

Day Zero

The school bell rang out loudly, signalling the start of my long awaited weekend. With the weather warming up as we drew near to summer, my family was planning our first beach trip of the year tomorrow. The sea might be too polluted to swim in around here, at least if you wanted to come out with the same number of toes as you went in with, but the views are nice, and we can still play in the sand. Little Ben does enjoy his sandcastles.

I hurriedly packed up and joined my near-neighbours Samantha and Alicia to walk home. The crime rate being what it was, no girl wanted to walk anywhere alone these days, so I was glad that some other children from our street attended this school. It would be nice to move somewhere else, where muggings and other violent crimes weren't so common, but alas, such a convenient place didn't exist. The police tried their best, but no amount of funding seemed sufficient for them to keep the streets under control.

"Hurry up," called Alicia. "I have a piano lesson tonight, and I need to prepare."

"By which you mean you haven't practised your piece once, and now you're going to try to hide the fact by cramming in as much play time as you can before your teacher turns up," needled Samantha.

"I'm admitting nothing," answered Alicia, causing me to giggle. Even better than having schoolmates on the same street was the fact that I got on well with them.

"Right, I'm ready," I said, joining them as we left the building.

The walk home was only ten minutes, talking us past a couple of rows of houses and a small line of shops. The newsagent had an advertisement posted for some pay-per-view internet show by one of this year's annual monster pacification participants, supposedly giving a live feed of his 'adventures'. I scoffed under my breath; the whole thing was bad enough already without commercialising it. If monsters were as dangerous as they said, why not just exterminate them completely? It was obvious they were hunting them for sport, and not 'public safety' or anything else they claimed.

"Uh-oh," said Samantha. "Lil is pulling her self-righteous face again."

"Take cover!" screamed Alicia, throwing up her hands in mock panic.

"Sorry," I said. "Sometimes I just can't help it."

"Yeah, I know how you feel. Nothing we little folks can do about it though, so best not to let it bother you, right Alicia?"

"Alicia?" I echoed when she failed to answer. I turned, only to see her laying on the floor a few steps back. "Hey, Alicia!" I shouted, running towards her. Before I could reach her, I felt a sting on my arm, and looked down to see a small dart stuck in it. I quickly plucked it out, but the stinging sensation remained.

"Sa..." I tried to call Samantha, only to find my mouth refused to make words. A chill spread across my hands and feet, making its way up my limbs. Everything was happening too fast for me to process, but when I saw Samantha, the panic in her eyes and the dart still embedded in her own arm, it was obvious we were in trouble. I tried my best to scream, to call for help, but by now I could

make no sound at all. The wheezing sounds coming from Samantha implied she was having the same problem.

As the numbness climbed my legs, I lost my balance and collapsed to the street. None of my limbs would move; I was completely paralysed. Even worse, my vision was blurring, and all that I could hear was a high pitched ringing. The last thing I saw was Samantha dropping a few seconds later. In the middle of a street, in broad daylight, walking in a group, I was being kidnapped.

Day 1

I blearily rubbed my eyes, wondering what time it was, and why I had been asleep. Was it Saturday already? I didn't remember getting home last night. Also, my back was aching... Since when was my mattress so hard?

I rubbed my eyes again, wondering why everything was so blurry. It didn't help that the overhead light suddenly seemed so harsh, forcing me to squint. I did my best to drag myself out of bed and upright, but as soon as I put weight on my legs they felt like they'd turned to jelly, and I crumpled to the floor. The cold, hard floor. That was finally enough to partially shake me from my befuddled state. This clearly wasn't my room; my room had carpet.

I sat there for a minute, waiting for my head to stop spinning, and trying to remember where I was. I'd been walking home with Samantha and Alicia, and then we'd been attacked. They'd sedated me with something, which must be why I still felt so groggy. I hadn't even seen our attackers, yet all three of us had been taken out easily. Yes, the street had been quiet, but it was early evening in the middle of a residential street. To pull that off without worrying about witnesses, we were obviously dealing with professionals.

A kidnapping didn't bode well. My family were nowhere near rich enough to pay off the typical ransom demand that kidnappers would make, nor did we have insurance, or contracts with the private policing agencies that had cropped up when it became obvious that the public police were losing control. If they were professionals, once they realised that they couldn't sell me back to my family for as much as they would want, they would look to cash in on their 'investment' in other ways instead. At least it was better than amateurs, who would probably just kill me. It was unlikely I'd ever get to see my family again, but I refused to be the sort of victim that would just sit there and cry, waiting for a heroic rescue that was never going to come.

I gritted my teeth and tried to force the sedative out of my system with pure willpower. It didn't help, obviously, but at least it made me feel better that I was actually trying to do something. I had to continue sitting for another five minutes before enough function returned to my legs for me to stand, and it was a few minutes more before my sight cleared up enough to get a view of my room. I was stood in one corner, next to a bed, with only a thin, hard mattress, and no sheets.

Floor, ceiling and walls were metallic, with no visible doors or windows. The ceiling held a couple of panels that were emitting light, as well as vents, and a few glassy black spots. Cameras, perhaps? A metal shelf jutted out of the wall near my bed, on which was a meal on a paper plate, and what looked like a sheet of paper. The paper caught my interest immediately, but my sight hadn't cleared up enough yet to read. On the other side of the bed was a toilet, again metallic, but no sign of toilet roll. There was a sink, with an inbuilt soap dispenser, and a shower that ran straight onto the floor,

behind a transparent door. A grate in the corner was presumably there to drain away the resulting water.

On the opposite wall were more metallic shelves, these ones populated by a collection of books. Every fixture and fitting was made from metal; no matter how much I raged out here, I wouldn't be able to break anything with force. As my eyesight cleared up a bit more, I could see the seams on the walls. A slot above the shelf on which the meal had appeared, and a few locations that could have been doors, obviously completely sealed from this side. I revised my professionalism estimate up a few notches; this wasn't a cell knocked together by any old criminals, organised or otherwise. This was built with no expense spared to ensure that whoever was on the inside remained there.

A slight chill made me realise that I'd been spending so much time looking around the room that I hadn't looked at myself. I appeared to be uninjured, but I was completely naked, without so much as a piece of underwear. I hadn't noticed earlier, even when I'd sat on the bare floor, thanks to my confusion. While my initial reaction to that realisation was shame, I quickly replaced it with anger. Whoever was watching had seen everything already, and I was damn well not going to give them the satisfaction of watching me squealing and trying to hide.

Another quick look around the room confirmed that there was neither clothing nor any storage that might contain it. Thankfully, the room was pleasantly warm, so the lack of clothing or bedding wasn't going to cause problems. I'd do a more careful inspection of the walls later, in case they hid a pop-out drawer or something, but given how unlikely that was and now that my sight had completely recovered, I had something more important to address.

Dear Lily

We apologise for the circumstances in which you now find yourself, and hope you are able to quickly adjust. Feel free to peruse the collection of books we have made available to you, should you seek entertainment. Aside from that, please try to remain relaxed. Please leave any waste on this shelf, and it will be disposed of appropriately. Cooperation will be rewarded with luxury meals. We promise that everything will be over within a month.

Well, that tells me nothing whatsoever. *What* will be over within a month? I doubted they would just release me. It wasn't even signed by anyone. It has my name on it, but I had my ID card in my purse, so they would know that by now even if it hadn't been a targeted kidnapping.

I hungrily ate the food that was provided, because after my drug induced nap I was famished, and no-one would go to this much trouble just to poison me. It was actually pretty good, despite the lack of cutlery. Better than I'd have got at home, for sure, not that that justified any of this. At least it seemed that I'd be fed well, and there was a limitless supply of water available from the sink.

I left the used plate on the shelf as requested, because it wasn't as if I could do anything useful with it other than piss off my captors, and I was interested to see how they reclaimed it. I washed my hands of the mess I'd made, and then raised my professionalism measure up another notch when I realised the room also contained no towels, but rather a couple of blow driers built into the walls. There was a small one for hands, and a full-body one for when I took a shower. Apparently, as well as just containment, there was little in here with which to commit suicide. I could probably charge

head-first into a wall or bite my tongue, but I wasn't sure how reliable that would be, and besides, I wasn't that desperate yet.

Meal dealt with, I did a more careful examination of the room. There were no accessible secret panels that I could find, or any hidden storage, or any loose objects in the whole cell other than the books. The toilet had a built in cleaning function, which was weird, but at least compensated for the lack of paper. The bed did nothing whatsoever, the mattress being a fixed part of it. I did find one switch on a wall that dimmed the lights to a level that wouldn't be detrimental to sleep, but that was the only one.

My tour was interrupted by a sudden whirring noise, and turning back towards the shelf I saw that the panel above had opened, and the whole thing was withdrawing slowly into the wall. I walked over and peered into the new hole, only to see another metal panel behind, and no sign of light. Apparently it was some sort of air-lock system and didn't let me see into any sort of room beyond. I'd have added another notch to the professionalism meter, but by this point it was already pretty much maxed out.

It was obvious that there was no way I was getting out of here unless something changed, and I doubted anything would come from begging for my life, so I did my best to keep any sign of my growing panic off my face, grabbed the first book in the row and settled back to read.

Days 2-3

Two days later, I was yet to see or speak to a single person. I'd had another message thanking me for my cooperation, along with a really nice piece of steak, but I still had no clue whatsoever why I was here, or what my captors hoped to gain. I was being fed three meals a day, and they even seemed to trust me with cutlery now, which was nice and all, but *why*? For what reason were they were going through this trouble?

The whole setup seemed far too extensive for kidnapping random kids from the street. This was the sort of thing I'd expect for the children of millionaires, and I couldn't think of any reason why I would have been specifically targeted. Maybe I wasn't the intended target and was just collateral damage from one of the other girls? As far as I knew, neither family were rich, but maybe they were hiding it to try to avoid exactly this situation? But even if so, that didn't explain the effort put into keeping me.

The normal way to dispose of kidnap victims who couldn't otherwise be monetised would be to sell them on, and while I couldn't say I was familiar with the whole people trafficking and slavery markets, I couldn't see myself as being anything special. I wasn't a particularly good looking, or even a virgin, and while I was pretty intelligent, with my grades being at the upper end of our school, I was no genius, nor had I any special training that would be valuable. I'd expected to be sold off as a domestic servant to a corrupt, rich individual with more money than morals, somewhere far enough away for no-one to know my face. As far as I'd heard from the news, such victims didn't sell for very much, which meant they should have wanted to get rid of me as quickly as possible, to try to keep things cost effective.

Knowing I wasn't going to come up with answers on my own, and that my captors certainly weren't going to share, I decided to take a shower. I'd been avoiding it so far, suspecting that people were

watching, but ever since yesterday my back had been really itchy. The mattress *looked* clean enough, but who knew how many previous victims had been using it before me, and what skin conditions they may have had.

The shower had its good points, being very high pressure, with an easily configurable temperature and with jets pointing out of the walls in many directions. On the downside, in the spirit of not providing movable items, it didn't have a detachable head, nor did I have flannels or anything to properly wash myself with. Despite that, I enjoyed the experience of letting it blast me for a bit, before standing in front of the full-body drier.

Alas, it didn't seem to do anything to help the itch. There were no mirrors around for me to try to get a look at what was going on, but as far as I could tell by twisting my arm around and prodding at it, everything seemed fine. If anything, my skin felt softer than normal.

"If anyone's listening, there's something weird going on with my back, and it won't stop itching," I said out loud, just in case. If they were feeding me this well, presumably they'd want to keep me healthy too. Message sent, albeit maybe not delivered, I sat back on the bed to continue reading, doing my best to ignore the strange itch.

Day 4

When I woke up the next morning, the itch was worse. Scarily, it wasn't just my back now either; there was a patch on my left leg and one on my left arm. At least these I could look at; the one on my leg looked a bit dry, but my arm looked and felt perfectly normal. This was starting to get concerning. I stood up from my bed, to see that breakfast had already been delivered, along with another note.

Dear Lily,

The itch you are experiencing is a normal part of the process, and will fade in time. Allow us to reiterate that it is best for you to remain as relaxed as possible, as agitation may exacerbate such symptoms.

I could scarcely believe what I was reading. "What process?" I shouted. "What are you doing to me?"

Right, slow down. Panicking isn't going to help. I took a few deep breaths, then stopped to consider the implications of that note. First thing; someone is indeed actively listening to me. That had been the first time I'd spoken since I was kidnapped, and there had been a response with my next meal. Second, they're willing to respond to questions, at least to some extent. Third, and possibly most importantly, this isn't a simple kidnapping for ransom.

Am I being used as some sort of human research material? The sort of experiment that involves kidnapping children from the street instead of using willing volunteers would not be the sort of experiment I would want to be a part of. Heck, given the widespread destitution, I wouldn't doubt they would find willing volunteers for *anything*, as long as they paid them as much as this kidnapping must have cost to arrange.

"Please, if you don't want me to panic, keeping me informed of what to expect would help."

No new note came with my next meal, and I could only think of two possible reasons why. The better option would be that at the end of the month they would release me, and didn't want any information leaked that may help track them down. It seemed unlikely, but given the effort they went through to not let me see a single face or hear a single voice, it was plausible. Even the notes were typed rather than hand-written.

The more likely alternative was that whatever it was they were doing to me was so bad that telling me would make me panic more than leaving me in the dark. Oh, maybe a third option; the test they're doing is psychological. Yes, I'll happily grasp at any straws if it means I can pretend option two isn't the most likely.

What could I do about it? Hunger strike? What would that achieve? I had no idea *how* they were doing whatever they were doing to me. It could be something in the food, but it could just as easily be in the air, or there could be someone sneaking in every night and jabbing me with needles. Heck, for all I know, each time I sleep they sedate me and keep me out for a week. I had no power at all in this situation. The best I could do would be to injure or kill myself, and that would obviously harm me more than my captors. I could still do nothing but wait.

Doing my best to put my fears and frustration aside, I once again returned to my current book, sitting naked on my cell's bed. At this rate, I was going to need a fresh supply long before the month was up. Where did they even get them all from? I didn't think physical books were even being manufactured anymore.

Day 5

Waking up on day five, the itchiness on my back had finally eased. Poking at it as best I could with my limited flexibility, I would swear it felt *furry*. If all they're testing is some sort of hair regrowth formula, I can live with a random hairy patch on my back, but somehow I doubted that was the full story.

No, it *obviously* wasn't the full story; the patches on my arm and leg had spread. The centre of the patch on my arm now had little red spots at regular intervals, while the one on my leg was so dry that the skin had cracked. Running my hand along my arm, I could feel little bumps under my skin at each of the red spots, but that was nothing compared to my leg. When I rubbed that, I couldn't even feel it, and when I pushed harder, I realised in alarm that sizeable chunks of my skin were rubbing off. It didn't hurt, and there was no blood, but that was far from normal.

I went to take a shower, and even more of my skin washed away. It still didn't hurt, and when I poked at the pale yellow layer underneath I even found some feeling had returned. Something was still wrong though, and not just because pale yellow was not a natural skin colour for anyone with a functional liver. The layer underneath felt hard and leathery, and very unlike skin.

What the hell were these people doing to me? I had three patches on my skin, all of which were doing completely different things. My meals turned up with no further notes, and I was still trapped here. I wondered what my family were doing with me missing. Did they think I was dead? Were they distressed, looking for me? What about Alicia and Samantha, and their own families?

"What are my family doing? Are they looking for me? Are Alicia and Samantha okay?" I asked, just in case, but of course no answer came.

Day 6

I was woken up in the middle of the night by an intense pain in my arm, as if someone had filled it with needles. It thankfully didn't last long, and when I looked, the reason it felt like I'd been stabbed by countless needles was readily apparent. It was because I *had been*. They'd just come from the *inside* instead of outside. Neat rows of blue-grey spikes had pierced through my skin, making my patch of arm look like some sort of short-haired pastel hedgehog.

My sleep disturbed, I tossed and turned, trying to drop back off. I only wished there was something I could do about the whole situation. The notes stressed the importance of relaxing. Was that really for my own good, or would getting worked up spoil their experiment? It would be worth a try.

I woke up once more the next morning, finding with alarm that the quilled area of my arm had grown overnight, as had my leathery patch of leg. At least neither itched now, although subtle tingling at several other points around my body suggested I'd have new outbreaks soon. Deciding that if I didn't do something soon, there wouldn't be much of my skin left to save, I tried starting my day in a decidedly unrelaxing manner.

