was when I saw the boots.

On the far right of my shoe collection was the exact pair of boots I had seen in the dream this morning. I picked them up and looked at them. They were suede leather with zippers in the back so they would fit snug, heels, all of it. I wanted to just trash them but something about them appealed. I took them to the bed, then went to my sock drawer. The socks had changed too and I wasn't sure why. I usually wore crew socks, the thick cotton kind that absorb sweat. But a couple of days earlier they had been replaced with those knee-high nylon dress socks. Why or how I had no idea.

I sat on the bed, sliding up the socks, then slid the left boot on. It felt... strange, sensuous against the flesh of the new leg. I smoothed it down from ankle to knee, then slid the zipper up. The boot fit like a second skin and I could feel my hands running over it. I was so entranced, I repeated it with the right boot. I had never felt such a feeling and I decided I liked it. I stood, the heels making my ankles arch, and stood there in delight. For a moment, I thought of going dancing, something I hadn't done since the War. I didn't even know where to go! Like the old joke, "It's been so long since I've had sex, I don't even know who gets tied up anymore."

I left the house and went walking. The boots hugged me like a lover, and I enjoyed every step. I was almost at the point of not caring if this was a dream or not. I walked everywhere you could reach in the city. Up the steep hills, down them, running along the side of Lombard Street, just for the sheer delight of being able to run again.

At five in the afternoon I was near home, and headed toward J town and the restaurant. I saw Koshiro on the

sidewalk, talking with a Japanese girl. He looked frustrated, but she looked desperate. He looked up and waved. The girl looked at me, then back at him. I went to my favorite table and ordered. I gorged on Seafood tempura, or what would be gorging if I could have stuffed myself. No matter how much I tried to overeat, I still lost weight, so now I just ate until I was satisfied.

I went home, then off to the bar. Jane waved at me when I came in and I signaled for my usual. She delivered a new Oatmeal stout and I sipped appreciatively. Nice and smooth.

“Hey, Danny!”

I sighed, signaled for a pitcher, then stood up and thumped Chris in the forehead.

“Hey!” He held his head, then looked chagrined. “Sorry.”

“I’m not. I like thumping you.”

“You must, you sadistic old fart.” He set his books down and I stared at the top one. Feline Diseases. I pulled it aside and looked in it. Dietary problems with domestic canines, then a chapter about diseases common to zoo animals.

“Veterinary medicine?” I looked up at him. He was pouring his first glass.

“Of course, you doofus.”

“When did you become interested in veterinary medicine?”

He gave me the same look that the doctor had last week, as if I were telling a joke and he wasn’t sure if the punchline had come up. “Three years ago. Paul and I came in for my first drink. He started into a diatribe about the Jews and you tore his arguments to shreds, remember? You told me I should get out of history because it

was a dead end and quoted some guy named George Santayana. I remembered the name because I liked the band Santana.”

“ Oh, right. Serious brain fart, sorry.” I sipped, thinking. The world around me was changing again. The argument happened three years ago, but I hadn’t mentioned veterinary medicine **until two weeks ago!**

Whatever was happening was spreading further than I would have believed possible. I remembered a comment from Heinlein’s book *Job*; that if a god were to change the world so one person had no grip on it, he’d just change what that person could see and feel, not everything. Was that what was happening?

The door slammed open and the young girl I had seen talking to Koshiro burst in. She looked around frantically, saw me, and ran over, dropping to her knees to wrap her arms around my legs. I was just noticing that she was wearing clothes similar to what I had last seen on Kyo in the dream that morning when the door burst open again and half a dozen Japanese kids flooded into the bar. “**Saa uwakionna!**” the leader, a kid Kyo’s age shouted, storming across the room.

“**Tasukete!**” she cried, ‘help’ in Japanese, then shrieked in pain as he caught a handful of her waist-length hair, and tried to drag her away. I would have punched him normally, but the thugs behind him would have thought six-to-one was a fair fight.

“No one calls a woman a slut in this bar.” I snarled, catching his wrist to relieve the pressure.

“If you want some of this, bring it!” The kid raised his left hand, and then flipped the Bali-song knife to show me eight inches of steel. Behind him, the others drew weapons. All but one had knives; the last had a bicycle chain.

"Excuse me?" a voice called from the door they had entered. Mike Dwyer wasn't that big, but when he wanted to, he radiated a subtle sense of controlled violence. He was a nice guy and we all knew where that violence came from. When he was working, he was Detective Sergeant Dwyer. He stood from the end of the bar, then pointedly flipped the handle of the dead bolt and leaned against the door. He surveyed the frozen scene, then a predatory grin showed his teeth. "When they passed out brains, you guys weren't even in the room."

The guy I was struggling with let go of the girl's hair, and turned to face him. "You think you can take us all? Just the two of you?"

"Probably not," Mike admitted. "If it was just the two of us. Janey, let them see what you have under the bar."

There was that sound anyone who has ever seen a Western remembers as she jacked the slide. Then the Winchester 1897 trench gun came up over the bar, to her shoulder and was aimed at the middle guys in their little cluster. They all moved as if to head for the door but screeched to a halt as they saw the 9mm Beretta Mike had drawn while they were watching Jane.

"Now two things can happen. Either you drop the weapons, then all sit at that table..." He motioned with his free hand toward one about equidistant from them all. "And wait for the nice policemen to come and collect you. Or you can try something stupid and some or all of you will be going to the morgue. Your choice."

The guy who had grabbed the girl's hair was turning back toward us but when they had looked to Mike, Chris and I had moved back. The girl had hampered me; think of the scenes they do in movies where the girl holds the guy's leg as he tries to walk away, dragging her. If it hadn't been so tense, I would have thought it was funny. But

she had been dragged far enough back and out of the line of fire that either of the armed patrons could have dropped Mike easily.

Without a readymade hostage, the guy snarled. "When we get out," he growled in Japanese, "you will pay. Both of you."

"I assume that was a threat?" Mike said. I nodded. "So predictable. Listen, asshole. In this jurisdiction, carrying a concealed gun is a misdemeanor. But carrying a concealed knife longer than four inches is a felony. So is using it to threaten someone. The only one of you that might hit the streets today is your friend with the bike chain. After all, he might really have been taking it to a store to be repaired. Also verbal threats are defined as domestic terrorist attacks under State law. So before you dig yourself any deeper, drop the hardware, sit down, and shut up."