I went for a strenuous workout, starting with push-ups. It quickly became obvious that something else was wrong; normally I struggled to do thirty, but today I made fifty without breaking a sweat. By the time I reached a hundred I was breathing heavily, but still felt I could do more. I switched to sit-ups, squats and the other simple moves that I could do without equipment, and in every case I found I could vastly exceed what I thought I was capable of.

That was not as alarming as having quills burst out of my arm, but was still obviously abnormal. What had they been doping me with to give me that sort of increase in endurance in under a week, when I hadn't even been doing exercise in all that time? Alas, the note about relaxing turned out to be at least partially true; by the time I'd finished, the tingling was noticeably worse. I did my best to ignore it as I ate my breakfast, unwilling to show my captors any weakness. I doubted it would help in the long run, and might even make things worse if they felt they could push me harder, but even in this state, I refused to sacrifice my pride.

By the end of the day, I was starting to think that my little protest workout had been a mistake. There hadn't been any notes complaining about it, but I now had three patches between my two arms, four more on my legs and two on my chest, all burning away with an itch that was far worse than the original one on my back. In the evening, another one had started up on my forehead, and I wasn't at all looking forward to finding what would happen to *that* one tomorrow.

Day 7

I woke up on day seven, a little sleep deprived after having been kept awake for much of the night by the strange sensations bubbling beneath my skin, but thankfully feeling a little better. Inspecting myself to survey the damage brought no comfort; I now had red pin pricks along significant swaths of my arms, dry and cracked skin covered more than half of my legs, there was a bump on my forehead, and I was sprouting short blue fur over patches of my chest. The fur must be the same thing as on my back, which had now spread significantly and covered half of it.

With a sigh, I climbed out of bed to grab my breakfast, blowing hair out of my mouth as it swung around and landed in there.

...Wait, I have my hair in a pixie cut. It isn't anywhere near long enough to reach my mouth. I felt around, only to find that my hair was double the length that it should be. I pulled a clump forward, trying to get a look at it, and found that while the bottom length of my hair was my normal shade of brown, the new growth was the same pale blue as my new fur.

"I don't suppose I could have a mirror and some scissors?" I asked the empty air. "Might as well keep a consistent colour scheme."

Speaking made my throat feel scratchy. I suppose at one sentence every couple of days, I was probably getting out of practice. And frankly, I couldn't care less about my hair colour; I wanted a mirror to get a better picture of what was happening to me, and scissors were a weapon. For precisely that reason, I doubted I'd get any, but it was worth a try.

I continued the inspection of my body after breakfast. It didn't seem to just be my hair that had grown explosively; my nails had too. If they did give me scissors, they would need a trim. The oldest of the quills on my arms were starting to develop a small amount of fluff near the tips, which was not a feature of any hedgehog I'd seen. Could they be *feathers*? Was I growing *feathers* on my arms?

Why would they do that? What use were feathers to a human? Reluctant to try exercising again, after yesterday made it clear that it just made things worse, I sat back again to read. I'd barely managed a page before the noise of the delivery shelf moving out caught my attention. It was a long time until lunch, so what was it now? It turned out that there was, indeed, a pair of scissors. Also, a note that they must be returned before lunch would be delivered, so they wouldn't let me keep them. A pity, but it had been a long shot to start with.

In that case, where was the mirror? I'd barely had a chance to think that before I heard another grinding sound behind me, on the opposite wall. One panel moved out very slightly, and from behind it, a full-length mirror slid out by a metre. I ran over to peer behind the exposed panel, but there was nothing there but solid steel. That wasn't useful...

Keeping up appearances, I gave my hair a trim. It wasn't easy, being unable to see my own back, and the end result wasn't pretty, but it would get the hair out of my face. I eventually managed my nails too, but the scissors could barely cut them, so it took far longer than it should have. They *looked* sharp enough, so that hadn't been a problem I was expecting, but I suppose it was no surprise that they'd actually given me blunted ones.

Personal care done, I stopped to inspect myself properly. My face looked fine, although my eyes seemed a little lighter in colour than I remembered. In fact, *everything* looked fine, other than my mutated patches of skin and my new colour scheme. The colours actually looked familiar, although I couldn't place them.

I noted just how far the mutated patches had spread, and couldn't help feeling a bit like a frog boiling in a pot. I was sitting around doing nothing while my symptoms got gradually worse, telling myself that things weren't bad enough yet to require drastic action and I should continue to feign cooperation until I saw an opportunity for escape, yet never noticing just how hot the metaphorical water was getting.

Day 8

By the time I woke up on day eight, it was clear that the things growing from my arms really were feathers. Furthermore, the leathery skin on my legs had grown hard and chitinous, looking almost like... No... My heartbeat sped out of control as realisation finally dawned; almost like *scales*. I felt at the bumps in my head. A second one had appeared, its position a mirror of the first. Doubtless they would grow into horns. The pastel colour scheme, designed to blend in with the sky, to support their hunting strategy of diving out of the sky and grasping their target with their feet. The armoured legs to defend against a target trying to fight back.

I was turning into a harpy! No, *they* were turning me into a harpy! I can take a bit of disfigurement, but I don't want to be a monster! Why would they even do something like this? "Why?" I screamed. "Why do you want to turn me into a monster?"

I was hyperventilating, and I could already feel my skin starting to tingle again as my heart beat faster than from any workout. I tried to get my breathing back under control, telling myself I wasn't really turning into a monster; I still had arms, and not a harpy's wings. I didn't have the claws. It was rubbish, and I knew it; I was only on day eight of something that was supposed to take a month. From my workout two days ago, I knew I was getting the ridiculous strength of a monster. My voice when I had screamed just now was *wrong*. Not to the point of being inhuman, yet, but now I knew that my scratchy throat yesterday was nothing to do with disuse.

This explained the over-engineered cell I was in. The steel walls that were far in excess of what was required to hold a random school-girl were instead supposed to contain a monster. I'd heard monster claws could slice straight through steel, so maybe I was wrong about what type of metal it was. Or maybe it could be electrified or something. Regardless, I didn't doubt that this room would be able to contain a harpy.

I didn't know much about monsters. I knew some of the different types, and that they seemingly sprung into existence in this country about fifteen years ago, but I had no idea where they originally came from, or why our country was the worst affected. They were no more intelligent than animals, but had unnatural physical strength, and were universally hostile to humans. There were religious groups that claimed they were sent as a punishment from God for humanity's depravities. There were conspiracy theories that they were created by governments as weapon of war, that escaped their leashes. There were fantastical theories that they were immigrants from another world, that had escaped into our own when our two universes brushed against each other somewhere in a larger multiverse. Which one was true, I had no idea, although my own first-hand experience was starting to point at option two.

I did my best to calm back down. I'd already expected that the reason they didn't tell me what they were doing to me was because knowing the answer would only stress me more, and frankly, turning into a harpy was a better option than some of the horrors I'd been imagining in the pit of night. Harpies were actually kinda cute, and it wasn't as if I was planning to go on a murderous rampage or anything.

A bit more panic slipped in as I realised that my intentions meant nothing. If they wanted to wield me as a weapon, there were plenty of ways to do so, regardless of what I wanted. Taking my family

hostage would certainly work, but would probably be unnecessary; if they could do this to my body, who knew what they could do to my mind?

Now what? I'd worked out what was happening to me, but I still didn't know why, or what my captors' goals were. I also wanted to know why they kept me conscious; if they wanted me to stay 'relaxed', they could have kept me sedated and fed me intravenously. Should I try to stay as relaxed as possible, to slow down my transformation and hope for a rescue? Or should I do my best to accelerate it, and hope that a sudden boost in my strength would somehow lead to an opportunity for escape?

What would I even do if I *did* escape? I might be okay today, but a few days more and I'd probably look monstrous enough that running to the police was as likely to get me shot as it was to get me rescued. Would my transformation stop if I escaped? Was I being continuously dosed, or am I suffering continuous effects from something they filled me with when I was first captured? If I was being continuously dosed, would I even survive going cold turkey?

In the end, my decision wasn't based on which route I thought would get me out of here, simply because I didn't think either option would help. I'd already been here over a week; if a rescue was coming, it should have come by now. Neither did I really believe that I'd be able to escape this room, monster or not. Rather, my decision was based on impatience; I had no desire to sit here for another three weeks, doing nothing, watching my humanity slowly drain away while I could do nothing to prevent it. If they wanted to turn me into a monster, then a monster they would get.

I managed two hundred push-ups before breakfast without even breaking a sweat.

Day 9

I didn't sleep that night. I *couldn't* sleep; my whole body was on fire. Even my *bones* were aching. I didn't even know they could do that. I was expecting some payback, given what had happened the last time I'd tried working out, but I wasn't expecting it to be so bad. Then again, perhaps not sleeping was a good thing? At least I could be sure no-one was sneaking into my cell while I slept and doing anything to me. Although if they did need to, they could just pump in anaesthetic through the vents. It had abated a bit by the morning, leaving me utterly exhausted and in desperate need of sleep, but the sound of breakfast arriving got me out of bed regardless. I was hungry, and I could nap later.

With the exception of my face, I no longer had any human skin left. After the accelerated burst of mutation, my arms were fully feathered, my legs and feet were fully scaled, and my torso was coated in a downy layer of sky-blue fluff. Even my hands had turned dry and cracked and would presumably be breaking out in scales shortly.

I pondered taking another shower, given that it had been a few days, but I had no clue how I was supposed to maintain feathers. That's not really the sort of thing that we pick up naturally when children learn how to wash themselves. Well, no harm in asking. "How..." I screeched, before stopping, the shrill, high-pitched noise coming from my throat catching me by surprise. I took a few deep breaths before trying again. "How am I supposed to look after these feathers? Is the shower safe to use?"

It was getting harder to form words, and the noise coming out of my mouth was little more than enunciated screeching. Could harpies speak? Could *any* monsters speak? I hadn't heard anything about that, but since they weren't intelligent, it didn't seem likely... Damn; I didn't want to lose my voice. Not that I was using it much right now, but at the back of my mind I was still thinking things like 'when I get out of here'.

Lunch came with a sarcastic note that if monsters struggled with getting wet, then a single rainstorm would clear the misty woods for good. That was new; previous messages had all been completely professional. I didn't think my question was stupid; the shower was a lot higher pressure than simple rain. Was it written by someone different? Or had I annoyed them somehow? I hadn't noticed a decline in my meal quality, despite what they'd threatened. Maybe they didn't like me hastening my transformation after all? It was my first glimpse of hope in this hell.

In that case, there was nothing for it but to push even harder.

Day 10

Day ten came, and again I'd not slept a wink all night. Fortunately, I'd had the foresight to get some napping in before last night's workout, so I wasn't completely out of it. Prior experience was that the effects of an exercise session would last for around a day, so I was expecting to be uncomfortable until the evening. I'd do my best to sleep normally tonight and then work out again tomorrow morning.

There had been further changes overnight, my skin sloughing off my hands and leaving the leathery material beneath, which was already starting to grow its scales. The horns had finally erupted from my head, narrow and rounded, gently curving backwards, but still with some more growing to do before they were as long as pictures I'd seen. In an effort not to lose my voice, I spent a while before breakfast just trying to speak, trying to make words that sounded, if not human, at least comprehensible. It went... adequately. I wasn't happy with it, but it was hardly the thing at the forefront of my mind right now.

Then I tasted breakfast, and it was *gross*. Looks like they aren't considering me cooperating anymore. Or were they? There hadn't been any notes telling me to stop, and breakfast *looked* normal. Was there just one annoyed person out there, who had decided to piss in it or something? Or, possibly even worse, was this a harpy thing? Despite looking and smelling, as far as any logical part of my brain could tell, exactly like yesterday, it still managed to *feel* unappetising. What did harpies even eat? I bet it wasn't full English cooked breakfasts.

I found out the answer at lunch, which didn't even turn up on a plate. Just a collection of raw vegetables and fruits in a pile, with a *dead squirrel* on top. "No..." I whimpered, my screechy voice making my protest sound far less sincere than I felt. It hadn't been prepared in any way. It was just sitting there, whole, still wearing its fur, beady dead eyes looking at nothing. I managed to stare for a full ten seconds before spinning around and throwing up in the toilet.

I ate the fruit and veg, but did my best not to touch the squirrel. Not only out of disgust, but also because of just how *appetising* it looked. I was worried that if I touched it, I wouldn't be able to resist taking a bite. So much for my mind being unaffected. I did my best to tell myself that I was still capable of thinking logically, and it was just my body telling me what sort of things I could eat,

but regardless of how I tried to rationalise it, this change was far more disturbing than any change to my appearance had been.

When my evening meal came, there was no note complaining about me not eating the squirrel, but this one came with a rabbit. This time I was too hungry to ignore it. I picked it up and gingerly took a large bite of the raw flesh, fur and all, the blood squirting into my mouth and down my throat, and it tasted *good*.

That night, for the very first time since my kidnapping, I cried myself to sleep.

Day 11

I woke up on day eleven and tried to rub my crusty eyes, almost cutting my face with a nail, which had grown back far beyond where it had been when I cut them the first time around. Well, I should probably call them claws now, rather than nails, pointed and thickened as they were. No wonder the scissors had struggled with them. I'd have no hope now. I'd need a grinding disk or something equally industrial.

Breakfast was a pigeon. They hadn't even bothered with the fruit and veg today. I ate it up with every sign of enjoyment, even crunching up the bones, and noting the changes to my teeth that made it so easy. The ones at the front felt more like fangs, pointy enough that I was worried about stabbing my own tongue. Eating raw meat was... less nauseating than yesterday, letting me better enjoy the flavour. Perhaps because pigeons weren't cute and fluffy, so the mental barrier was lower? The bird disposed of, I moved onto my voice practice, happy to find it hadn't deteriorated any further, followed by strenuous exercise.

Or at least, I'd intended it to be strenuous. By the time I'd done five hundred one-handed push-ups without any sort of strain or disturbed breathing, I started to suspect I'd be able to keep it up indefinitely. I did my best, even utilising the pile of books as extra weight, but it looked like exercising myself to exhaustion was suddenly a losing proposition, and lunch arrived before I'd been able to wear myself out.

It was squirrel again, but at least lunch came with more fruit. As great as they tasted, the mental damage from eating small, furry animals was unbearable. The thought of what these bastards were doing to me was enough to make me want to gut them. Line them up in front of me, and I would...

I caught myself as my anger built up. *That wasn't me*. Sure, I wanted to escape, maybe even get some payback, but I wasn't the sort of person to seek revenge through personal violence. I looked down at my feet, scaled and now slightly arched, obvious claws growing from each toe and one more starting to poke out of my heel. I'd been imagining raking along their stomachs with those claws, and the resulting waterfall of guts. That was very definitely not a human move, even if I was willing to prioritise revenge over escape. Damn, I was getting more harpy instincts. I could still think rationally, but things were getting worse.

I was terrified. The changes to my body were one thing, but losing my mind was something else entirely, and now a combination of fear and anger was doing everything for me that my workout had failed to achieve, whether I wanted it to or not. And right now, I really didn't. I didn't want this to go any further. I didn't want to lose my mind. I just wanted it all to stop.

In another first since my capture, I seriously contemplated suicide. The claws on my hands were every bit as nasty as those on my feet, and it would be easy to rake them across my throat. I could deny my captors their prize, before I lost my mind completely. Losing my rationality and becoming a mindless monster would be no better than death, anyway.

I couldn't. I thought I'd been brave and held up pretty well, given my situation, but there were lines I couldn't bring myself to cross. It wasn't certain that I would lose my mind. If it was just some instincts, I could cope.

I kept telling myself that as I chewed up the squirrel that had been provided with my dinner. It had a somewhat different taste to the rabbit. Less succulent, but somehow richer. It was definitely my favourite so far, and I regretted not partaking yesterday. I felt like I could eat half a dozen of them.

Yeah... Despite my expectations, I wasn't feeling nauseous at all this time. I could keep telling myself I could cope as much as I liked, but standing there munching on raw squirrel, with blood running down my face, and *enjoying* it, it was obvious that even my mind was becoming less human by the minute.

Day 12

I woke up on day twelve feeling horrifically claustrophobic. I was trapped in a closed room, when I should be free in the sky. No, that was wrong... I won't argue with the free bit, but not the sky... I didn't even have wings! Or didn't have wings *yet*, I corrected myself. I would soon; my arms had changed shape overnight, elongating and widening. A small clump of feathers had grown above my bum too. As far as I recall, harpies didn't have tails, but maybe there was a vestigial nub there or something. I couldn't claim to have fingers or toes any more either; they'd started to fuse from the base, and would be better off described as talons, three on each foot and hand. Farewell, my opposable thumbs.

At least harpies still had something at the end of their wings, even if it couldn't be described as a hand, and I sort of had opposable foot claws. Not the sort of thing Alicia would be playing piano with, but they would be able to grip things once they finished growing. Well, obviously; grabbing things in their feet and squeezing was a harpy's primary method of killing its prey. And eating it too; my legs were now flexible enough to bring my feet to my mouth.

I could *smell* breakfast was already there waiting for me, but despite feeling ravenous, I stopped to do my voice practice. It still hadn't degraded any further, which was promising. I didn't know whether I was helping it at all, but even if not, it was a way to remind myself that I was human. That was something I desperately needed right now, with barely any human features left on my body. My face still *felt* mostly intact, if I ignored my rather pointy smile, and the way my ears seemed to be migrating up the sides of my head, but for all I knew it had completely changed colour or something. I considered asking for the mirror again, but decided I'd rather assume my face looked fine, even if that meant continuing in blissful ignorance.

I ate up my blood-filled breakfast, and did my best to suppress the harpy inside of me that was screaming about its captivity, wanting to lash out, to claw at the walls until they fell apart. If I thought they would, I'd have let it, but I doubted it would achieve anything. For now, staying in control was far more important; I refused to lose myself.

The desire to do something, *anything*, continued to grow throughout the day, abating only slightly at feeding times. And I couldn't even pretend to call them meal times anymore; it had been days since I'd seen a plate, knife or fork, or any sort of processed food, but today at lunch they took things a step further. The slot opened, but before the shelf had even moved, a live squirrel jumped out, skittering across the room and hiding in a corner. I pounced without even thinking, catching the poor creature in my talons. By the time I'd regained any semblance of control, it was already bleeding profusely from claw wounds. I hurriedly ate it, even the blood splashes on the floor looking tempting, leaving me resisting the urge to lick them up.

The experience was repeated in the evening, with them tossing a live rabbit through the airlock. There was no longer fruit or veg. There was only meat, and now came in the form of 'prey' instead of 'food'. This was no longer giving meals to a prisoner, it was feeding time at a zoo. I imagined what I would do if they put a *human* in the room with me, and I knew, hungry as I was, there was now no way I'd be able to resist the impulse to feed. This was it; I was down to the last vestiges of my sanity. If I wanted to end it, now would be my last chance.

I still couldn't. Even if I was every bit as scared of losing myself as I was of dying, I wasn't able to do it. It didn't help that harpy-me was very much against dying too, leaving me battling against two sets of instincts instead of one.

Day 13

I stirred to the sound of my breakfast delivery. Birds again, but not pigeons, judging by the tweeting. What day was it now? Thirteen? I hadn't slept a wink. Sleeping would require relaxing, letting go, and I knew that harpy-me would jump at the chance to take over the moment I slipped up.

I sprung up and jumped off the bed, a flap of my perfectly formed wings being all that I needed to snatch a finch from mid-air, bringing my foot up to my mouth before even landing and chewing it up whole. I repeated, again, and again. They'd given me three, but they were so *small*. I needed more! This damn prison! Who did they think they were, rationing my food, treating me like a caged beast? I tore at the walls, able to put scratches into the metal, but not tear through it like I *knew* I should be capable of. If only I wasn't so damn hungry! Again and again I swung, without getting anywhere.

No, this isn't me!

I'd slipped up. I'd let harpy-me seize control to grab my breakfast, and I could no longer take it back. I couldn't fight anymore; this body was no longer mine. No longer was I a human dealing with harpy instincts. 'I' was almost gone. The prison now contained full-blooded harpy, and 'I' was just a voice at the back of its head, a flickering candle that could remember what it was to be human. I shouted at harpy-me to stop, to calm down, but the newborn harpy was ignoring its human voice with far more ease than I had been able to ignore my harpy instincts. How easy would it be to just sleep, to let the flame of my consciousness go out completely, to let harpy-me do what it wanted...

No, I refuse to disappear! I refuse to let my captors win!

I watched on helplessly as the harpy that used to be me uselessly attacked its prison walls. For hours it raged on, stopping only to feed each time another sacrificial animal was pushed into the room. I was a prisoner now, not just of this room, but even of my own body, watching its inhuman form act with no input from me. But I clung on and did my best not to panic. I had no idea what I could do from this position, but I still refused to give up.

I don't know how many days I spent, locked in my own body, able to see and hear but not act. It was a sort of horror I'd never even imagined. The only thing that kept me sane was the knowledge that, should this existence become unbearable, I could just let go and vanish. It was a small comfort, but ironically it was the option of death that allowed me to cling to life. Perhaps that had been all that kept me sane the past two days too.

Harpy-me apparently didn't need sleep, or even to use the toilet, and I lost count of the number of meals it had gobbled. In that time, I'd learnt that while harpy-me didn't understand language, it *did* understand emotion and pictures. Shouting 'stop' had no effect. Thinking of the *idea* of stopping, imagining harpy-me standing still, did have an effect, harpy-me briefly pausing in its rampage. That was... something. Not much, but better than nothing. Could I learn to control the monster? To get my body back, even if by proxy?

That was when, for the first time since my capture, I heard voices.

Escape

"Listen up everyone; we have a fully converted one in here. The notes say that it hasn't shown any sign of intelligent behaviour for the past two days. Once we open the door, it *will* attack. Everyone with riot shields, at the front. Everyone else, line up behind them, guns drawn. Shoot on sight. Don't stop after the first hit; these monsters are tough. Keep firing until you are out of ammo, or until I tell you otherwise. Remember, this isn't a kid in there. The bastards who ran this place murdered that kid already. All that's in there is a monster, so don't spare it a shred of pity, because it sure as hell will have none to spare you."

Well, that sucks. I didn't cling to life for this long just to be shot by my would-be rescuers. Why didn't they arrive a week ago? Harpy-me heard the voices too, leaping over to the area of wall where they'd come from, and kicking at what was presumably the door.

'Stop', I thought, as loudly as I could. 'Back away'. I showed harpy-me images of standing a little back from the door, waiting for it to open, and leaping over whoever was on the other side. It continued clawing at the door, ignoring me. I showed it how I would imagine a couple of rows of police would look, equipped with body armour, shields and weapons. I showed it how I imagined things would go if it pounced on them, its body riddled with bullet wounds. That got a response, causing it to stop clawing and back off.

I had just enough time to wonder if this was a good idea, whether I really wanted to let harpy-me escape, before the door started grinding open. With no time to reconsider, I decided to give it my all. Trapped in my own body or not, this was my only chance to get out of here. Harpy-me shuffled away to the side, hiding until the gap was wide enough to squeeze through, and then as I'd recommended, it leapt.

I had a brief glimpse of two rows of police in heavy duty riot gear below me, before we were out, sprinting down a clinically clean white corridor, with '23' painted in large lettering on the wall. So it really was the police who had come... I heard shouting behind me, as the police force scrambled to deal with their failed ambush, but we quickly came to a T-junction, taking us out of their line of sight. Harpy-me turned left, and I had no better suggestions, so I let it pick the route. Hopefully it could smell fresh air or something.

I'd heard a few gunshots and felt a few impacts during that leap, but there was no pain. I couldn't imagine harpy-me being so cooperative had it actually been wounded, so we must have only been hit by rebounds and ricochets, insufficient to penetrate. We continued running down the corridor, past another dozen side corridors leading to doors just like mine, all of which were open. Presumably the police were methodically working their way along.

We turned a corner and entered a large hall. There were police in here too, encircling a group of... I couldn't describe them as anything other than victims. Two dozen of them. Some were obviously unconscious, most were half transformed into various forms. Some, like me, were at least vaguely humanoid. Others were not so lucky. I saw no-one as far gone as myself, which made sense, given that the police would apparently have shot them. Harpy-me ignored the crowd, the concentration of half-monsters seeming to switch its analysis of the group from 'food' to 'threat'. Instead, it flapped its wings and leapt over them towards an upward sloping passage.

"Lily!"

Harpy-me turned towards the voice, and I saw Alicia. She looked in reasonable condition, far better than most, but her hair was white, her eyes were blood red and her skin was deathly pale. Next to her was Samantha, who did not look in a good way at all. She seemed to be trying to speak, but the condition of her mouth didn't allow it. The right side looked torn open, halfway up her cheek, but with two things that looked like little arms poking in from the top and bottom. She had a further two claw-tipped limbs poking out of the right side of her back, and her right eye was completely black, with no visible iris. She had no hair, and large chunks of exoskeleton were showing through holes in her skin. At a guess, I'd say she was partway through conversion into some sort of giant spider.

Harpy-me took a step towards them, realising that these half-finished monsters weren't the threats it had assumed. '*No!*' I sent, pushing images of the three of us together, back in our human days. Of friendship and cooperation. The three of us just walking down the street, having fun. '*Friends!*' Harpy-me turned back towards the exit and fled. I was thankful that my friends had been rescued, at least. I had no idea if whatever this was could be reversed, but even if not, they were alive and in control of their own actions, which was more than could be said for me. I'd made the wrong choice when I'd decided to deliberately accelerate my transformation, but it was too late for regrets now.

More police were standing guard at the entrance, all armed, guns drawn and facing inwards. Presumably they'd been warned about us by radio, and they started shooting the second they saw us. I felt a few more impacts, but again, no direct hits. Thankful that I was finally experiencing some good luck, I watched on as harpy-me burst past them and out into the night, shooting into the sky with a flap of our wings. Finally, after more than a fortnight, I was out of that cell. Now I just needed to get control of my body back.

Information

Harpy-me looked around, hovering in the air. I had no idea what sort of special arrangement we had with physics, but there was no way its occasional flap of our wings was sufficient to keep us airborne. On the other hand, what exactly it was looking for was no mystery whatsoever: Dinner. Thankfully, we seemed to have been moved well outside the city, so there should be some sort of wildlife around.

Alas, the dinner that it found was not wildlife at all. A group of three men standing around a black car. I was about to do my best to redirect harpy-me, when I spotted that two of them were in white lab coats. Had they just escaped from the facility? I couldn't imagine what else they were doing out here. I changed my plan from 'redirect' to 'spy', pushing ideas at harpy-me about observing an enemy, and how advantageous it would be to learn about them.

That was far too complicated for its small harpy mind to comprehend, so I showed us following one person who led us to a big group of lots of people, letting us eat them all. That seemed to work, even though it was a flagrant lie. Harpy-me flew in closer, and I could see that the third guy, who was wearing an expensive-looking suit, was talking on a phone.

"Look, I don't *care* about the police," he shouted, and from his following facial expressions it was obvious that whoever was on the other end of the line cared about the police very much. "Yes, I understand that the mayor is angry, but he doesn't need to dirty his own hands." The mayor? Angry about what? That they were turning kids into monsters, or that they got *caught* turning kids into monsters? From the dirtying his own hands bit, I would assume the latter. Our mayor being corrupt would come as a surprise to precisely no-one.

"That's what I keep saying. Number twenty-three has already completed her metamorphosis, but doesn't have a control chip fitted. They weren't even equipped to deal with the usual neutered monsters, and they're going to find themselves faced with a full-on biological weapon. The guns I saw them with won't even touch the thing. Trust me, everyone in that facility is dead. Leave twenty-three to the military to deal with; she'll attack a city before too long, there won't be anything to link her back to us, and the problem will solve itself. The only thing we need is a cover story."

Number twenty-three? Presumably that's me, given the numbering on my corridor, and the description. But this is the first I'm hearing of a control chip. Normal monsters are crippled somehow? Normal as in 'wild'? That would imply these people are chipping wild monsters? How? And... that kind of implies that the impacts I felt *weren't* ricochets. I'd taken at least five gunshots, and although harpy-me hadn't stopped to do an inspection, I was pretty sure that not one of them had pieced my skin. Or scales, or fur, or whatever. And military or no military, I intended to try very hard to ensure that harpy-me *didn't* attack any cities, nor would they find their victims and the police who rescued them quite as dead as they imagined. Looks like things aren't going to go quite how they expect.

"Fine, if you insist, but I still think it's unnecessary. And how should I know? We're fully paid up with the commissioner this month, and he'd hardly go against the mayor even if we weren't, so some ambitious captain or other must have got their own lead. Maybe that stupid team that started shooting in the middle of a damn street. It wouldn't surprise me if they were seen. They're the ones who brought in twenty-three too, the troublemakers."

I added the police commissioner to my list of known corrupt officials. And what was that about the people who brought me in? I was reminded of Alicia's 'take cover' joke. It sounded like they were following us at that point, waiting for us to get somewhere with no witnesses, but one of them freaked out at Alicia's performance, thinking they'd been spotted, and shot her.

"Don't you blame that on me, *brother!* Yes, we're supposed to fit the chips immediately, but the mayor ordered us to leave her alone when she started deliberately provoking her metamorphosis, because sedating her would reduce the quality, and then *you* failed to get us the new batch of chips delivered on time. We didn't have anything to chip her *with*."

Oh, so speeding my own transformation did cause them problems. I'd still have rather been rescued, but it was nice my efforts didn't go completely to waste.

That seemed to be the end of the guy's argument, and he hung up the phone. It was a pity I hadn't been able to hear both sides, but what I had heard was very interesting. The three of them started moving to get into the car, the two lab technicians remaining silent. It didn't seem like I'd get any more information from spying here.

Should I just let them leave? Try to follow the car? They had hurt so many people... Who knew how many others they'd done this to? He specifically said 'new batch', which meant there were those who came before me. And presumably there would be those who came after. I couldn't just leave them be. While I'd claimed to not be the type to seek personal violent vengeance, it wasn't exactly me in control right now, was it? I didn't need to attack them myself, I just needed to stop resisting harpy-me. And it wasn't 'vengeance' anyway, it was 'saving other kids'.

Harpy-me was starting to get impatient by now, wondering when these people would lead it to the extra food I promised, and even if I wanted to, I couldn't hold it back forever. So I stopped resisting. Harpy-me leapt, and the three weak little humans didn't stand a chance. At the back of the harpy's mind, imprisoned in the body of a monster, I smiled a metaphorical smile to myself as I watched three of my captors get torn apart by their own creation.

And then my metaphorical smile was quickly wiped from my metaphorical face when, despite my efforts to get it to leave the corpses and go hunt something else, it started to eat them.

Name

I was feeling seriously sick, and I didn't even have control of my own stomach to throw up with. I wasn't even sure there was anything *to* throw up. Harpy-me had completely devoured two of the three, and made a spirited attempt on the third, and there's no way it should have all fit. Just like our flight, it was obvious that it was cheating somehow. It had completely ignored all of my efforts to get it to stop, and I couldn't even close our eyes to stop looking. Forced to stare at and smell human carcasses, little more than bones, cartilage, viscera and torn clothing by the time it was done, as harpy-me happily stuck our face into them to pick off what flesh it could.

It made me feel a little better that even if I had decided to let those police shoot me, it would only have resulted in dead police, and harpy-me would have escaped anyway; by the time it took over, it had already been too late to stop it. I shouldn't have let it get close to those three in the first place, despite my desire to spy. I should have told it they were poisonous or something. Now we'd both had our first taste of human, and it was simultaneously the most vile, nauseating, hateful and most

delicious experience I'd ever had. Human turned out to taste even better than squirrel. Better than anything I'd ever eaten as a human, either, and harpy-me found them just as tasty as I had. I doubt I'd have any chance of stopping it next time.

Meal over, harpy-me set off straight towards Kholakel, apparently attracted by the tall buildings and bright lights, which were visible even from this distance once we'd taken back to the air. I did my best to stop it, but once again was completely ignored. I'd made some inroads towards manipulating the monster that was piloting my body over the past few days, but I was under no delusions about which of us held the real power in our relationship. It could certainly hear my suggestions, but it was under no obligation to follow them.