They did as they were told. I managed to pry the girl off me and got her to stand. She was about eight inches smaller than I, around five foot, and lighter than I was. "It's all right."

"No, it is not!" She replied in Japanese. "I have been trying to find you for the last three days. I must have walked by you several times because I didn't recognize you." I stared at her, confused. She didn't recognize me? Why was it everyone else just accepted the changes, but she didn't? Then her next words stunned me.

"Both you and I are changing, but no one else is noticing it!"

Revelation

Back when I was a kid of sixteen, a neighbor's barn had caught fire. They had let the horses out and I had been told to catch Rex, the prize stallion. I had been as-

signed because I had a way with animals. Unless you know what to do, or are suicidal, you would just let the horse run until he was tired. He had run to the fence, turned back, and saw me. A frightened horse will do one of two things; he will run you down like a drunken motorist, or he'll rear. If he rears, he will attack with his hooves. I had followed and just as he turned, I leaped up, grabbed his ears, and held on for dear life.

It sounds crazy, but it works. A horse will run if he can see anything at all, but he won't if he can't see. And if you are controlling his head, he won't rear, though he might try. But having a kid, even as small as I was, hanging from his ears would stop him. As he was trying to move around the obstruction, I was talking to him gently, making him calm down. A few moments later, he was standing there shivering. Part of me wanted to grab the girl's ears and it made me smile. "What do you mean?" I asked instead.

"You don't recognize me either, do you?" she challenged. She was still frightened but it was coming out as anger. "I'm Ky-" she stopped as if she had just developed a stutter. She kept repeating 'Ky' three or four times. Then she took a deep breath. "A few days ago, you walked past my home. I was having a garage sale, and we had words."

"I had words with a boy named Kyo," I corrected her.

"Yes. You had words with... with him." She looked at me, her eyes pleading. "That was me before."

"Wait. You're Kyo?" She nodded like a bobble-headed doll. "But you're not a boy."

"I said that was me before. Now?" she motioned.

I just stared at her. Then I looked at Jane. "Is it all right for Chris to get me and this girl a drink to calm down?"

She didn't look away from the guys she was covering. "Dan, you know it's illegal to serve to minors. The police might get upset if they found out." Her last remark was directed at Mike.

"Janey, I'm busy covering these perps until back up arrives. Besides, I'm off duty."

She considered. "Chris, I think everyone can use a drink. Why don't you pour or pull them for me, on the house. I'm kinda busy. After you call the police, that is."

"Sure, Jane. Always glad to help." He dialed 911, then went back to get the drinks. After dropping one off for Jane and Mike, he brought a shot of whiskey for me and a brandy for the girl on a tray. I moved her to the back of the bar, asked Chris to leave us for a moment, then motioned at the brandy he'd brought her. She sipped, coughing as you would expect at first. But by the time half of it was inside her, she had her color back.

"We don't have a lot of time."

"But I need a lot of time to explain it all."

"Give me the Cliff Notes." She gave me a confused look. "Summarize."

"The statue is magic. I thought Grandmother was lying, but it is. I was disrespectful, and this happened. One minute, I'm a ma-" She stumbled over the word.

"Man," I supplied.

She nodded. "Then I was... this."

Before she could say more, there was a pounding on the door. "Open up! Police!"

Mike pulled out his badge, then used that hand to open the door. Half a dozen cops poured in, covering everyone. Jane lifted her hand away from the trigger and set the shotgun down. Mike filled the cops in, and they began

patting the prisoners down and cuffing them. One came over and Kyo told them the men had been holding her in their basement. She had escaped and fled until she saw me and ran in to ask my help.

I sat there silent until he was done with her, then told him what I had seen. I told them I knew her from J-town, which wasn't exactly a lie. At the same time, other cops were talking to Jane, Mike, and Chris. An hour later, the perps were gone. Mike grumbled about having to work overtime filing reports, and left. A few regulars had come in during the interviews and merely accepted it. That might sound odd, but Mike had stopped three robberies in the bar during the time he had been frequenting it. Two of them on the same night.

We still laughed about the call we'd made that night; an hour after the first attempt, two young idiots had seen the cops leave, figured we would be relaxed, and charged in to take us down. We'd spent two hours covering those two because the local station thought the new call was related to the old one, so they didn't send another car until an off-duty cop stopped by to joke with Mike about the earlier call.

Kyo was silent as the police left. She had finished the brandy as she was interviewed and the young cop hadn't said anything about it. I let her, waiting for her to continue. But then I realized why she hadn't. "Do you have a place to sleep tonight?"

She shook her head sadly. "You saw me this afternoon when I spoke to my father. He did not recognize me. He thought I was some girl fresh off the boat from the old country trying to get him to put me up. Grandmother did not recognize me, none of the neighbors did. And part of my problem is the curse itself."

"What do you mean?"

"The curse works by the words of the one who is struck by it. I was angry because you stopped me from smashing the statue, and I said 'I wish you'd just let me get on with my life and make money,' then my father told me off, 'No son of mine would act so shameless' and I said-

"Then I'm not your son'," I finished. She nodded.

"I am afraid to ask anyone else to help. You see, my body reacts even if I do not want to even contemplate it. If a man talks to me, comes on to me, I can feel my body reacting, making itself ready to accept him." She looked at my confusion. "Think of seeing a girl in the bar. You approach her, talk to her, try to woo her. You look for the clues that she might be interested.

"When it happens to me, I am repulsed." She tapped her head. "But my body is giving all those little clues that I am ready and eager. I have to walk away and sometimes that doesn't even help. When I was the one picking up girls, I always thought them saying no was a come-on. You know what I mean; she wants you to push it."

"I was raised better."

"So was I, but I didn't really believe it," She admitted. "My friends all boasted about how girls were all sluts in training. If you pushed it, they'd resist until you put it in their mouths, or rip off their clothes, then they'd submit." She looked at me. "When the statue made me into this, it made me into the kind of girl I thought all women were. Even as my body and voice is saying no, my body is doing everything it can to make them sure I want to do it. Once it begins, I cannot stop it. After the pleasure begins, I even accept that it is happening.

"When I'm fondled, I feel like I am on a drug high, and enjoy it. But the high ends, my mind returns, and I feel used, made unclean. But that, to them, just means I

want to do it again, so they do, and again, my body accepts it." She gave me a wounded look. "That has been my nightmare for the last three days."