It didn't seem to be in much hurry, casually flapping along and picking up the occasional snack. Also a cow. It wasn't even a small one and must have weighed close to a tonne. It saw a cow in a field, grabbed it, carried it a hundred metres straight up and let go. I could feel the amusement *it* felt when the cow went splash, but at least it did eat some of the resulting mess afterwards.

If I needed any more evidence that harpies had no respect for gravity, that was a pretty thorough demonstration. Same as its disrespect for geometry; just like the way it had already eaten two-and-a-half people, the volume of cow it ate was greater than that of our whole torso. I had no idea what a harpy's internal organ layout looked like, but I doubted the stomach extended into the limbs. Combined with the lack of excrement, there was obviously something unnatural happening there.

By the time we reached the city, a couple of days had passed. Harpy-me made a beeline for the tallest skyscraper in sight, which of course was right in the city centre, flying straight up and landing on the roof. It wasn't exactly being stealthy, and how we hadn't been spotted, I had no idea. Given our proximity to the misty woods, a known monster nesting location, I'd have expected them to have some sort of surveillance. Although given what they'd said about control chips, maybe they had made alternative arrangements...

Thankfully, we hadn't run across any more people on our way here, so I'd been spared a repeat of *that* particular horror. Trying to stop harpy-me from eating people was going to be rough from now on though, now that it knew how great they tasted and that we were in the middle of a city where people were pretty much all that was available... Maybe I could make sure it ate the right *sort* of people? Take a visit to my school and snack on the PE teacher? No, eating people is wrong, no matter how good they taste. Argg! '*Right*,' I thought at harpy-me, deciding to leave the diet problem to future-me. '*You need a better name than harpy-me.*'

Harpy-me ignored me, as it generally did when I dared to use such complex, incomprehensible things as words. '*I'm named after a flower, but a flower doesn't really fit a superpowered, bullet-proof monster. Maybe if we take the lion from dandelion, given a dandelion seed's habit of flying and a lion's habit of being a big-arse predator? That would fit you a bit better. What's the female version of Leo? Leona, I think. Plus, that means we share the same first letter. Right, from now on, you're called Leona.*'

The freshly christened Leona continued to ignore me, peering intently at the ground. Drat, apparently I was already future-me; Leona was staring straight at a young couple, walking hand in hand down a street. I could feel our mouth salivating and knew I had only seconds before she pounced.

I scanned the corners of Leona's vision, wishing she would at least let me lend our eyes, looking for some alternative. The city centre was not known for its extensive wildlife population, but with the crime rate of this city, no doubt there would be a mugging going on *somewhere*. I just needed to find it, and we could snack on evil criminal instead of loving couple.

It wasn't until Leona had dived off the roof that I finally found one. I desperately pushed the image of us eating my chosen targets at Leona, giving a metaphorical sigh of relief as she turned. Thankfully, she seemed to be slowly getting more receptive to my advice, or perhaps it was because I'd only asked her to switch target, rather than abstain completely.

A group of three masked individuals were in a street, waving knives at another couple, one of whom was in tears and the other of which was rooting through a backpack, presumably looking for money. None of the group even noticed as we gripped the head of the first mugger and gave it a little squeeze. They did notice the thud as the resulting corpse fell to the floor, but by that point we'd already taken back off.

"What?" asked one, his voice shaking. "Boss?" he queried, turning back to the space where his apparent boss had been two seconds prior. It now contained a whole lot of nothing. "Boss?!"

We hovered in mid-air, Leona nibbling on a juicy chunk of arm, the disarmed and mildly dead boss of this group of muggers held securely in one talon. I wasn't sure of the professionalism of eating on the job like that, but she seemed to have everything in hand. In talon. Whatever. I was too preoccupied trying to ignore the chunk of flesh in my mouth to complain, although at least this time I wasn't feeling so violently sick about it.

The final mugger was looking around wildly, while their victims had seized up, even the crying having stopped. Oddly, none of them bothered looking up. It wasn't until the last mugger tried to run that Leona made her next move, lightly piercing his throat with a claw, then grabbing him by the shoulder, wheezing and bubbling, but for now still alive. Three people all at once was too much even for our extensible stomach, so maybe she wanted to keep him fresh for later.

She turned and looked the pair of victims in the eye, both of them utterly frozen with fear. Then she leapt over them, grabbed the last of the would-be muggers that had been abandoned on the ground, somehow holding both corpses with a single foot, and took off back towards what was apparently our new home. I'll admit it was a bit more spacious than our old one, and comfortingly less metallic, but it was rather lacking in facilities and heating. Also cold storage; she impaled the still living mugger on a lightning conductor, then sat down to eat the two corpses, ignoring the way the third one was never going to survive the night.

Just how far gone am I that I'm thinking how best to refrigerate human corpses for later consumption? It was obvious from the moment we'd killed those three kidnappers, and I'd just chosen to ignore it. Now that we'd made it to the city, feigning ignorance was getting harder. The fact was that even this 'me' that was supposedly still capable of rational thought was being influenced by my harpy side.

Although I'd been nauseated by what happened afterwards, I'd been happy to let Leona slaughter those kidnappers. I'd justified it well, but the simple truth was that the old Lily wouldn't have killed people for revenge like that. I was angry at what they'd done to me and my friends, but there was a

sizeable police contingent a short distance away. I hadn't even considered trying to lead the two groups to each other, or something else non-violent.

And now I'd let her kill again, and this time it wasn't for personal revenge, but simply for a meal. What I'd considered a traumatising horror only two days ago now just seemed like an unfortunate necessity, with no more effect on me than making me feel a bit sick. The old Lily *might* have eaten someone, maybe, if her life depended on it and there was no other way, but she'd have felt terrible about it and probably had nightmares for months. She wouldn't have commented on the taste, or complained that impaling someone on a spike wasn't correct storage.

That... should have disturbed me more than it did. After eating my first raw rabbit, something I'd have been perfectly happy to do had it been cooked first, I'd ended up crying all night. Watching my disobedient body eating humans for the second time, I found myself ambivalent. It wasn't that I was happy about it, but that I could claim that they deserved it, that it wasn't me that did it, or that I couldn't do anything to prevent it. Justification was just so *easy*.

What was the point of me trying so hard? It had become easier now, but back when Leona had first taken over, trying to maintain my sense of self had been like trying to stand upright in a hurricane. I was trying so desperately to cling on, yet even now it seemed that my humanity was still being eroded. Would no amount of effort be enough to sustain myself? Was I even still Lily at all by this point?

As Leona was happily chewing away on nameless mugger number one and I was busy pondering how much of myself I'd lost over the past couple of days, I spotted a large bundle of paper sticking out of his jacket. A newspaper? With a bit of shoving of pictures of Leona grabbing the paper, and another attempt at teaching her the value of information, I convinced her to pull out the paper for me to read.

It was a bit blood-stained, but not to the point of unreadability. The headline read, 'Police captain kidnaps, rapes, slaughters children.' Beneath was a large picture of one of the guys who'd come to rescue us, along with smaller pictures of fifty much younger faces, most looking in the second half of their teens. It didn't take me long to spot my own.

The world we live in

I'd let Leona get back to her meal after I'd finished reading the article. Supposedly, that police captain, named Justin apparently, had been kidnapping children from the street to feed his paedophilic tendencies, killing them and disposing of the corpses in a furnace hot enough to turn the bone to ash. I was a confirmed victim, as were Alicia and Samantha, and dozens of others. After he was caught, he'd bombed the abandoned warehouse he was using as a hideout, killing himself and thirty police officers.

It was an utterly horrific story. It was also blatantly false. Apparently this was the cover-up they'd chosen, after realising that 'number twenty-three' had not, in fact, killed everyone. Or maybe they'd have gone with the same cover-up regardless. They sullied the good name of the police officer who was there to rescue us, and this newspaper was running it as fact. Well, of course; this newspaper was controlled by the very same corrupt officials who had apparently been involved in the organisation to start with. They were saving their own hides. All media was like that these days.

There was also a small snippet from the mayor, decrying the evil behaviour, and saying that this year's monster pacification would be cancelled, as he couldn't in good conscience take part in such an event while so many parents of his city were mourning.

That made me feel like a complete idiot. I realised at last why there were always more monsters to hunt every year, despite there being no threat for the rest of the year. So that was why they were turning children into monsters; there were no natural monsters in the forest at all. They all had once been *people*. They had a facility where they turned kids into monsters, stuck chips in their heads to make them weaker and easier to hunt, then let them loose for the rich and famous to murder. And now that their facility had been destroyed, and the monsters escaped, they'd had to cancel it. And then added insult to injury by presenting it as 'good conscience'.

Well, not escaped... Given the levels of professionalism I'd seen, they wouldn't have published this story while leaving any sort of loose end that could contradict it. The cops and other kids would all be dead by now. Either that, or they'd been recaptured to finish their transformations. If this year's event was cancelled, I felt dead was more likely. Alicia and Samantha... Dammit!

Leona stopped eating again, distracted by my raging emotions. Damn right I was angry! When I'd seen them a few days ago, I thought my friends had been rescued. Changed and damaged, maybe, but alive and safe, and in a better position than me. And now they'd presumably been murdered, not for any sort of personal reason, but because they would be a loose end. Because their very existence told a story that didn't mesh with the official lie. Killed by people who referred to them by a number instead of a name.

And those same people had given me superpowers. Superpowers with which I had just saved two people from a mugging. Slightly traumatising them in the process, admittedly, but no-one said the world was perfect. On top of that, I could guarantee a zero percent reoffending rate by any criminals I caught. I burst out in mad mental laughter, confusing Leona even further. A harpy superhero, coming to the rescue of the good citizens of Kholakel by means of eating all the bad guys. I suspect that more traditional superheroes would not approve. Yes, I almost certainly qualified as clinically insane by now, even ignoring the fact that I was essentially a back-seat driver, but so what?

'Hey, Leona,' I thought, not caring if she understood. *'How do you think mayor tastes?'*

Attack

If I was going to make an attack, it needed to be soon. The phone call I'd overheard made it obvious that there were people out there who knew I existed, and Leona hadn't exactly been subtle when she'd taken those three kidnappers out. That much couldn't be avoided, and at that point they hadn't much cared, content to leave me to rampage. Alas, since then, there had been the issue that my behaviour had been abnormal. They had thought I was completely mindless, but the way I hadn't attacked anyone inside the facility had probably cured them of that delusion, and even if not, the two people I'd just rescued certainly would do, and would have let them know I was in the city too.

I shouldn't have done that. I should have found muggers that were still looking for victims or something. Now I'd shown myself to be as much a loose end as the other half transformed children. I hadn't seen a mirror in a while, but Alicia had recognised me, so my face couldn't be too badly changed. To keep their cover story intact, they'd need to dispose of me too. I had to make a move

before the information spread. And I had to somehow convince Leona to carry it out despite having a ready supply of food right here.

A benefit of being on top of the tallest building in the city was that we weren't overlooked. I'd need to keep an ear out for surveillance drones, and there were some overhangs around to hide from anything flying overhead.

I desperately wanted to visit my family. They were less than a ten-minute flight away, but however much my sanity may have slipped, I still recognised what a bad idea it would be. If my kidnappers suspected I'd maintained my intelligence, then surveillance on my family would be a no-brainer. As would be feeding them some lie about pranksters pretending I wasn't dead. Or just outright pre-emptive execution. These guys obviously had no more respect for human life than Leona did, so I wouldn't put it past them. Besides, even if I did get to meet them, I wasn't sure how to convince Leona not to eat them.

Despite my efforts, Leona wouldn't drop her meal to go mayor hunting, so it looked like I'd be stuck up here for a while more yet. Or at least, that had been my assumption. Leona suddenly perked her head, and I could feel our ears twitch. Had she caught something that I'd missed? She darted to our right, kicking out and grabbing at something. Bringing it up to our eyes, it looked very much like a fly. Then she squashed it, and I saw the small spark that flashed within. There was neither blood nor flesh smeared on our claw; it was a micro-drone. We'd been seen!

'*Flee!*' I shouted. '*Enemies!*' Leona seemed uncertain, not returning to her meal, but not taking off either. If this was a professional assassination, how would it go? Harpy nesting habits are no secret, so if they knew I was in the city, tall buildings would be a sensible thing to check. And what would they do once I was found? I doubted they would rely on me not realising I'd been spotted; that would be leaving too much to chance. They would have contingencies set up. Having aircraft or armed drones in the air would be an obvious one, but I didn't see or hear any, and armed drones didn't come in fly sizes. Stationing snipers with line of sight to whatever buildings they were checking would be my next guess, and their bullets would have far more power than what we'd been hit with in our escape.

'*Up!*' I yelled, thinking as loudly as I could. I sent images of us flying straight up into the air, gaining height as rapidly as possible. Unlike me, bullets needed to respect gravity, and getting out of range was the best option I could think of. Leona still hesitated, not seeing the threat. How could I convince her? I sent images of snipers, of people waiting to shoot us once we took off. Leona seemed to consider it, which was new; I hadn't seen her stop to think before. Then she grabbed one last mouthful of mugger and blasted straight upwards.

Only a couple of seconds after take-off, I felt a sting on my chest. Leona looked down, and I saw the blood staining my fur. I felt Leona's anger; her *food* had hurt her. How dare it! She wanted to turn around, to dive down and to tear apart the insolent fool that dared to harm her. I sympathised, but I knew they were prepared for us, that trying to attack would be pointless and just get us killed. I encouraged her to keep gaining height, and she followed my advice, swayed by my frustration, my own emotions letting her know that I was as indignant as she was. A few more bullets came, but with our increased height they'd lost too much speed to penetrate. It didn't take long before they stopped completely.

We needed to get out of the city. I directed Leona to the misty woods. It was nearby, had food that wouldn't fight back, and we needed to deal with whatever damage that bullet had done. We reached it rapidly, Leona grabbing a deer as we flew below the tree canopy. She didn't seem worried about our wound, and it had already stopped hurting, so maybe we had regeneration to go along with our magical flight and non-Euclidean stomach.

Now that the fright was over, I was *angry*. Just when I'd decided to give the mayor his dues, we'd been chased out of the city, and no doubt we'd be followed. We'd escaped that trap, but we were still too close. As soon as Leona was done eating, we needed to go further. Preferably to another country, one with bad relations to this one.

Acceptance

We flew high over the next row of barbed wire fencing below, leaving the country of Lecolie for the antagonistic land of Gronorlie, the ground based obstacles being completely useless against anything with wings. Presumably they had radar and other scanners too, but they wouldn't want them to trip on every bird. What would they make of me? The border was heavily militarised, yet I hadn't seen any response to my presence. I hoped I hadn't been detected, or had been mistaken for a large bird, as high up as I was.

One plus point right now was that I was finally full. That hadn't happened since before they'd started feeding me wildlife. I had no idea how much a harpy was supposed to eat, beyond 'lots', but apparently Leona's few days long feeding frenzy had been enough to compensate for however much the kidnapers had underfed me. Or perhaps it was because we'd finished replacing whatever energy our transformation had cost? It made no difference; the important point was that even if we reached another city right now, I still had some time to spare before I'd have to worry about organising our next heroic rescue.

Hah, and to think that when I first got kidnapped, I'd claimed that heroic rescues never happened.

What I needed most right now was to form some sort of understanding with Leona. Trying to influence the monster was getting easier, and she'd flown this way with no complaints, but it was still unreliable, and I needed to get more control if I wanted to avoid any... accidents. What even *was* she? How did we have two minds sharing the same brain in the first place? She definitely wasn't intelligent, at least to start with, just a murderous bundle of instincts tied together with claws and teeth. As time passed, she seemed to be learning more, but she still didn't understand language, or show any overt signs of complex thought.

For most of my captivity, I hadn't noticed any mental changes. The food had been the first sign, with human food looking unappetising and raw meat starting to look appealing. Then I'd started feeling inclined to violence, and that was the point I'd started doing my best to resist. Then there had been other instincts; the need to be up in the sky, the urge simply to fly free. Finally, there had been the hunger. I'd been terrified of what I was becoming, and had done my best to reject every new instinct that was thrust upon me, to separate them all, and to lock away those instincts in a box that was far away from 'me'.

I'd succeeded for a day or two. Then the box had burst and out had come Leona. She seemed to be all the parts of me that I'd rejected and tried to lock away. I couldn't say for certain, but I didn't think

this split-personality thing was something deliberate my captors did. I thought it was something that I'd done to myself. I'd refused to accept the mental changes, rejecting them so thoroughly that the two of us had split apart. And then, as time had progressed, as I'd got worn down and stopped fighting piece by piece, bits of Leona had been leaking back into me.

The most telling was my acceptance of her feeding habits, as I shifted from horror at the very thought of eating people towards making sure she ate the *right* people. And as she leaked back into me, I've been leaking into her in turn, giving her some spark of intelligence and making it easier to influence her. No, that wasn't completely correct; it was true that she had an easier time understanding my mental imagery, but the bigger difference was that the things I wanted to influence her to do were less far-fetched. I hadn't been influencing her more easily, I'd simply been learning to compromise. We probably could have stayed out of sight in the countryside of Lecolie if we wanted, but instead we were crossing over to Gronorlie because Leona wanted a city full of people to hunt in, and switching country was the safest way. I'd switched from resisting her to aiding and abetting.

I wondered if I could get a cheap rate at any psychologists; surely treating a harpy with a split personality would be worth some fame and prestige? The thought made me giggle to myself. Nope, I'd have to deal with this myself; I'd scare their other customers. Or Leona would eat them.

Leona twitched in mid-flight, disturbed again by my mental giggling. Well, there was one way to figure out if my theory was right or not; I simply had to give in. Not in the way I'd been resisting right after Leona had taken control, by letting my consciousness die and leaving the harpy free rein, but simply by accepting the truth; that thanks to the mutilation that had been performed on me, Leona was every bit as much 'me' as I was. I didn't have to disappear, nor did we need to compete. We were both the same person, and there was no reason for us to be split apart like this in the first place.

This split part of my mind was the last part of me that I was prepared to call human, and so giving it up would mean abandoning the last of my humanity. But frankly, after what I'd seen of humanity these past weeks, the right to call myself human was no longer something I'd miss. Between Leona and the people responsible for the atrocities I'd seen, I struggled to think of Leona as the real monster.

We reached a border city undisturbed, Leona again picking the tallest building to land on. What I was about to do was probably ill-advised, and not knowing what the result would be scared me immensely, but I had no intention of remaining a prisoner in someone else's body forever. Yes, I was giving in, admitting that in some way my captors had beaten me, and that the girl called Lily was gone. Perhaps someone with more willpower could have 'won', but that someone wasn't me, and that was a fact I needed to face up to. *'I'm sorry for pushing you away, Leona,'* I thought at her, causing her to look around in confusion. *'I'm ready to accept you now.'*

Leona

I soared through the air, my impossible wings letting me speed far faster than any car below, or change direction at a moment's notice. Humans could keep their thumbs; wings were better. I effortlessly grabbed a bird mid-flight as something to snack on, while keeping my eyes out for a

more substantial meal on the streets below. So weak and fragile, no better than ants, milling around in their useless little lives.

I was flying higher than the tallest building, invisible to any unaided human eye, yet I could see them all so clearly. The dealers, handing out their little packets of temporary bliss, or showcasing arrays of guns from the boots of their cars. The pickpockets, bumping into their victims on crowded streets. The burglars climbing in and out of empty houses. The thugs in the back alleys, eyes darting around for their next victim. I could see them all.

I chose a burglar, halfway down a ladder at the rear of a house, plucking him off easily and laughing as he dropped his bag of ill-gotten gains, having barely managed a single grunt of surprise before my talons snapped his neck. I carried his corpse back to a high-up rooftop, having resisted the urge to make a permanent nest. After my merger with Leona, I could see the folly of sticking to a single location.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to call it my merger with *Lily*. The innocent girl called Lily was long gone. It had just taken her a while to accept the fact. I certainly wasn't her, given what I was currently doing, so I decided to keep the name Leona that Lily's last echoes had gifted me with. It was exactly as that police captain had said; she had been murdered long ago. I was what was left over. An artificially created monster, and now, thanks to Lily's parting gift, an intelligent one.

I stripped the corpse, clothing not being particularly tasty. I even shuffled through the pockets for valuables, adding a few coins to the bag I'd tied around my waist. Not that I had any idea how I'd ever be able to spend them; I could speak, but there was no way in hell I'd pass as human, either in terms of my voice or my looks. I'd caught a glimpse of myself in some glass windows, and my piercing yellow eyes with slit pupils would be a giveaway even if I covered everything else up. Not that my horns *could* be covered up. They were a good twenty centimetres long, jutting out on either side of my forehead and curving gently back.

I wasn't displeased with my looks. I was glad I was a harpy, and not Samantha's spider, or some of the other more freakish creations I saw in my escape. My face was broadly human, but was blemish free, far more beautiful than Lily's had been. My ears looked feline, sitting in little triangles atop my head. I was, in a word, cute. At least, I was cute as long as I didn't open my mouth. If I displayed my teeth, I rotated from cute to scary in no time. Again, that was not a fact that displeased me. What use would be a monster that couldn't terrify their victims with a mere smile?

I settled down to feed on my latest meal. Sure, I could live off animals if I wanted to, but I didn't. Why should I limit myself? My concession to Lily was that I would only feed on people who I felt deserved it. Then again, who could say if the burglar I'd just nabbed was evil? He did seem a bit underweight. Maybe he was just trying to provide for his family and felt he had no other choice? I'd picked him simply because he'd been alone in an area where I was unlikely to leave witnesses. I had no intention of pretending to be 'good', even if there was some absolute definition of 'good' to begin with.

I wondered what would happen if I *did* just walk into a shop and try to buy something. What's the worst that could happen? If the police back at that hateful facility didn't have weapons that could hurt me, then random civilians on the street sure wouldn't. I can't stay in one city for long anyway, and it would be no great loss if I had to leave here, so maybe I should give it a go just for the fun of

it? Although even then, what would I buy? It occurred to me that I was still, strictly speaking, naked. Should I start wearing clothes? Nah, the weather doesn't seem to bother me, and modesty was something Lily lost long before I came along. As for me, I never had any to begin with.

In fact, modesty was even less relevant now; Lily had spotted my lack of need for excretion, but what she hadn't noticed was that beneath my coating of fur, I'd even lost the orifices involved, nor did I have any equipment for bearing young. Lily hadn't exactly been big busted to begin with, but I'd lost even more. I no longer had anything left to hide. Even if I did care about modesty, my fur was plenty.

Actually, there *was* something I wanted to buy; information. The mayor was off-limits for now, and making another attempt at him would require either certainty that I wasn't about to fly into a trap, or to wait enough time that I could be sure they weren't still looking for me. Perhaps I could find some softer targets to express my displeasure in the meantime. How could I best obtain a list of previous hunt participants?

Shopping

As I watched the store clerk heading into the stockroom to fetch my new mobile phone, I pondered human psychology. I had just walked into a store, bought a new phone using a wad of cash I'd taken from a meth house, whose previous occupants had suddenly found themselves in no further need of it, and the only response I'd had to the fact that I was a fucking *murderous harpy* were a bunch of ogles and a few comments of 'awesome costume, mate'.

It was a lesson for controlling people that I intended to take to heart. Humans didn't see what was in front of their faces. They only saw what they *wanted* to see. And sometimes, controlling what they wanted to see was easier than controlling what they really saw. Monsters didn't walk into stores and buy phones. Everyone *knew* that, and so they simply didn't see me. Things would no doubt change quickly if I tore a couple of heads off, but as long as I refrained, I could just walk around with impunity.

I wasn't even *pretending* to be human. My voice was horrific; after so long without using it, it was barely comprehensible. I didn't have *hands*! I was walking around *naked*, for goodness' sake! Yet no-one cared.

Despairing about the intelligence of humanity, I headed out of the store with my new purchase clutched uncomfortably in my wing-claws. This is really the sort of thing my feet are for, but that might spoil everyone's delusion that I'm in a costume. Hopefully, the meth house was still undisturbed; I'd need some time in private to do some research. I just needed to find a deserted alley somewhere to take flight, so I could get back there.

As I headed down a side street, my ears twitched at the sounds of footsteps behind me; I was being followed. Perhaps not everyone was as dull as I'd assumed? I ducked around a corner and waited for them to catch up, wondering who it might be, and what they wanted.

Two hulking men came around the corner, knives drawn and leers plastered on their faces. "I'm sure a chick like you doesn't want to get hurt, so just chuck us that bag, and we'll be on our way."

Oh, just muggers then. They'd probably seen all the cash I had in my bag while I was in the shop and foolishly followed me. That was convenient; I hadn't wanted to eat the occupants of the meth house, in case they were so drugged up that their meat was poisonous. But first, there was something I *really* had to know.

"Sorry, but I have to ask," I screeched. "Was that pun deliberate?"

The pair of muggers looked at me in confusion. I guess it wasn't then. Not that it made any difference to what was about to happen next. I'd just been curious.

Before either of them had a chance to respond, I darted forward and pierced their throats. I really needed a better way of storing people alive for later, without having them screaming their head off in transit. Perhaps a bit more research to do once I got back. Maybe chloroform would turn out to be easy to make or something.

Hmm... If I had been a spider, would I have got poison? I could paralyse them and web them up for later. That would be cool. I'd need to read up on harpies too, in case I had any neat tricks that even I didn't know about. It wouldn't be too far-fetched, since Lily had spotted pretty quickly that my flight was unphysical, so supernatural abilities seemed fair game.

I grabbed my lunch, flew back to my borrowed home and for the first time since Lily had been back in the cell, I settled back to read.

Dammit, these phones were really not designed for use with claws!

Accomplice

I was munching on the heart of one failed mugger, reading about harpy queens, who could supposedly perform magical feats with their horns, throwing bolts of lightning around. That was surprising; despite my ability to fly, I hadn't been expecting to see outright fantastical magic. Then again, the supposed first-hand accounts of encounters with harpy queens seemed suspect at best, so maybe the tales were exaggerated. If they weren't, Lily would likely want to reevaluate which of the monster origin stories she believed in.

As a mere regular harpy, I apparently didn't have anything like that. There was the strength, durability, regeneration and gluttony inherent to all monsters, but the only unique feature I had was the ability to pretty much ignore mass during flight. To be fair, that was pretty physics breaking on its own, but still, why can't *I* shoot lightning bolts? I want flashy magic! Could a harpy grow into a harpy queen? That was something the internet failed to answer.

The other mugger was cowering in a corner, staring at me in abject terror. He'd somehow managed to cling to life till we got here, holding his wound shut with his bare hands, and managing not to drown in his own blood. Once we'd arrived, he'd torn off some clothing from one of the old occupants and made himself a bandage. He was still gurgling unhealthily, but was very much alive. I was impressed.

Of course, then he'd tried to escape, so I'd had to amputate his legs. Again, he'd manufactured himself a pair of tourniquets, but this time I wasn't so impressed. He should have tried to make a deal with me, or talk his way out. I wasn't sure what he could have offered, but it would have had a

far greater chance of success than *escaping*. As if I was going to allow my precious food to run away.

I'd found a list of previous hunt participants and done some research on their current locations and status. There was actually one here, in this very city, albeit one who had scored a big fat zero kills. Maximilian, the CEO of some medical corporation by the ostentatious name of Ascendant Technologies, mostly doing medicinal drug research, testing and manufacture. Or at least, that was what their public website said. I couldn't help but wonder where the technology to turn humans into monsters had come from, and who might be involved. He might be worth a visit.

I copied all the information onto paper, happy to find my dexterity more than sufficient to do so. I knew better than to continue using one phone; phones could be tracked. Fortunately, I had lots. Everyone had phones, after all, so there was quite a collection around this house now going unused. Really, I'd only gone out to buy one out of curiosity for what would happen. Despite my success, I doubted my approach of brazenly walking into stores would work *too* many times; I'd make the news eventually, and then people would be on the lookout.

With information on hunt participants copied down, I started researching Maximilian. Where would he likely be at which times? When and where would it be best to target him? Obviously the internet didn't exactly have personal timetables, but it was surprising how much information you could glean about a high-profile figure. Not that I put any of it to use; after reading for a bit, I decided to just go after him at his home, an isolated mansion in a rich suburb, surrounded by private grounds. With security I could fly over and no neighbours to grow curious about the noise, it was like it was *made* for me to invade.

I continued munching and reading while waiting for night to come when the doorbell rang. Well, that's a pain... I hadn't seen any phones go off, given that I'd removed all the batteries, but it shouldn't be a surprise that some drug lord would send someone to check after they all went unresponsive. Shouldn't be too hard to take care of, but then I'd need to get out of here before a more serious response arrived and spoiled my privacy.

I opened the front door to a pair of police officers. Not quite what I was expecting, but the same thing still applied. They didn't even have guns drawn; I could kill them both before they moved, but then I'd end up with SWAT here or something. I'd have to flee after dealing with them, no matter how things went down.

"Can I help you?" I asked, in the most normal sounding voice I could manage.

The two didn't respond, staring at my wing. No, wait, at the second mugger's half eaten leg that I was holding in that wing. Ah... I forgot about that. *Now* they're drawing guns.

"Drop the... the leg and put your hands in the air," stammered one of them.

"You know I'm a harpy, right?" I asked. "Kinda known for being bullet proof, unless those pistols are far higher powered than they look. Also, I have no hands."

"Don't be stupid. Monsters can't speak."

I took another bite of leg, curious as to where the conversation was going to go from here. Monsters can't speak, therefore, despite literally standing in front of them in all my harpy glory, *eating someone's leg*, I can't be a monster. That's even worse than the phone store.

"Look," said the other one, lowering his gun, "this is a dangerous prank you're playing. You could get hurt."

By this point, I couldn't help but feel sorry for them, the poor clueless little things. Rather than believe that I was real, this guy had convinced himself that the leg wasn't. "I really am, though. Used to be a human girl called Lily, but some creepy government dudes over in Kholakel kidnapped me and did this to me. I escaped, ate a few of them, then fled over the border." Also got shot a bit, but no need to mention that part. Thank goodness Lily was there to warn me.

The first cop lowered his gun too. "I don't know what game you're playing, but we just have to investigate some stupid report about... a large bird... flying into a window... with two corpses."

Oh? Seems like something finally twigged. And damn, I was seen. My camouflage doesn't mean much when I'm carrying my dinner with me... One point of order, though. "If it helps, they weren't corpses at that point? One of them still isn't, even. Also, they tried to mug me, so I claim self defence."

The guns came back up, just as mugger number two finished crawling to the doorway, eyes pleading for help, making muffled noises through the scarf I'd gagged him with when he wouldn't stop screaming about his legs. The police both stared.

"See, alive," I said. "Told you." At least they were actually taking me seriously now. I could have killed them a hundred times over already, the idiots.

"You... You're insane!"

"Yeah... Can't really deny that one, but I doubt you could do any better in my position. Anyway, Lily would be sad if I killed you, and I want to track down the people who did this to me, so how about I fly off, you pretend you never saw me, and you can blame everything on the crack-heads who used to live here?"

"People who did this to you?" said one. "On this side of the border? Maximilian?"

The name had been whispered, but it was still enough for the other cop to glare, hard. "Shut up," he muttered under his breath.

"Oh?" I said, grinning a grin at them with *far* too many teeth in it. "This has suddenly got a *lot* more interesting. Would you care to come in for a cup of tea? I mean, it's not my house, and I doubt you'd be interested in what I consider to be snack food, but it sounds like we have a lot to talk about."

"We need to get that man medical aid, and you're..."

I interrupted his sentence by kicking backwards, ensuring that the second mugger would never need medical aid again. I'd wanted to keep him fresh, given that I was mostly full right now, but it was a small price to pay if I could get information out of these two.

"I'm what?" I asked. Neither cop looked pleased at that turn of events, apparently finding it harder to ignore murder that happened right in front of their faces. "Look, you seem to have... issues with a

certain CEO. Issues that I might be able to solve. Either you come in and tell me what you know, you start shooting, or you run away. Two of those three options let you survive, the other doesn't. I think it should be obvious which is which. Now hurry up and pick one, before I get hungry again."

"He really tried to mug you?"

"Yes, really. Came at me with a knife. There's still a bit of empathy buried deep inside of me somewhere; the final act of Lily. I don't kill innocents."

And at that, the cops, who must have been every bit as insane as I was, stepped into the house with the bloodthirsty monster, closing the door behind them.