I looked around. Chris was at the bar and the regulars were far enough away that we'd been left alone. But in a short while the place would be packed. We couldn't sit here all night talking. "Why did you say you couldn't trust anyone else? That implies you know you can trust me."

"Because my body did not react to you. If I had grabbed any other man around the legs like I did before, my body would have begun to react. I know." I pictured her as she had been earlier, then pictured her doing it to someone she had known before, throwing herself on their mercy. He would think that she was ready for sex. The mixture of pleading and longing on her face would give him a woody just at the thought. She had probably gone to her friends for help when it happened, and she had discovered the horror of the 'curse'.

"You're coming home with me."

She began to cry. "Thank you."

I stood, motioning her to stay, and walked over to the bar. Jane came over to stand behind the bar as I spoke to Chris.

"How is she, Dan?" Chris asked.

"Pretty rocky. She doesn't have anywhere to stay, so she's coming home with me."

"She'll be safe there," Chris commented. Jane walked away, then came back with one of the 'Gallon to Go' boxes they had started selling when Triple Rock Brewery in Berkeley invented the trend. In her other hand was one of those little metal water bottle REI sells. It was her own

variation known only to the regulars she trusted; whiskey you took home. She set them down.

"You're in for a bad night. Better have reinforcements." She shoved them over to me.

I stared at her, then at the brew and booze. "I'm just going to let her have the bed while I sleep on the couch," I protested. "I'm not getting any tail tonight!"

"We know that, you doof." Chris snorted. "You pick up injured strays all the time, and let them free when they're mobile again. It's rare for you to pick up a human one, but we've all seen you do it." He looked at Kyo contemplatively. "But I've never seen one so badly hurt before. Take her home, bind her wounds, then let her free."

I blushed. Here I was, thinking everyone knew the antisocial old fart I had become, and not the real me. Boy, was I blind. I pulled out my wallet, and Jane waved it away. "When you do this, we all try to help as much as we can, Dan. It's my turn."

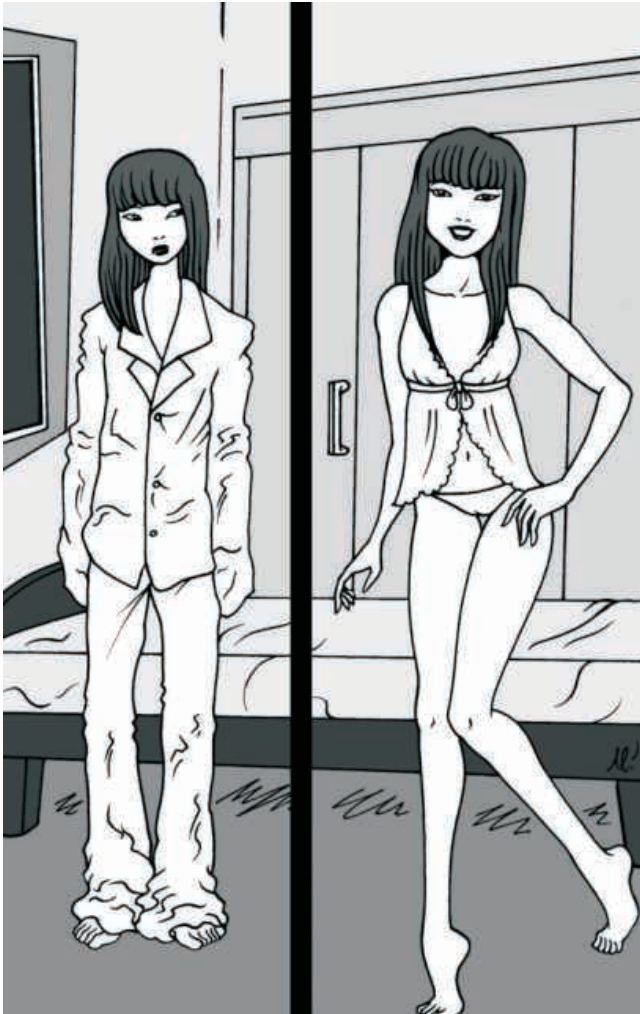
I was humbled by her words. Had I been doing this all these years, and never noticed people helping me? I had to admit that I had built that shell over me when I got back to the world. My own private universe, population: one. Beyond it, people were giving me assistance and I hadn't even realized it. "I am not a jelly donut with a soft center," I growled. "I'm a mean old fart who wants to be left alone."

"Your secret is safe with us," Chris retorted. "Go. She's starting to get nervous." I looked over and understood when Kyo meant. His mind was still screaming no, but the way she sat was more like a girl who wanted to lose her virginity tonight; she just hadn't decided who to lose it to.

I went.

Having fun with Curses

Kyo looked at my apartment curiously. "I'm not going to make a habit of it but I think you might need this." I opened the water bottle and sniffed. One of those un-taxed single malts. I poured us each a shot and walked to the small dinette set. She followed, sitting down across from me. "Do you want to change into something less... provocative?"



"It wouldn't help." She shrugged. "Whatever I put on changes to match that vision of the girl as a slut in my mind," She sipped the whiskey, made a face, sipped again. I was looking at her, and she grinned. "Don't believe me?" I shook my head. "If I were in an anime, I'd think it was cool if it didn't make me look like a tart. Got some old clothes you don't need?"

I went to the dresser. I had three pair of pajamas, and I picked one at random, brought it over, pointing her at the bathroom. She went into the room and I sipped my own drink. Then her skirt flew out, followed by the rest of her clothes as she stripped out of my sight. When she stepped out, she looked like a girl in her brother's pajamas, and I told her so.

"It doesn't happen all at once unless I try to go outside."

She visually steeled herself, then walked toward the door to the landing. As I watched, the clothes changed. It was like watching a flower opening in time-lapse photography.

By the time she had taken those twelve steps, reached the door and took the knob in hand, she was in a babydoll nightgown with matching panties.

"All right, that explains what's happening to you. But it doesn't explain what is happening to me."

"I don't know," she whispered. "I understand why I was punished. But have you done anything to offend the Kitsune?" I pointed at the statue. It sat in the same place where I had put it, crouching as if to jump down on us.

"When I was younger, my Obaasan moved it because I would want to play with it. When I grew older, she told me of how it came to be part of our possessions.