Infiltration

I soared through the midnight sky towards my target residence, far enough up to not be visible. Thanks to the interruption I hadn't got around to looking up how to manufacture chloroform, but that didn't matter; I wasn't intending to take prisoners tonight. I'd meant it when I said I wouldn't deliberately kill innocents if I could help it, and was intending to test Maximilian simply by turning up in front of him and watching his reaction. That was no longer needed; I'd heard more than enough over the last couple of hours to know that he was no innocent. So much so that two police officers had ignored a murder carried out right in front of them for the chance of taking him down. Admittedly, the fact that there was absolutely nothing they could do about me probably helped too, but I liked to imagine it was mostly because of them being on my side.

The structure wasn't huge, despite the vast grounds in which it was set. My enhanced eyes could spot a number of cameras, both on the land's perimeter and the building itself, but all pointed down. I had no idea why so little attention was given to flying opponents. Surveillance and military drones were things that existed, and while it would be difficult for the average civilian to get their hands on one of those spy flies or military hardware, even a toy helicopter would be sufficient for spying on this place. Or for dropping a small bomb on it.

I dropped over the roof, hovering a narrow distance above it to avoid making noises that might be heard by anyone inside. I needed some way to get in without loud noises or alarms, but the loop I'd flown around the place before landing had revealed a number of open upstairs windows. Again, security was simply not designed with fliers in mind. I picked one at random, listened for a bit, then risked sticking my head down to look. Nothing. I quickly somersaulted through the window, and easy as that, I was inside the sort of place that I'd expected to have to fight through a small army to get to.

Something deep inside me twitched. Some sense of unease that I couldn't identify. Because I was indoors, without the sky above me? Because I was in hostile territory? Some other reason? Something was off here, I was sure of it, and it wasn't Maximilian. I crept as quietly as I could, listening for the smallest sound. I was in a bedroom, but it was a small one with no personal effects in sight. Probably a guest room, currently unoccupied. The door was closed, but I heard nothing beyond it, and silently made my way out.

I found myself in a dim corridor, a number of closed doors in sight. I stalked down it, listening at each one. The first few were silent, but at the fourth I heard voices.

"So there were no signs of her regaining intelligence after all?" sighed an older sounding male.

That's Maximilian's voice. I recognised it from the videos I watched earlier. *Found him!* Unfortunately, the bad feeling I'd been getting seemed especially strong around here. What rotten luck.

"The behaviour since then has been... suspicious. But nothing irrefutable, and all eyewitness accounts have categorically denied it."

And *that* voice; that's Kholakel's mayor! I released the door handle, which I'd already grasped in my claws, and concentrated on eavesdropping instead.

"Damn. We were so close too. She was still speaking at the point of being fed live meals but then lost it right at the end."

Wait, are they talking about Lily?! That's one hell of a coincidence.

"Are you really sure you lost it?"

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. Everyone who saw her has described an inhuman monster, incapable of speech or rationality. Yet she just happened to not kill any of the police or other test subjects but did kill three of the lab personal. She attacked and killed three muggers, but didn't touch a hair on the head of their two victims. When ambushed, she flew straight up, avoiding our trap. Now, how do you think a monster incapable of rationality could do all that?"

"What the hell are you implying? You think *I* was controlling her? Why would I have her attack your men, but not the people who screwed up the whole experiment? No, wait, don't answer that one... But the muggers for sure. Why would I have done *that*?"

"So, you deny having any sort of control over her?"

I found myself struggling not to laugh at the misunderstanding. The mayor was right; I had been pretty mindless back then, but there sure as hell was no-one controlling me. Lily was simply giving me... *suggestions*.

"Damn right I do! She wasn't even chipped. Exactly how did you think I was controlling her?"

"Lily!"

My heart lurched; despite never having met her before personally, I knew full well that had been Alicia's voice. No further voices came from the room for half a minute, before the mayor spoke up again.

"So, seeing that, I'm sure you can understand why I'm suspicious."

Apparently he'd just played a video. Was it from during my escape? My own memories were fuzzy from back then. I'd wanted to attack the fools pretending to be my kin, but Lily had shown me... something. There was an intense feeling of loss, of having something important torn from her, and the fear of me taking more. I knew what had happened from Lily's perspective now, of course, and yes, me lurching to attack someone and then jerking back and running away from them would play into his misguided theory nicely.

"I admit, it is difficult to watch that and not share your suspicions."

"Then if you insist you were not involved, one can only assume that someone has access to your research."

"Someone from *your* lab; a control chip would need to be fitted while the physical part of the metamorphosis was winding down."

"That one I won't admit. It could just as easily have been someone with the police unit that broke in."

"Ha, yes. The unit that you so thoughtfully wiped out, along with the other experimental subjects."

"They were a waste of time and you know it. Barely good enough to hold this year's hunt."

I heard Maximilian heave a big sigh. "There's no point in arguing about it. It seems that we have holes on both of our sides, and I assure you that I'll be doing my best to plug mine. I suggest you do the same. So, where is our anomalous harpy now?"

"After escaping my ambush, she flew into the misty woods. She hasn't been seen since."

I'd walked into a shop on a crowded main street. I'd opened my door to cops! Well, *a* door, not *my* door, but my point still stands. Believe me, I've been seen!

"Ha, looks like you have a hunt this year after all." Despite the nasal laugh, and the fact that he'd supposedly participated in them, Maximilian sounded bitter about that. Did he not agree with them? Maybe his score of zero was deliberate?

"And I shall endeavour to enjoy it. *Personally*. I have a gap in my schedule three days from now, and the unknown makes it all the more interesting."

A click seemed to signify the end of the call, while I was left desperately trying to stifle my laughter. However do these people manage to keep their criminal empires running with that level of incompetence? Now they were both looking for non-existent moles in their organisations, while thinking that one of them was somehow puppeteering me? Plus they were looking for me in the wrong *country*.

With all this talk of control chips and controlling monsters, coupled with the supernatural abilities, I was starting to think that Lily had it backwards. It wasn't that we were created as weapons, but that we arrived some other way, and now they were trying to turn us into weapons after the fact. Although how transforming humans played into that, I had no idea. Perhaps I could find out? Let's see how talkative I could make this guy. I threw open the door and stepped into the room, causing Maximilian to spin around in surprise.

The two mantis-like creatures standing on either side of him spun around too. Ah, so *that* was where the bad feeling had been coming from.

Confrontation

Unlike Maximilian, his monstrous bodyguards didn't show surprise or confusion, or even indecision or hesitation. They simply attacked. They were two metres tall, with narrow heads containing protruding eyes that would give them a wide field of view. They had four arms, each with two joints

providing additional flexibility, all covered with a thick exoskeleton. Two were curved and bladed on the insides of the final section, like scythes. The other two were straighter, bladed on both sides, more like swords. Their feet had no claws, and their legs were lithe. At a guess, they were speed and agility specialised melee combatants.

They hadn't made it two steps before I'd finished doing the maths. Two of them, one of me. My main advantage, flight, was neutralised by the rather inconsiderate existence of the ceiling. I had some pretty darn nice claws, but they had *swords for arms*. In a word: *Nope*. As much as I wanted to gut that guy, I wasn't going to get myself killed doing so.

By step three, I'd noticed that they were just so... *slow*.

One of them swung at me with three limbs, but the swings were so pathetic that I almost needed to go and grab a snack while waiting for the attack to arrive. I casually took a back-step, then I made a single swipe with my own claw, and the thing suddenly had three fewer limbs. Apparently my maths failed to account for these guys being complete wimps. A couple more swipes and a kick, and they'd run out of limbs. Also of heads.

During that brief exchange, Maximilian still hadn't moved, staring open-mouthed. Apparently having his wussy bodyguards dispatched with such ease had come as a surprise to him. Then, disturbingly, he *smiled*. It started with the corners of his mouth twitching upwards, but soon turned into a full faced grin, followed by him bursting out into riotous laughter. That was not quite the reaction I expected, but once again, I was interested in seeing where this was going, so I let him get it out of his system.

"It worked! Ha, it really worked! I knew it was possible! You've successfully ascended, but you haven't fallen to the madness that has taken the others. You still possess the intelligence and cunning of a human. Or maybe a monster. Some of them were far more intelligent than we are, you know."

"What?"

"You can even talk?! Oh, this is just too *perfect*. Grant can take his bloody witnesses and shove them up his arse. How dare he call you unintelligent... My beautiful, wonderful Lily."

Once again, I found myself questioning the general sanity of humanity. Maybe I wasn't quite as bad off as I thought, at least by comparison to pretty much anyone else I'd met... Not that I'd really met many people, at least not for long enough to get to know them. Maybe fixing that would score me extra sanity points?

"So? Didn't you come here to kill me? What are you waiting for?"

"Oh, sorry, I was too busy despairing about the general state of humanity. I kinda forgot you were there. So what's your deal, anyway? What is there about me that makes you so happy?"

"So you came here for information? Very well, I have nothing to hide from *you*. Tell me, when did monsters first appear on this planet?"

"Fifteen years ago."

"Wrong," he said, wagging a finger at me. "It was actually over three hundred."

Three hundred? I didn't need to search far through Lily's memories of history lessons to find the significance of that date. The great collapse, a war so violent that human civilisation had come within a hair's breadth of being utterly annihilated. It would be difficult to claim that they had fully recovered even now.

"So you're saying that monsters caused the great collapse?"

"Exactly! One moment civilisation was ticking over like normal, the next we were the subject of an invasion on a global scale. Fifty percent of humanity wiped out in the first few hours, as they turned our cities into dust. Over the next few days that increased to ninety percent as they dispersed across the countryside. And then, can you believe it, they all just went and died. All on their own. Humanity couldn't do a thing against them, even *tank shells* just bounced off them, but they just went and keeled over by themselves. Can you imagine just how much of a *waste* that was?"

"Sorry, you're saying we almost killed you all, but the fact that we failed was a *bad* thing."

"Of course! Have you never heard of survival of the fittest? Humanity didn't *deserve* to live. We were weak! So I've made it my life's work to rectify this travesty, to bring back our betters and gift to them the world that they deserve. Kill me, consume me or enslave me, I don't care, I just want to see you on top, where you belong."

Wow, when those cops were telling me just how much of a creep this guy was, they seriously undersold him. He *worships* monsters. Of everything I was expecting when I came here, this was not something I'd considered. But, since it has happened, how best can I use this guy? I'll still kill him, but no harm in milking him for as much information as possible first.

"So the facility that made me wasn't just populating the forest for the hunt, they were doing research?"

"Of course! The things that were released into the forest weren't even fit to be called monsters. They were the failures! It was Grant's idea to turn it into a sport. He just wanted to spite me, you know. Having humans hunting monsters as prey, even if they were just the failures. It was... irksome, but I couldn't continue my research here on my own. Too many unsuccessful tests, too many dead children, too much attention. He just wanted to use them as weapons, but I knew he'd fail, that he could never control a true monster, and now here you are."

"Then why did you keep using children? Why not take the vagrants, the homeless, people who wouldn't be missed?"

"Don't you think I tried?! Don't you think I would have experimented on *myself* if I could? It needs to be children. Sixteen to twenty is the sweet spot. Younger, and they die before they can ascend. Older, and..."

The alleged human in front of me rolled up a sleeve, and what was beneath was... not pretty. A mass of flesh, out of which poked fangs and claws, bristles and scales, malformed eyes spinning in ill-fitting sockets, some turning to face me. Maws that led nowhere. All of it was seemingly random; it didn't look like a controlled transformation at all, but a cancer. Only parts of it were coated in any sort of skin, and what was there was shrivelled, as if with old age.

"Cells can only divide a limited number of times, you know. Someone of my age will reach that limit before the glorious ascension can complete. Have you any idea how much trial and error it took to get as far as we have? To get things that even *looked* like monsters? No, enough talking! Now is the time for *action!*"

Drat, how did this guy run a corporation when he's as incoherent as this? I still have questions, particularly about the control chips and what separates me from the failures, but how am I supposed to contain this madman without killing him? I needed that chloroform after all...

He pulled some sort of plastic stick out of a pocket and had hit a bunch of buttons on it before I could snatch it off him, along with a part of his hand.

"What did you just do?" I screeched.

"My gift to you," he replied, seemingly not even noticing that I'd just sliced his fingers off, smiling as more of the mantis creatures turned up behind me, and from a couple of hidden doors around the room. "My two last orders. Gather before your new mistress and then disable your control chips."

My eyes opened wide as the half dozen monsters raised a scythe-limb to the backs of their own necks and sliced.

Evidence

The room was a scene from hell. After cutting out what was presumably their control chips, the mantis monsters froze up for a couple of seconds, which I used to back up against a wall. However slow they might be, I didn't want to be surrounded. Once they started moving again, they charged, but not at me. They went straight for Maximilian, slicing, stabbing and generally mutilating him, all while maintaining complete silence. He did nothing to resist, dying with the same maniacal laughter he'd burst out with upon first seeing me.

They were also faster than the two that had attacked me. That suited me. I'd killed back at the facility had said something about control chips weakening monsters, so this must be what he meant. Now I *really* didn't want to get into a fight with them, so I took the opportunity while they were distracted to flee back out into the corridor, only to stop when I heard a different sort of noise. The clangs of blade meeting blade. That made me curious enough to poke my head back through the door, where the monsters were now fighting each other.

It was a gory fight, each of them concentrating more on offence, and barely sparing a thought for defence. Green blood and severed limbs went flying everywhere, until only one was left, down to two arms and bleeding heavily from a dozen cuts. It collapsed to its knees and then brought one of its remaining blades up to its own throat.

It remained like that for a few seconds, trembling, before it withdrew the blade, remaining in its position on the floor.

"Can you understand me?" I asked curiously.

It didn't seem to react at all to my voice or presence, just kneeling there. Then it swung up its blade for a second time, without warning, and this time with real force behind it. It carved clean through its own neck, severing its head and collapsing to the floor, dead.

Some gift that was, I thought, trying to cross the room without stepping in anyone or getting the icky green blood over my feet. I had no idea if he'd expected them to become my subordinates or something, but the way they'd all attacked him suggested they knew he was controlling them, and had enough intelligence to resent him for it. The suicide at the end also hinted at intelligence; breaking a mind so badly to result in taking that way out required there to be a mind to break. I didn't know what to make of the free for all, though, or the way they hadn't even looked at me throughout the whole thing, even right at the end.

I could hear voices from the rest of the mansion, this disturbance finally having been enough to wake the other occupants. Now what? Should I kill everyone here and take my time to search the place? Should I flee now and hope my involvement remained hidden? Glancing around the office revealed absolutely zero paperwork, so whatever data this guy had would be on computers and electronic storage. It was likely to be encrypted, and I'd be unlikely to find anything. Also, the conversation with the mayor showed me that they were still completely clueless about my true nature and location, and that it might be in my best interest to ensure that remained the case.

On the other hand, it wasn't completely certain I wouldn't be able to find anything, and as the late Maximilian had so eloquently put it, I had the cunning of a human. I looked down at one of the severed sword arms and grinned to myself, just as the sound of footsteps entered the corridor.

Ten minutes later, and everyone in the building had unfortunately been murdered by the out-of-control mantis monsters. No harpies here. Nope, none at all.

Okay, so I doubted my trick would hold up to any sort of detailed forensic inspection. I'd probably been shedding fur everywhere or something. It was just a shame that one of the maids in this place had been busy setting up some scented candles when the mantis monsters had struck, leading to the whole place burning down and any investigators having very little to go on beyond charred bones.

Trying to light a match with my claws wasn't going to be fun, but I was sure I could manage it.

My hasty cover-up complete, I started to search the place more seriously. I still couldn't spend too long here; the night would probably be okay, but come morning, people were going to start noticing that a famous CEO and his household had gone missing. I should leave before dawn and get out of the city before first light.

My search surprisingly turned out to be successful. Encryption and passwords mean little if you leave a computer on and logged in. There wasn't time to search through it here, so I picked one of the phones from my bag, tore out the antenna, turned it on, and started copying across as much as I could within my self-imposed time limit, enjoying the plentiful available food while I waited.