“ It was made so long ago that no one even knows when. I looked up Netsuke online when I was still in school, and found that it was made long before the word even came to be... Thousands of years according to Obaasan.

“ It has belonged to Daiymos and even, supposedly, to Emperors. When a nobleman insulted one of my ancestors almost 300 years ago, he came afterward and told him ‘The spirit of the statue ordered that I give him to you because of my thoughtless actions’. The nobleman gave that ancestor documents that date to that far back, but I have never seen them. But that ancestor was told that it cannot be sold or stolen, only given away, and only when the eldest of the household does so. I am proof of that.”

“But why am I changing? And why has it taken two weeks for me to get this far along, and you only remember three days passing?”

“I don’t know. But it is still ongoing. Your hair is longer than it was before. And the color is overtaking the gray.” I ran into the bathroom and stared at myself. My hair was turning to a brown so red I would call it auburn, and the gray had almost disappeared. It was already below my shoulders. I leaned closer. My face was slimming down. It no longer looked like me in my twenties; now it was someone else.

Kyo hadn’t eaten that day; I brought out a fry pan and made her a belated breakfast. She ate as if she was starving, and when I pressed, admitted that since she had changed three days earlier, she had only one thing to eat, and that was sperm. She joked with unshed tears that the one thing she had eaten a lot of was sperm.

She had spent the last three days in the basement of one of her tormenters; every one of the men who had been

trying to recapture her had been in every orifice multiple times. She finally found a way to flee right after she heard them discussing selling her to the Yakuza or Tong. I made her a second breakfast, then we sat together on the bed.

There was nothing worth watching so I delved into my video collection. She laughed when she saw that I had a lot of anime. I pulled out one named *Rei-Rei*, and we watched it. She was entranced by one scene in the first segment when a boy is turned into a girl as part of a plot to revenge himself on the ones who had murdered his girlfriend. Then she laughed hysterically when the main character Kaguya suddenly molests his female body from inside a tree as Pipi, her butler, slides his head rapidly between 'her' legs. The scene moves away as the feminized boy is shouting, "Stop! I'm liking this too much!".

She fell asleep during the second episode; I realized she must be exhausted by her ordeal. I wished I could help her. It was while I was considering this that I fell asleep beside her.

Every new chance has a price tag

I found myself in the alley. Kyo, still a cross-dressed boy, was falling to his knees, his hands up to ward off an invisible blow from the Kitsune that stood over him. Its mouth yawned and a bolt of yellow fire smacked into the target above the cups of the corset like a blaster from *Star Wars*.

He screamed in mortal terror, then his body rippled as if he were the creature from *Species*. He fell forward back on his hands and knees, then his body changed. I could see his ass filling out, his legs slimming down. Then he reared back up on his knees and his hands clamped desperately at his crotch as he begged. His chest began to swell, then filled the cups of the corset as his screams sud-

denly rose an octave. He fell forward, collapsing to lay there, his mewling now that of the girl he had become.

“See how the wicked are punished.” I turned and the Kitsune towered over me, though he still faced the woman Kyo had become.

“And I am next?” I snapped.

The Kitsune’s head turned to face me, then cocked as if seeing me for the first time. “And what have you, Daniel Foster, done to earn punishment?”

I was furious. “I don’t know! Maybe I erred in calling you a Kitsune! Maybe I should have punched Kyo in the mouth for daring to sell you!” I had a thought. “God! For all I know I’m laying in a hospital bed in a coma, dreaming all of this. Or maybe I’m laying on the deck of the Herky-bird dying because the slug ripped out my intestines, or maybe my brain!”

I felt something, clutching my head. I had read one of Lynsey Sands’ romance novels of the Argeneau family. In the book, a vampire created not by some soulless demon but by technology from fabled Atlantis was reading a woman’s mind. The author described it as a riffling feeling, as if her memories were a stack of index cards someone was looking at. I fell to my knees, holding my head. “Stop it!”

Suddenly the feeling was gone. I looked up and the Kitsune watched me. “I apologize. I am used to the minds of those I lived among for millennia. Your American way of looking at things is... interesting in comparison.” His head swiveled, and my eyes were drawn to Kyo.

The figure that finally stood on shaky legs was the girl in my apartment. Her hands ran over her body, then she repeated *Iye*, ‘no’ in Japanese over and over. She ran frantically down the alley away from us. Then a man

walked past. I remembered him well. He had threatened me with a knife the day before.

She ran up to him, babbling in mixed Japanese and English, calling him Takeru. She told him she was Kyo, or at least tried to; she hung up on the name as she had when she was speaking to me. Then she avoided the name, telling him they were friends, that she had been changed somehow. She moaned that she needed help and begged for help. I could see his eyes, first confused, then thoughtful, then lustful.

She didn't realize what was happening. I could see her body language, her voice slipping from a terrified girl to a seductress. He led her back into the alley, then suddenly he pinned her to a wall, kissing her in mid-sentence. For an instant, she froze in shock. But as he forced his tongue into her mouth, she gave a little whimper and her arms rose, nails catching in his jacket.

As we watched, he forced her to her knees, her pleas for help segueing into cries of no. Then he dropped his zipper and thrust himself into her mouth. For several seconds she kneeled there, hands outstretched to either side as if crucified. But then she whimpered, hands coming up, clutching his ass as she pulled him deeper.

"It has to be that I'm dying," I whispered. "Like an old TV show I watched years ago."

"An Occurrence On Owl Creek Bridge," the Kitsune replied. I looked up at him in shock. The head came down again, considering me. "A story by Ambrose Bierce. The main character is about to be hanged for treason during your War Between the States. The rope breaks as he is dropped and he runs frantically for home. But before he reaches his wife, the rope snaps tight, and he dies." The head came down, and I could see the eyes looking at me again. "You saw a television portrayal in 1959 on Alfred

Hitchcock Presents. Then again on a television show named Twilight Zone in 1962.”

“How can you know who Ambrose Bierce is?” I challenged. “Or who Alfred Hitchcock was or about the god-damned Twilight Zone? For that matter even what television is!”

“I learned of them from your memories, except for television. You see, in dealing with humans, I have found you need a common reference point; somewhere and something that will connect your mind to theirs when explaining things. What you felt was me recording all of your memories through your long life and matching them to what I know of humans.” The head came back up to look down the alley and I could see the man suddenly stiffening.

Kyo was flailing, trying to pull back, then merely accepting. As the man drew himself from her mouth, she fell on hands and knees, first coughing, then vomiting up his seed. He ignored her distress but once she was done, he dragged her to her feet, then toward the street beyond.

“I pity him,” I whispered.

The Kitsune looked at me, head cocked. “Pity? You have seen the start of his punishment but do you know why he was here in this alley when it happened? He had arranged with that man to meet here.

“They both knew of the Netsuke, though only Kyo knew it’s provenance. In fact it had been added to the garage sale because that one of his ‘friends’ was going to come by and buy it. He could then claim he didn’t realize its true worth, but he would split the money when it was sold.

“But you coming by and arguing with him drew his relatives out, and it was passed to you. So he was going to arrange with his friends to break into your home to steal

it. Anything that happened to you; death or injury, was, to him, your just reward for standing in his way." The Kitsune looked toward the end of the alley again.

"He was lucky in a way. He ended up being used by people he knew instead of finding it out by meeting some pimp or prostitute on the way home."

"But he has suffered too much already," I sighed, crossing my arms. "Punishment must end, whether it be jail time or a spanking, or the child never learns better."

"An interesting concept." The Kitsune looked back to me. "But to stop his body from continuing on this course, he needs someone to advise him, to protect him, if only for a short time."

"I've taken injured animals under my wing before. Why should I ignore an injured person?"

"Yet you have done so."

"What?"

"Back in 1992, you rescued a badly injured kitten from an abusive child, yet you ignored that child later."

Suddenly I found myself back on that day. I had been walking toward the bus stop when I heard a yowl of pain. An eight-year-old boy had flung a kitten into the wall. Why I never knew. He laughed with delight, then ran over, and snatched the kitten up. Then he had screamed, "You fucker! You scratched me!" He flung it against the wall even harder before I could reach him. I threw the boy aside, cuddling the kitten to my chest and proceeded to berate him, calling him a monster, something that was human only in form.

The kid screamed back that it wasn't my kitten, so why did I care? My reply was "An animal doesn't have to belong to me to deserve better treatment!" I rode the bus not to the VA hospital, but down a couple of stops to the

local vet. He let me use the phone to reschedule my appointment but when I had finished the call, the news was grim. The last toss against the wall had broken the kitten's back. He would never walk again.

I asked how much it would cost to put the poor thing to sleep and have him cremated. The doctor offered to just do it for nothing but I was adamant. He quoted the price and I gave him a check for it. He went to prepare the needle; I sat there, stroking the animal's head. To my surprise, he began to purr; even as badly hurt as he was, he knew someone cared.

The vet returned and injected the kitten. The purr slowly faded, then he was gone. I sat there crying and when he returned with the box, I stuck it under my arm and started home. I was depressed and headed instead toward the bar. I had just reached it and was about to open the door when someone grabbed me, slamming me into the wall. It was a man built like a defensive lineman; the boy's father. He held me pinned by the neck and screamed at me. I had terrorized his son for what? For an animal that wasn't even mine!

I lost it, telling him the same thing I had when the boy had said that. "But the cat scratched him!"

"After he threw it into the wall the first time," I snarled back. "Of course, look at you. Twice as big as I am, yet you're ready to beat me up!" I thrust out the box and he took it. "There! Go home and give that to him. Praise him for murdering something smaller and weaker than he is! You should be **so fucking proud!**"

The man let me go, then looked at the box for a long moment before he walked away. I turned and Mike, who was just a brand new patrolman back then, was standing there, ready to help if I needed it. He took me in and for

only the fourth time in my life, I got falling down drunk. The vet never cashed the check.

Then I was back in the alley with the Kitsune. “You don’t even know what happened to that boy, do you? His father went home, and added his own comments to what you had said. That someone who injures those weaker or smaller are monsters in the eyes of society. He then took away the boy’s allowance for the next year to pay you back for having to get the kitten put to sleep and cremated. Yet when he came to give you that money, you refused him, saying that money would not give the kitten back the life his boy had callously taken.

“The boy took those words and built his life on them. He joined the Army in 2001 after 9-11. He won medals for bravery, not for combat, but for going out into a hail of bullets not once but four times to pull in wounded comrades during the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

“He returned here and went to Rhiannon where he saw you drinking alone. He wasn’t willing to approach you; after all, you would have remembered the callow child. Instead he bought you a drink and when you looked up confused, gave you a parade ground salute. You didn’t acknowledge him and he felt he had not yet earned your respect.

“He went for a second tour and died on Afghan’s plains, as Kipling would say, trying to rescue yet another comrade for which he was awarded his second Silver Star.”

I remembered the young man, so proud in his uniform. He had given me that salute but I didn’t remember the boy he had been. I merely lifted my drink, then turned back to my conversation. In my own way, I had been as cruel as he had been, with less reason. I felt tears running down my cheeks.

The Kitsune sighed. "There is much to do in the next few days. I must go and do what else needs to be done."

"Wait! You haven't told me why you're doing this!"

He looked at me and I could hear the humor in his voice. "It is being done for your well-being."

"Changing me into... this is for my well-being?"



“Your redemption then.” I was confused, and I heard a dry chuckle. “You never watched A Christmas Carol on TV, except for the version with Bill Murray. Your family liked It’s A Wonderful life instead, primarily because when your father read you the story, you were bored. But Kyo loved it.” A moment later I was alone.

I suddenly awoke, tears staining my cheeks. I looked toward the kitchenette. Kyo was up in what looked like the pajamas I had given her the night before instead of a babydoll. She smiled at me. “You have time for a shower before breakfast.”

I smiled back, yawning as I got up. I closed the bathroom door, took off my pajama top and looked toward the mirror. then I froze in shock. I was staring into the eyes of a young Japanese girl.

I think I might have lost it right then if what was happening had been done in only one night. But it was so gradual, dreamlike until yesterday, that it was like growing up; something that happens while you aren’t really paying attention. I had to resist repeating what the boy in Rei Rei had said in the English translation as I felt down. Yes, I was now in a girl’s body.

I examined my new look, curious. I was older than Kyo, closer to twenty-one. Dark auburn hair instead of black. As much as American picture Japanese women as having black hair, I had discovered during my time in-country that they run from a deep auburn like I had now to coal black like Kyo’s. I was trying to figure out what happened and found my hands were automatically stuffing the waist-length fall into a shower cap. Since my hair had been a buzz cut until yesterday, I had never bought a shower cap, so where the hell did it come from?