It had proven an interesting day. The implications from what Maximilian had told me was that he started researching into turning people into monsters sometime over fifteen years ago, but after having no luck and under pressure from authorities, had to outsource further work. In had stepped Grant, our beloved mayor, who had rather different motivations. At some point during that time, they'd invented some sort of neural implant that could control the monsters they created at the expense of their physical abilities.

I had no clue what made me different from any of their other attempts, or what exactly had happened to the mantises once they removed their chips. For that matter, I didn't know what

happened to them while they *did* have their chips. Were they conscious but unable to act, like Lily had once been after I took over? That could well explain their behaviour once freed, if so.

Well, I had more information available now. I just needed to get somewhere safe first. I headed back to the open window and into the early morning sky, making sure to light and knock over a candle on my way out.

Data

I perched in a treetop, tapping away at my crippled phone and wishing I'd invested in a stylus while I was out shopping. Thankfully, I had lots of batteries with me, because I had a lot to read, but even so I was going to need to find a plug socket eventually.

The data I'd nabbed was all unfortunately historical, from the experiments that had taken place prior to Grant's involvement, but it still made for informative reading. Three hundred years ago, the dead monsters had decomposed with unnatural rapidity, their bodies melting away to nothing within hours, but nevertheless some samples had been frozen quickly enough to preserve them in good condition.

Thirty years ago, Maximilian had got his grubby hands on some, and had begun dedicating his resources to their research. His first finding was that the initial wave of monsters had starved to death, and none of the corpses examined had anything that could be identified as a digestive system. That came as a surprise to me, munching as I was on a captured squirrel, because I sure as hell did.

His initial hypothesis was that they had been artificially designed and built as weapons, and that since they weren't supposed to survive more than a few days, such complex biological systems had been neglected to make space for something more useful. And there things might have ended, if not for the lingering mystery over *who* had designed them, and why. From the way they had appeared worldwide, it was abundantly clear that there were no good suspects. Given their limited lifespans, it would have required an immense quantity of manufacturing facilities, and the logistics were simply infeasible. It would have needed a global level of organisation, and the countries were hardly going to work together to wipe *themselves* out.

Logistics aside, there was also the problem that they were physically impossible. No material could be completely bullet-proof, as they seemed to be. Examination of the corpses revealed further inexplicable designs. A salamander-like creature with highly temperature resistant scales lining its throat, but the throat not going anywhere or being connected to anything. Bird-like creatures that weighed far too much for their small wings to get them off the ground. Hulking behemoths that by all rights shouldn't even have been able to move.

While eyewitness accounts from the time were rare, and suppressed for whatever reason by the current authorities, that didn't mean they didn't exist. What tales there were told of fantastical magic and impossible abilities. Of minds far beyond those of humans, or of instinctual beasts that nevertheless possessed great animalistic cunning. Maximilian came up with a new hypothesis; these were creatures from another world and lived off a completely alien energy source. A source that was completely absent from our own world.

When and why he had developed his fanaticism towards them I didn't know, but the data that followed was a full decade of DNA and protein analysis that I couldn't even begin to understand. It

seemed they'd been trying to work out exactly how these monsters had functioned, and apparently they'd found some answers, because twenty years ago they'd started splicing sequences into people. The aim was to create a new breed of monsters, able to subsist off physical food. He sought to replace humanity with what he considered to be something better. It had gone poorly; mostly he'd only succeeded in killing all his test subjects. But there had been some hints, some controlled mutations that had got close to a success, but without fail even these 'successes' would go insane, starve and then die before their transformation was complete.

It was several years and some effort in watering down the amount of 'monster' in their mix before they reached a point where the creations could still eat, discovering that raw flesh could stave off the hunger. Whatever energy source the monsters had wherever they came from, some small amount could be syphoned from recently dead corpses here. The fresher the corpse and the more complex the life form, the better, explaining my preference for fresh human. The insanity remained however, and the transformed creatures would either end up comatose and unresponsive, or else violent and raging to the point of self-destruction. They neither kept their human intellect nor obtained the minds of the original monsters.

And that was where the information cut off. Nothing about control chips, Grant's involvement, or what was happening in Kholakel. Not even anything about where Maximilian's pet mantises had come from. More good information, for sure, but it didn't contain anything about *me*.

Powering off the phone, I slumped back against my tree. Just what exactly was I doing? I didn't *need* to do anything; I could make any city my home, preferably a safe distance from here, feed only as much as needed, and probably remain undetected forever. That should be enough, but then Lily had to go and gift me with her intelligence and suddenly make everything complicated. Now I found myself plagued by pointless questions like 'who am I' and 'why am I here', never mind a hard to resist desire to see some sort of justice. Although, to be fair, without Lily I could never remain undetected for two days, never mind forever, so I couldn't complain too loudly.

I'd made the decision to stay away from Kholakel until I was certain I wasn't heading into a trap, and now I knew I wasn't. Should Maximilian's death be linked back to me, that might change once more, so if I was to go back, now was my best opportunity.

For better or for worse, I was going to have to head back to Kholakel.

Return

I flew once more over the barbed wire fence that separated Lecolie from Gronorlie, this time in a far better position to observe the fortifications below. I shared Lily's amusement about the effort put in to prevent land travel while nothing was done to prevent aerial incursion, although that didn't seem quite so important now that I knew monsters weren't actually breeding and migrating anywhere.

My goals here were to take out the police commissioner, the mayor of Kholakel and as many of their supporters as I could get my claws on, expose the truth to the general public about what had happened to the kidnapped children, and to visit Lily's parents. They deserved to know what had happened to her. In fact, I could do that first; now that I knew the mayor had no idea I was sentient, there should be no reason for me to visit them, so they shouldn't be under watch.

After that, who knew? Maybe I should run for mayor myself. The office would be open, and being a mass murdering psychopath seemed to be a desired qualification, rather than any sort of detriment. I should fit right in.

I flew high above Kholakel, scanning the ground below for anything suspicious. Seeing nothing, I accelerated downwards, dropping into Lily's backyard. My ability was supposed to be something like mass negation, but I wasn't sure that could explain going from a full speed dive to a full stop as soon as I touched the ground without turning myself into a two-dimensional smear, although it did at least explain why I didn't leave a sizeable crater. It had all been instinctual before, but now I couldn't help trying and failing to apply science to it. I guess that's what makes it supernatural.

There were no open windows, such a thing around here being seen more as an invitation for a house invasion than a source of fresh air. Perhaps breaking in would be counterproductive, anyway? I wasn't exactly going in there to kill everyone, like the past couple of houses I'd visited. I knocked on the back door instead, tucking myself close to the wall to stay out of sight of neighbours.

...Knocking the back door probably wasn't much better than breaking in, was it? This was a private garden, after all, so I had no right whatsoever to be here. But no way I'm going around the front. Why does *not* killing everyone have to be so harder than mindless slaughter?

I saw the face of Lily's dad peering out of the kitchen window, and poked my head up, letting Lily's face do the talking for me. The double layer of glass did little to negate the shriek he emitted as he toppled over backwards, which would have given even my screeching harpy voice a run for its money. I patiently waited for him to recover, before glancing pointedly at the door. He didn't budge though, just staring at me.

"Who are you?" he asked, talking loudly through the window, but not even opening it, a deeply suspicious expression on his face.

Finally, someone who's reaction wasn't completely idiotic. Respect for Lily's parents. On the downside, that means I need to explain. Answering with 'the monster who stole your daughter's body' probably wouldn't go down well. Alas, I failed to come up with an acceptable answer before Lily's mum looked into the room, immediately spotting me through the window then sprinting to the back door and throwing it open.

"Wait!" shouted her dad, but she wasn't interested, grabbing me and pulling me into a giant hug.

"Lily!" she sobbed. "I knew they were lying!"

I stood there completely nonplussed. Okay, I take back my previous respect. Respect for her dad, perhaps, but I'm leaving her mum out of it. "Do you hug every harpy you see?" I asked, "or only those with your daughter's face?"

She ignored me, crying into my fur. Hopefully they'd let me borrow their bathroom for a wash. I looked over to dad for... wait, *Lily's* dad for help, but he seemed clueless how to react, his panic somewhat diminished by the way *I* didn't know how to react either, and that I hadn't immediately attacked anyone. She had her arms wrapped around my wings, pinning them to my sides. I could easily have broken out, but I was trying to create a good impression here. Besides, it didn't feel bad...

"Leona," I said, taking the opportunity to answer Lily's dad's question while I was otherwise restrained.

"Huh?"

"You asked who I was. Leona. That's the name Lily gave me." There; acceptable answer discovered. I've implied there was a friendly link between the two of us without admitting that I stole her body.

Lily's mum looked up in shock. "No, you must be her. Your face!"

"Also, my wings, claws, horns, ears, voice and general inhumanity. I'm pretty sure Lily was human." I'd have winked, but that would be taking things a bit too far.

"How do you know our daughter, and why you have her face?" asked Lily's dad.

"Can we get properly inside and close the door first?" I asked in return.

"No offence, but you're a monster. I'm not sure I want you in my house."

"You know, that's among the most sensible things anyone has ever said to me." I said. "Unlike this one," I added, glancing down at mum... at *Lily's* mum, who was still gripping me despite her confusion. Need to stop doing that before I embarrass myself; they aren't *my* parents. "How do you want me to prove that I'm safe? I doubt you'd take my word for it."

Lily's dad grabbed a saucepan from a cupboard. "By slicing this in half," he answered. "That's a thing monsters can do, right?"

"Umm... Isn't that the exact opposite of reassuring you?"

"Just humour me."

"If you insist," I said with a shrug, gently disentangling Lily's mum from me and then bisecting the saucepan with a kick. One half remained in Lily's dad's hand while the other dropped to the floor with a clang. Lily's mum stared wide eyed, while her dad just nodded.

"Good enough," he said, closing the back door. "Welcome to our house."

I stared in incomprehension, leading to him adding, "if you can do that to a saucepan, you can do it to us, and nothing we can do could stop you. We might as well let you in, because if you wanted to hurt us, closing a door on you wouldn't help."

"That's... rather pragmatic," I said, following him through to their lounge, but hanging back a bit to hide from the front facing window. "I can see where Lily got that trait from." Bah, these claws of mine were not designed for carpet, and keep catching. I need my wings outstretched to do my hovering trick, and there isn't space.

After we'd all taken seats, both of the adults looked at me, the mother with something that was a contradictory mixture of hope and despair, while the father was looking far more serious. "So," he started. "You came here for a reason, and I doubt it was just a comfy seat. Would you like to talk?"

"I came because I thought you deserved to know the truth. It's unlikely it'll help you at all, or make you feel better, and if you actually shared it with anyone you'd end up dead, but you should know anyway. Everything you may have seen in the news about a paedophilic police captain by the name

of Justin is an utter fabrication. That man tried to *save* Lily and the others, and not only got murdered for the trouble, but had his name dragged through the mud by the real ones responsible. Grant, your mayor, and his subordinates, trying to manufacture some sort of mind-controlled monster army. The ones he considers failures end up getting sent to the misty woods as fodder for their annual hunt. For sport. And as for the kidnapped children, they are the raw materials the monsters are made from. I was... made from Lily."

"Then Lily is..." Lily's dad let the sentence hang.

"Yes. I'm sorry. She was... a strong girl. She... went on her own terms, by her own will, and left me with a decent chunk of herself as a parting gift. It's why I'm here talking instead of... what I would otherwise do if I found myself indoors with two juicy looking humans."

"And what evidence you you have for this?"

Another good question... I could see the hope draining from Lily's mum, leaving nothing but the despair, but her dad was being as serious and analytical as ever, as if inviting harpies into his house was something he did on a daily basis. From Lily's memories, I was pretty sure it wasn't, and that this pragmatism wasn't out of the ordinary for him, but it was still odd given everyone else's reactions. You'd think describing someone as juicy would garner some sort of adverse reaction.

"Not much. There's my face, for one. Second, I have all of Lily's memories, or at least I think I do, so you can question me on them. Other than that, I have this." I tossed over the phone with Maximilian's research. "The historical research notes from before your mayor took over the experimental side. Records of experiments of turning people into monsters that took place in Gronorlie."

Dad was staring wide eyed at the filenames alone, before even opening a single file. Lily's mum on the other hand had perked back up at the mention of memories. "Was she looking forward to our beach trip?" she asked. "I know it wasn't much, but we really couldn't afford to go further."

"Yes. She would have liked to swim in the sea, but having a day out with her family was all she really wanted."

"Lily?" came a new, small, sleepy voice, but one that Lily's memories identified immediately.

"Oh, did we wake you?" said Lily's dad, gently. "Sorry Ben, but we're having an adult conversation here. Can you go back to bed for us?"

Lily's little brother, only eight years old. And his dad's efforts had been far too late; he'd already seen me before speaking.

"Lily! You came back!" he exclaimed again, completely ignoring his dad, charging at me, jumping into my lap and clutching at me. "You're all fluffy!"

Oddly, neither parent seemed perturbed. I... guess they trusted me? That's good? Maybe? I feel like I'm not living up to my monstrous reputation here. But what do I do now? Being hugged was really not something that was inside my comfort zone, and the only suggestion my instincts offered was to behead the boy, which would run counter to my whole purpose of being here.

Wait. Since when did my instincts get so unimportant? I'd barely even considered them since Lily... did what she did.

What would *human* instincts have to say about this situation? I considered Lily's memories a bit more, then gingerly wrapped my wings around the boy, making sure to keep my claws angled away. He burst into a fit of giggles before snuggling in to me, which I found strangely gratifying.

I looked up, only to see mum looking at us with a warm smile, with no trace of her previous despair. I even caught dad sneaking regular glances at us, despite his best efforts at pretending to be engrossed in the phone. Well, if I've brought them some comfort, that's my mission complete, I guess. I should get back out and prepare for my attempted mayoricide.

I felt a tickle on my cheek and rubbed it with the back of a claw. The claw came back wet.

Seriously, I'm *crying*?!

Identity

"So," said Lily's dad, carefully, "could you tell us a bit more about what Lily went through, and what separates the two of you? You were talking like you were two completely separate individuals, but what I'm reading here describes a transformation."

They were unpleasant memories, even for me, but if he really wants to know, there's no harm in sharing. Not in front of Ben, though. Oh, never mind; looking down, I saw that he'd fallen back to sleep, still tucked up in my wings.

"Yes, a transformation," I answered, as quietly as my screechy voice would permit. "Locked in a prison cell, stuck watching her body changing with nothing she could do about it. But her mind remained completely intact almost until the end. First it was food, with human meals starting to feel unappetising, then came anger, claustrophobia and hunger, all of which she struggled to keep bottled up. One morning, she lost control and all of those instincts burst out and took over, giving birth to me. She somehow held herself together, even after I took over, but was left as nothing more than a voice at the back of my head, with no control over what used to be her own body."

"I have to say, the way you've acted so far doesn't strike me as some embodiment of rage and hunger. And you seem quite at home here, despite being indoors."

"I ate before I came, and I know I'm not trapped here," I pointed out. "Anyway, despite her situation, she held on, and when the police raided the place, she did her best to give me advice on how to escape. She gave me direction, and tried to keep me from being just another mindless beast. She gave me my name. When snipers came after me, she helped me to escape. She told me what a country was, and why I should leave this one. She helped me so much... But then, once we'd escaped, she... I don't really understand what she did, but we kinda merged. Before then I couldn't think for myself, or at least not clearly. I was just operating on instinct. But then Lily was gone, I was suddenly fully sentient, and I could remember both of us."

"I see," he said. "So you really are Lily after all."

"What? Weren't you listening, I..."

"Yes, I was," he said, cutting me off. "As you just said yourself, you merged. You are Lily, and you are Leona. I would even go so far as to say you weren't two different people to start with, and pretending that you were was simply Lily's way of coping with her changes."

"What? How can I possibly be Lily?! I'm a monster! I've murdered over two dozen people. I *ate* half of them! How is that Lily?!"

Ben stirred in my wings, and I did my best to calm down, not wanting to wake him. But... why did I care if some little kid woke up. It wouldn't hurt him. No, why did I care even if it *did* hurt him? Weren't all humans just prey for me?

"It isn't," answered dad. "At least not the old Lily. They mutilated you, in mind as well as body. Added in Leona. There are bits of you both; that's what's meant by a merger. There's Leona, the monster, and Lily, the girl who is currently embracing her little brother so gently. Can you remember a little more of what Lily actually did, or said?"