The Kitsune still hadn’t told me why this was happening, and ‘my well being’ or ‘redemption’ didn’t give me a

clue. I hadn't brought clothes with me so I put the pajamas back on and stepped back out. Kyo handed me a cup of tea and I sipped it. "What, we're out of coffee?"

Kyo sighed pettishly. "You know you have to set it up before going to bed. I'm not tall enough to reach down the canister."

I walked over, opened the cabinet, and reached up, finding my fingers only brushing the canister. I looked at Kyo who was portioning out our breakfast. I had been six inches taller than she was yesterday, but I had shrunk at least four since then. Determined to have my goddamned cut of coffee, I stood on tiptoes to get it down. I set up the coffee maker, started it, and sat down to breakfast. It was faintly amusing to see that the mammoth breakfast I had been used to eat was enough for the two of us now.

"We'll have to go shopping," she told me. "We're out of breakfast food."

"Sure, Kyo." She gave me an odd look. "What?"

"Why did you call me by a boy's name?"

Great, the only one who knew I was still me inside here was fast disappearing. "Fine. Who am I?"

"Daniel-san."

"And you?"

"Kaguya."

"Fine. As soon as we wash up, we'll do some shopping." I was worried about how much money I might have. I couldn't go to the VA about the disability. Not without some kind of records to prove I deserved it. Now I wasn't sure I could go to my old job to ask about the pension; they would wonder why some girl totally unrelated to me was asking. I was also afraid that they would give me a blank look and say, "Daniel who?" But until

this sleigh ride ended, I now had two mouths to feed instead of one.

I went to the dresser and closet to get dressed. All of my clothes had been replaced with what a woman would wear, from underwear out. I took out the least attractive garments, so I ended up in a functional white bra and panties, covered myself in jeans and a t-shirt, with a jean jacket. Instead of the heels or boots, I put on a pair of sneakers that looked exactly like the ones I had bought a couple of years before, right down to the scuff marks. We both picked up the carry bags they make to avoid using the filmy ones given away at grocery stores, then set out.

Once we were out, we both felt it was too nice a day to just go for groceries, so we made it a girls day out. We rode across town to the Marina district, walked around there, even stopped for coffee and pastry on Fisherman's Wharf and watched the sea lions on the floats beyond. I hadn't had such a wonderful time in decades.

Finally we got down to business. We stopped at the regular American style grocery store and loaded up on staples. Once that had been delivered home and unloaded, we set out toward J-town for the specialty items an American store would not carry. As we passed the Tamaki residence, Koshiro waved and said hi. We stopped and talked for a while. Where Kyo had been unrecognized the day before, Kaguya was recognized as my younger sister. But I was still Daniel-san.

We decided to take another walk and my feet led us toward Rhiannon. We had just reached the block where it was when I heard a screech of brakes, then the yelp of a wounded animal. I spun to see a German Shepherd laying in the street. The car that had hit him had barely slowed, just enough to make sure it was undamaged before driving on.

I ran onto the street, horns blaring, brakes and tires screeching and I dropped to my knees beside the dog. He had been caught by the fender and thrown aside rather than having the tires roll over him. But his left foreleg was broken badly and he was struggling to get up, whining in pain.

I whispered soothingly as I petted his head. The dog stopped trying to stand and merely lay there. As small as I had become, I couldn't pick him up. He weighed as much as I did; dragging him out of the street would have just hurt him more. People were screaming at me to get out of the effing road, but I wasn't going to leave him here.

"Is your dog hurt bad?" a voice asked. I looked up. It was Chris. When I was a man, he was a head taller than I had been. Now he towered over me. He knelt beside me."

"He's not my dog, Chris. You know I don't have a dog."

He gave me a funny look I was getting used to and reached down, hands gently running down the dog's side. The dog snapped at his hand with a yelp. "Broken rib. He seems to be calm when you touch him. Keep him quiet." He drew out his cell phone, and called a cab company. Then he put it away. "They'll be here in a few minutes. We'll have to splint the leg."

"Chopsticks," I interrupted him. "We can use three pair of chopsticks and string to tie it off above and below the break. Then we can get him out of the street without making it worse."

"You mean I can get him out of the street. You're not big enough to carry him." He turned to Kaguya who was standing behind us. "Go into the bar there." He pointed at the door into Rhiannon. "Tell Jane Chris sent you and we need six pairs of chopsticks. She has those lightweight

snap-apart kind. And get some string or twine.” Kaguya raced off.

When she returned, Chris lifted the broken leg gently as I soothed the animal. He had me use my other hand to hold the legs in place as he deftly tied the string to hold them securely. Then he ripped off his sports jacket. He lay it beside the dog and started to lift.

“Wait.” I reached into a pocket and found myself pulling out a folded trash bag. I spread it on the lining and he nodded his thanks before lifting the dog onto the improvised sling. With a gentleness I would never have expected, he picked up the encased dog, whispering to it as he stood and we moved out of the street.

“Why would you go to all this trouble for a dog that isn’t even yours?” he asked me.

I sighed. “An animal doesn’t have to belong to me to deserve better treatment. That bastard didn’t even check to see if it was hurt.” I waved after the vanished hit and run driver.

“You sound like a friend of mine.” He whispered to the dog for a moment. “May I ask a personal question?”

“Sure. Though I won’t guarantee I’ll answer.”

He chuckled. “Since I have never met you, ma’am, how would I know if you had a dog or not?”

More changes and explanations

I sat in the cab on the way to the veterinary hospital in a funk. I had gone from someone with a pool of people I knew to someone with no one except for Kaguya and the Tamakis remembering me. I was frankly starting to get pissed at the Kitsune. He said he was doing this for me, but I still didn’t have a clue as to why he was doing this to me.

The receptionist was one of those clueless women who wouldn't know how to buy one if you took them to Clues R Us. She asked the animal's name and seemed confused why we were even bothering. "The pound will handle him; after all, he's a stray."

"They will 'handle' him by putting him to sleep," I snarled back. "Where's the doctor and who the hell hired you to work with injured animals?"

"Listen here, bitch." She started to stand, protected, she thought, by the cubical she was in on the other side of the wall.

"That's quite enough, Stacy." The doctor came into the cubical. The same one I had brought that kitten to all those years ago. He leaned forward to look out. "Bringing in another stray, Kitasei?"

"Another?" Chris asked. I wasn't surprised that he didn't recognize me either, but who the hell was Kitasei?

The doctor looked amused. "She does this occasionally," he told Chris. "Bring him back." The solenoid on the entry door on the 'dog' side of the building clicked and Kaguya held it open so we could pass through. We walked down to the examination room and the doctor went to work.

"Chopsticks for a splint? That was some good thinking." He grinned when Chris merely waved toward me as if to say, 'take a bow'. "Why am I not surprised?" He leaned back. "Two broken ribs and that lower leg is a bad break. I can take care of him but we need to have a name for the chart."

"Sam," Chris said. When both the doctor and I looked at him, he explained. "She's like the Good Samaritan. Someone who helped an injured man, rented a room, nursed him back to health, then left without even telling

the man who he was." He waved at the dog. "So 'Sam', short for Samaritan."

"Sam it is." The doctor picked up the chart, holding the pen in what was left of his right hand. He was missing his thumb and index finger but he was deft in his writing. "I'll set and make a cast for the leg and keep him here overnight. I'll give you pain meds for the ribs and leg. He'll be tender and snappish for a while; about three weeks until the cast comes off. He'll be home tomorrow but don't let him run." He snorted. "He'll figure that out for himself pretty quick if you stay to the dose I set."

He motioned to me. "I was hoping you'd bring in another stray sooner than this. I need a receptionist."

"You have Stacy," I motioned.

"I've had three receptionists in the last year. One got married and moved to Nevada. One got a better job. Then there is Stacy." He looked at me. "She is excellent at filing, good on the phone, and punctual. But she gets irritated very easily and flinches if an animal even moves. Then forgets half the meds the patients need because her boyfriend calls.

"I can't let her go because of the last two, but I need someone who can do the job. Someone who can convince a dog her size to chill out while I work on him like you did right here." He ran his hand across the dog's back. "Someone that will cry when someone cripples a kitten, and wanted to pay to put him out of his misery like you did."

I was stunned. I had done that as this girl? "I don't know what to say, Doc."

"Say you'll be here tomorrow at noon, ready to kick ass and take names for ten hours, four days a week. Over-time when necessary."

I merely nodded numbly. Chris picked up Sam and we went to the back. Dozens of cages held animals and the Doc walked down the row, saying hello. He opened one and Chris slid Sam into it.

We rode back to the bar and Chris waved. "I need a drink, and I'm buying." He ushered us in and when he told Jane what had happened, she delivered beer for Chris and me, and a soda for Kaguya. We sat there, relaxing after the tension of the vet's visit. I had started to feel mellow, odd with only one beer when the door open... and I walked in.

"Hey, Chris."

"Danny! Meet Kitasei." My doppelganger walked over and thumped him in the forehead.

"Don't call me Danny." He looked at the two of us, then held out his hand. "Dan Foster. Your name means North Star, doesn't it?"

"Dad was always into names like that. He named me Moon Princess!"

"Kaguya," he said. Then he looked at me. The room seemed to slow down. I looked at Chris as he raised his hand to order a pitcher, then he stopped moving. Jane was drawing a beer and the liquid stopped as if it had frozen in mid-air. But I could still move. The faux Dan smiled.

I turned toward my duplicate. "It's you," I said. He merely nodded.

"I never explained why this was happening. It is time." He sat across the table from me. "It all comes down to wishes. But while Kyo was a fool, you are not." At my confused expression, he grinned, and for a second, I could see the Kitsune's wide yawning dog-grin.

"You have read many stories of people getting wishes and making things worse and seen movies like the two versions of *Bedazzled*. And the best version of such movies is when the person making the wishes wises up and makes a wish to end all wishes.

"When the statue came into your possession, you did not understand my power; frankly you still do not. But you would have refused to use it if you had."

"How would I have had the chance?"

"Because the world had changed for only one person then: Kyo. He would have tired to go home as he has. Then, when he saw you, and knew that you now had the statue and he couldn't steal it, he would have come to you and explained. Perhaps he would have failed, but like in the movie *Heaven Can Wait*, he would know enough that he could have told you that you might have believed him. So you have in your hands the way to gain your greatest wish. What do you do?"

"Nothing. I give it to him, and he leaves."

"Why?"

"You mentioned *Bedazzled*. What you have to remember is that all of the wishes made by the character went wrong. In the newer version, they just went back to the old way of doing things, the last wish erasing all that went before. What I would have wanted the most at that moment was for my leg to never have been shot off. To get my old life back."

"Yes, you understand well. If that had been your wish, I could have given it to you. But you would have never made it. Instead, you wished for your friend Chris to find someone..."

"I wish I could find someone that makes him happy in every way," I whispered.

"Yes. You inserted yourself into it, but you wanted to help him find someone who he could love and who would love him in return. But by placing yourself in the wish, you gave me the chance to satisfy many other wishes. Everyone here," He waved at the bar, "Wished your life had been different. That you had not lost your leg and become what you are."

I was suddenly furious." I don't want their damn pity!"

"That is absolutely correct, Dan Foster. The only one allowed to pity you is yourself. Every person in the last forty-five years that you thought pitied you was cut off from your life. They no longer existed. Many in the last few years saw the man you had become was like a candle compared to the sun, and they realized, whether you did or not, that the you that could have been died on that plane when your leg was amputated." He shrugged.

"Oh you didn't really die. But the man you would have become, the gentle doctor who loved the animals of your world, didn't survive. And all because of your stubborn attitude toward other pitying you.

"You never went home because they would have pitied you. You refused to go to college, to earn that degree in Veterinary Medicine because some would pity you, others would scorn you, and both of those offended you. But to those who know you well, the man you are now was like a cloudy day when the sun occasionally shone through if an animal needed help." He picked up Chris' beer, and sipped it reflectively. "It has been that way for over forty-five years. Ever since Aoi met you for the first time."

"Aoi? I never met her before a few weeks ago!"

"You just forget that you did. In 1966, she and her husband ran a small hole-in-the-wall Ramen shop in J-town.

One day a bright young American came in, and spent the entire evening there, eating and talking to them. He was being assigned to Japan and he wanted to learn more of the Language than 'Hey, wanna go to bed?'. He came by the next two days, even helped out washing dishes just to learn more.

"Then, three years later, that man returned, crippled from that war. He came to the restaurant but was now a wounded animal, ready to flee at the first sight of someone trying to help. He drifted away and vanished. He mourned the youngster he had known, and wished that you could have gotten your life back. He told his son when he came back, and the wife he later took. They would stand on the sidelines watching as you came back to J-town, searching in your own mind for a door into the past. That wife later died, and the son wished that his first child, a daughter, had survived instead of being stillborn, which is how you came to be what you are today.

"I am giving you back a life, just not the one you started with. After all, this body is old. There are few years left to it. So I am giving you the life you could have had, and-" again that grin "-making sure Chris is happy too."

"What if I don't want it?"

"You didn't want the life you had after you lost your leg, but you accepted that and lived it. You will be able to do the same with this. Of course this is the last time you will see me and you will not remember that old life, so it balances out."

"What do you mean?" The room suddenly grew dark, and I blacked out.

Shibumi

"Kita?" I looked up. Chris looked worried. "Something wrong?" I shook my head, looking around. We were in Rhiannon, and the crowd was just beginning to grow. I looked at my imoutosan (Younger sister) Kaguya, who was drinking a coke. She was underage but she had become a fixture here as I had when I met Chris for the first time three years ago.

I still remember that day. A girl just graduating from high school running into the street to save a wounded dog. Chris came out, helping me as best he could as someone who had only just entered Veterinary College. We went to Doc Foster, the nearest vet, and Doc praised me for my natural talent for soothing animals and gave me a job as his receptionist-assistant.

But Chris was the prize. He was big and strong and handsome, as gentle with me as he was with the animals he now treated at the Zoo. It wasn't love or even lust at first sight. We sort of grew to like each other more. He liked me that way, I knew it from the times we kissed or cuddled because he would get hard down there. Every one of my girlfriends would giggle when I described him as a Daikon, the long white Japanese Radish they sell at the store. That of course descended into joking references. Was the tip of his radish peeled? Had I checked it for firmness? Perhaps nibbled on it when I was hungry?

Doctor Foster, my boss, came in. "Yo, Danny!" Chris caroled. I reached over, thumping his forehead with my finger.

"You know he doesn't like being called Danny," I admonished. Then I turned to him. "Good evening, Haku Sensei." He bowed to me in return. I had known him all my life. He was a family friend of my grandmother, father, and mother. He had become an unofficial uncle or

Haku long before I was even born. He had lost his thumb and forefinger in the Vietnam war, but I was thirteen before I knew that. He would always joke about it. He told he had picked his nose too often when he was my age, or had been playing Cowboys and Indians, when someone shot his 'gun' out of his hand and the 'bang' had caused them to fall off.

Sam nudged my hand and I reached down to pet him. I loved that dog more because he had brought Chris and I together than anything else. "So, Kita-chan. What are you doing for your birthday?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "Chris has plans, but he hasn't told me what they are." I gave him a mock glare.

"I said it was a surprise. I didn't even know until today what we were doing."

"So you two aren't going to watch an anime, cuddled on the couch and smooching, like always?" Kaguya asked. "You wouldn't believe it, Haku-kun. If otousan let them, they'd be up in the room doing that in a heartbeat."

"You wish," I replied calmly. "She always hopes we'll let ourselves go because she might be able to watch."

"Watch! Maybe you want an audience, onesan!"

"Well, if you're ready, I am." Chris picked up his motorcycle helmet. "Ready for your present?" I nodded, standing. "Sam, stay with Kaguya." The dog harrumphed, dropping his head onto his paws with a long suffering look. Then Chris took my hand and led me out.

His Harley was parked outside and he climbed on. I picked up my helmet, slipping it on before straddling the bike, my arms comfortably around him. The main reason I hated the helmet was that I couldn't bury my nose

against him and smell his scent. He joked that I was like a cat, always rubbing my face against him. He kicked the Harley to life and we roared away.

It wasn't far to the zoo. I was as exhilarated this time as I had been the first time we rode together. He promised to teach me how to ride, but I enjoyed being here, arms wrapped around him, too much to take him up on it.

We stopped at the Employee gate; he set down his helmet and led me inside. "What are we doing tonight?" I whispered. It wasn't the first time he had brought me here. He and Doc Foster had gotten permission to trap half a dozen Iriomote cats from the island of the same name. Like the Tsushima cat, they were on the verge of extinction because when people arrived, they brought their own domestic cats which promptly began pushing the native animals out. The primary cause of death, sadly, was the automobile.

So Doc had started a breeding program for both species as the Japanese government began searching for an island where other cats did not live to reseed the population. I was thrilled when he showed me the habitats they had created. I had been able to touch and pet the elusive animals so few people have even seen.

"Remember the movie *Manhunter* we saw a few months ago?" I shuddered. Chris liked psychological thrillers; the movie based on a novel by Thomas Harris who created the infamous Hannibal Lector was about yet another serial killer.

"Why? Am I going to see a scene of blood and gore?"

He chuckled. "I was thinking of the scene where the blind girl meets the tiger."

I remembered the scene vividly. A Bengal tiger had broken a tooth and they were going to cap it. The blind girl had been taken to the zoo where she got to touch the

animal she had only heard about, caressing it as if it were a pet she loved.

We entered the zoo's veterinary hospital and came upon Doctor Willis, the dentist. There on the table was a Siberian white tiger, grumbling in his tranquilized sleep. As they watched, I went over and caressed the animal. I leaned down and put my head against that massive chest, then I heard something I had never anticipated. He purred as I caressed him. I didn't want to leave, but we finally did.

Chris was silent as I cherished this gift. Finally he said, "Blankenship is retiring, and I have been asked to take his place. But that means I need an assistant."

I laughed. "I'm not even remotely qualified."

"You will be. When you graduate."

"When I graduated?" I caught his arm. "Chris, I don't have the money to go to college. You know that."

"You would, if you married me." I stared at him in shock. He dropped to his knee, putting his face even with my chest, then fumbled out a box. The ring seemed to glow in the soft night lights of the zoo, a Kitsune holding a small diamond. I took the box from him. "You always liked foxes. You once told me about a dream where a Kitsune offered you a wish and you refused because you had a perfect life. So I give you a nine-tailed Kitsune and ask you to be my wife."

I hugged him. "Yes."

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