What she said? What *had* she said, just before she vanished, and the world suddenly went complicated? Those few minutes were... confusing, but yes, there had been something. "I'm sorry for pushing you away, Leona. I'm ready to accept you now."

"Well, there you have it then. And if Lily could accept 'Leona' as part of herself, then so can we, so stop pretending you aren't our daughter."

Okay, starting to lose my respect for him again now. Perhaps he missed the part where I said I'd *murdered two dozen people*? But, for some reason, I didn't want to correct him. I found myself *wanting* a family. People to hang around with, talk to, and hug. People who meant more to me than just being food I hadn't eaten yet. Was I *allowed*? Could a monster like me be allowed such a thing? Ben was still squirming in my wings, his sleep disturbed but unbroken. Wings that were shaking...

My cheeks were tickling again, but this time it was both of them. My vision blurred, my eyes awash with tears. So, I'm supposed to be both? It was impossible to think of myself as Lily, given what I'd done. I regretted nothing, and would do more in the future, things that the old Lily could never do. And yet, why did I think of myself as Leona? It was easy to claim I wasn't Lily because I had so many years of her prior behaviour to point at, to show how I was now so different. I couldn't do that with Leona, because she had only been a few days old.

A few days in which she wasn't even sentient. How was a change from mindless to intelligent any less than the change from Lily before to me now? Had I simply pretended Lily was gone because I didn't want to admit how much I had changed? Had I kept the name 'Leona' so that I could continue to use the 'it wasn't really me' excuse to excuse my actions? Telling myself it was fine to kill people because I wasn't Lily, I was Leona, and Leona was *supposed* to kill people? Wasn't lying to myself like that doing a disservice to Lily, spitting in the face of her acceptance?

Was this what set me apart from all the other attempts? Lily's *acceptance*? Did everyone else resist their newfound monstrous instincts to the bitter end, until they either went insane or their human minds decayed away to nothing, leaving nothing but their own version of Leona behind? How many of them would have worked together with their monster half, instead of fighting it? How many of them *named* their monster half, for goodness' sake? If that was the case, all that the mayor needed to do in order for his scheme to be a complete success was to find some willing participants, instead of

resorting to kidnapping his own populace. It was fortunate for the rest of the world that he didn't seem to be that sort of person.

So Leona was a fraud, an *excuse*, something that never really existed from the beginning. I was still Lily, changed and broken, but still 'me', and pretending that I wasn't was simply easier than acknowledging how thoroughly I'd been violated. I blinked my eyes clear, only to find mum standing right in front of me. She reached down, scritchng at my inhuman ear. Well, after being Leona for so long, being Lily for one night wouldn't hurt, would it? "Hello mum..." I said, shyly. "I'm home."

Hunter

I let them go to bed, given that it was now long gone midnight, before I went back out to clear my head. To think that the one monster that apparently wasn't considered a failure was stumped by such simple questions as 'who am I?' Away from Lily's... no, from *my* family, it was easier to rein in my emotions. I spent some time watching all the little humans milling around below, some areas of the city busy even at this time of night. The sight was... comforting.

The conclusion I came to, after a great amount of mental effort, was actually very simple: Fuck it. I am me. The name people call me by, or that I call myself by, makes no difference. Family are simply those who acknowledge me as such, and who I acknowledge in turn. My home was wherever I was welcomed. The whole debate about whether I was Lily or Leona or both or neither simply wasn't important. I recognised those people as family, and they recognised me, and that was all any of us needed to know.

Such an attitude would probably make my old church minister cough up blood. No doubt he'd end up giving me an hour lecture on my immortal soul or something. Screw that. It was my brain, in my head, mutated or otherwise, and I can be whoever the hell I want. Besides, should he ever meet me, he'd find other more important things to complain about first. Speaking of which, I had revenge to plot.

I decided to go after the mayor first, and considered that the best time for my attack would be to ambush him on his way to the misty woods. He'd told Maximilian that the trip was the day after tomorrow, so I could spend the next day at home. Dad had given me a back door key, so I could let myself back in at some point before dawn. Then I'd get out of there again sometime tomorrow night and hang around waiting for the mayor in the morning.

It would be absolutely imperative that I not be seen before then; if they knew I was back in the city, it would spoil everything. Thankfully, my rediscovered senses of friendliness and sentimentality seemed to be restricted to my family, and I had no trouble stalking deserted industrial estates and other non-overlooked locations for my next meal.

I briefly wondered what it was in fresh meat that actually provided me with nutrition, because it was obvious that regular food did nothing for me. What was it that the original monsters, with no digestive system at all, actually fed on? A world where the atmosphere was so thick with complex organic chemicals that they could get nutrition just by breathing? But wouldn't they still need water? No, or at least I didn't. I hadn't drunk anything since Leona took over from Lily. Or excreted. My biology was weird.

Whatever. I spotted a couple of hooded figures spraying graffiti over a fence, down a deserted alley. There were no windows or cameras, making it perfect. Perhaps graffiti artist wasn't my usual calibre of criminal, but they'd have to do. I dropped down behind the two, slashing their necks, then grabbing a head in each foot and yanking them into the air and onto the roof of a nearby warehouse.

Did they have family too? Well, obviously they did at some point; people didn't just appear spontaneously out of thin air. But would they care? There were alcoholics leaving two-year-olds home alone to go and spend the day in a pub, who probably wouldn't even notice if they vanished. At the other end of the scale, there was my own mum, so overcome by hope that she was willing to run to me immediately, despite my appearance.

A bit late to be thinking about such things, when I was part way through scooping the brains out of one of them and the other was busy suffocating on his own blood, the little of his face that was visible beneath his mask and hood full of pure terror. The bit of me that was Leona enjoyed that look immensely. Those were the eyes that mere humans *should* look at me with, a look that I deserved and had earned. The bit of me that was Lily did not enjoy it at all, and I ran another claw through his heart, ending his life instantly. My food needed to be fresh, but I didn't need it to suffer.

I left the carcasses on the roof. It would be some time before anyone discovered them. There was some amount of blood in the alleyway, as well as paint cans and a bag of their equipment, but nothing to indicate monster involvement. It would be chalked up as just another mugging, or random murder. They wouldn't solve it tomorrow. They might not even discover the crime scene by tomorrow.

Fully satiated, I returned home. Hopefully, my family would never ask where I'd been, or what I'd been doing. At least not Ben. Dad would know already, and mum should know but was probably in denial, but Ben I intended to keep in the dark for as long as possible. Would he still hug me and call me fluffy if he knew? How long would my parents give me a pass for my behaviour? I can excuse last night, given that they'd just discovered I was alive, but I doubt they would shelter me forever if I kept up my feeding habits... Would I be forced to choose between my two incompatible lives? Which would I pick if I did?

No-one was awake by the time I got back and the sky was still dark, so I made my way back to my old room, unsurprised to see that it hadn't been touched. Even though I no longer needed sleep, I ended up on my bed, wrapping myself up in the duvet, accidentally tearing the headboard with my horns and poking holes in the duvet with my claws. How strange it was, to flip between two such different lives. To simultaneously hold two completely disparate world views. I wasn't any weaker for it though; it only made me stronger. The power of a monster with the intelligence of a human. One more day, and I'd have my revenge on the one responsible for my creation.

Hmm? That's a strange statement too, isn't it? Why do I need revenge on someone for *creating* me? I'm not going to call myself thankful for being kidnapped, but the fact remains that the current me wouldn't exist if I hadn't, and it wasn't as if I disliked myself. I was perfectly happy with who I currently was, naming complications aside.

Not for my creation then, but for my kidnap and violation, regardless of the eventual outcome. For the enslavement of my kind. For hunting them as prey. For the attempted enslavement of *me*. For the crime of thinking himself superior. Tomorrow he was intending to hunt me, as *sport*, not even

thinking I was a threat. I grinned a very inhuman smile under the duvet. Tomorrow, *he* would find out what it meant to be prey.

Prey

Lily's personality came out on top for the rest of the day. It was a school day, so I didn't get as much time with Ben as I wanted, but the evening was long, heart-warming and contained quite a lot of me flying up the stairs with him on my back. It was a shame we didn't have more space, but I wasn't going to risk flying with him outdoors in daylight.

I offered to give mum a ride, but she quite resolutely declined.

Alas, all good things must come to an end, and so nighttime came. My parents stayed up late while I gave them a more detailed account of my past few weeks, sparing some of the gory details, but otherwise playing up how well Lily had handled herself. Or how *I* had handled *myself*? No, never mind, phrasing it that way still sounded weird...

They went to bed angry, as one might expect. This world is... unfair. Massively so. I wasn't going to claim that I had any intention of rectifying that, but perhaps as a side effect, some of what I did might help. Or perhaps I was just doing my part to add to it, merely tilting the unfairness to the advantage of me and mine.

I set out into the night. I'd let them know what I was planning, and that I didn't know when I would next return. They didn't try to stop me. Mum had even given me some cloth to tie around my face as some sort of disguise, which was a nice idea; I was pretty sure that the whole country was going to actively be after me after this, but I would appreciate it if no-one linked me to the human Lily or my family just yet.

From my vantage point way up above, I could see that yesterday's alley had been disturbed, but wasn't taped off. Probably some passer-by stealing their equipment but not notifying authorities. The rooftop where I'd left their remains was untouched. Good.

Today I managed to find an arsonist, busy pouring petrol around an industrial unit. It was one in a lengthy terrace, but he'd obviously been focusing on just that one. It seemed to be a vehicle garage. Was he a disgruntled customer? A competitor? The owner performing an insurance scam? Maybe one day I'd stop to ask, but not today. I dropped on his head and snapped his neck with a twist before he had a chance to scream. I dragged him back to yesterday's rooftop, and once again fed.

No doubt that crime scene would be detected soon enough in the morning; there would be plenty of foot traffic as the units opened, and while I hadn't left any blood, there was a lot of petrol around. Hopefully nothing would accidentally set it alight.

Feeding was important. Aside from the obvious that I didn't particularly want to starve to death, I believed this was one of the advantages I had over my less intelligent kin. Yes, the control chips had a negative effect, apparently by slowing down their reactions, but that wasn't the whole story. I remembered my time in the cage, when I'd lashed out at the steel walls and barely been able to scratch them, whereas now I knew I could shear through them with one slice. I'd been hungry back then, and I'd got stronger as I fed.

How much did the mayor know? He apparently suspected I'd been chipped, which was foolish enough and would result in him underestimating me, but did he know the restricted diet weakened us? He must do, but did he know how much? Would he have taken precautions against what I was planning? I was hoping not. Would I be *able* to carry out my plan? Even when hungry I'd been able to lift a tonne of cow, but today I was intending to lift far more.

From my position high in the sky, I watched around for activity. As luck would have it, the misty woods were west of the city, so by remaining in the east I not only reduced the chances of anyone looking for me, but also the sun behind me meant that anyone who did happen to be looking would struggle to spot me.

I didn't have long to wait; the motorcade assembling outside of the mayor's residence was obvious. I didn't see the man himself, but a large, unmarked, black car with heavily tinted windows emerged from a service road leading underground, and assumed position in the centre of the formation. That would be my target.

I waited for them to start moving, still well within the city, but travelling through a residential area far away from the mayor's mansion, and then I dived. I still saw no-one looking upward, even though they were literally on their way to hunt a harpy. One that he suspected of being under a third party's control, which should have raised the possibility of ambushes and traps. They didn't seem to be taking this seriously at all. Perhaps the whole thing was a trap for *me*, and the car was empty, and would explode the moment I got close.

There was no reaction as I drew near, now at my top speed. I probably had only a couple of seconds to pull this off before the shooting started, but it would be enough. It was time to teach humanity to fear the open skies. I landed on top of the mayor's car, killing my momentum with a single flap of my wings. My claws tore through the roof, my talons gripping tight. I flapped a second time, and the car left the ground. I accelerated upwards, not stopping to enjoy the view of the stupefied faces around me, the logical part of me that I'd inherited from Lily hoping with all her strength that I hadn't just picked up a tonne of explosives. There was screaming coming from within, but my target wouldn't hesitate to throw away a few henchmen, so that meant nothing.

No attack or retribution came, and I was soon flying west, seeking the fastest route from the city, high in the air with my new cargo. Grand theft mayor was a success! How much did this car and its contents weigh? A good amount more than the cow, for certain, and yet I'd just plucked it from the road with as much ease as I'd pick up a human. I laughed to myself as my hair streamed back in the wind. Well, there will certainly have been eyewitnesses to *that*. I'd make the news tomorrow, for sure. Hopefully, with my mask, no-one will link me with Lily. I'm just generic harpy #1. No relation to humans at all.

The next question was how to deliver my cargo. Frankly, I didn't want to land with it, because the mayor was likely to have some very big guns with him, and while he might be loath to blast me with them while I was all that was standing between him and a deadly appointment with gravity, he'd no doubt be ready to fire if I got closer to the ground. On the other hand, I quite wanted his head intact for the next phase of my plan. After umming and ahing for a bit, I decided to play it safe. I found myself a nice patch of exposed rock, and... didn't need to let go, because with a deafening roar, one of my legs and a large portion of one wing had gone missing.

Duel

The car's roof couldn't support its full weight on my remaining leg and tore away, careening to the ground below. A couple of seconds after the car started falling, the mayor jumped out of the fresh hole in the roof, kitted in some sort of body-armour, which seemed especially thick on the shoulders and around the head, and had some sort of large mechanism on the back. Don't tell me he had a parachute? He had no-one watching the skies in the city, yet had come equipped with a *parachute*? And apparently anti-harpy armour? The thickened bits were obviously designed to protect my usual grabbing locations, although pretty much everything had some protection, aside from his open eyes. He spun around in mid-air, a long-barrelled weapon pointing straight at me.

This was... not good. Apparently, having half of my limbs explosively removed wasn't quite as crippling as it would be for a human, but I couldn't fly freely, and this guy was still armed. Why, when I house-sat that meth house, hadn't I taken any guns from the previous residents? I need ranged capability, dammit! I did my best, using my remaining wing to slow my fall, to make myself a smaller, more distant, moving target for whatever weapon the mayor had. He would need to open his parachute at some point, and then I could strike from above, out of his sight.

I saw his finger move as he started to pull the trigger, and with a flap of my wing and a big pulse of whatever magic it used, I forcibly pushed myself to the side. There was another roar, and the air shimmered, but it seemed I'd avoided it, or at least no more bits of my body were evaporated. Then the mayor pulled something on his side, and the back of his armour unfolded.

Upside, he didn't have a parachute. Downside, he had some sort of winged jetpack. On the whole, I felt that this was not an improvement for my situation. He didn't seem to be particularly manoeuvrable, but neither was I. I didn't seem to be bleeding, which was nice, but neither were my missing limbs regenerating at a rate fast enough to matter for this fight.

Despite the situation, I couldn't resist grinning. The first shot had been a cheap one, yes, but that was my fault for giving him so long to prepare. I should have dropped the car immediately. He wasn't fighting me with cheap tricks, but with proper human ingenuity. Strength of mind was a type of strength too, and the harpy side of me fully respected that. I hadn't thought of myself as a battle junkie, but apparently I couldn't help but get excited at the thought of my first fair fight.

"You fight well, human!" I shouted, my voice carrying well through the high air, and I saw his eyes open wide in surprise. Of course; he had no idea I could talk, did he? How long would it take for my wing to regrow enough to get back my agility? And I knew it *would* regrow; I could feel it. How much fuel did that jetpack of his have? How much time could I buy? "A better fight than Maximilian put up, for sure. He wanted to give me the world, you know. At least you seem less of a madman."

His eyes narrowed, but it seemed he wasn't going to take my bait. He aimed his weapon again, but at least his surprise had given me the chance to take my distance. I evaded the shot easily. What sort of recharge time did that weapon have? Did it have limited ammunition? I saw the car impact the floor below, exploding into a fireball and leaving just the two of us.

"Harpy got your tongue?" I goaded. Not that I was sure I'd hear him, even if I did coax him into talking. Apparently my modified voice carried well through the air, but his probably wouldn't.

Okay, if I couldn't provoke him into wasting time until my wing heals, I was going to need another plan. I had no ranged capability, but if I got close to him I'd have no way to evade his weapon. He'd gone a while without firing it now, but I didn't believe the recharge time was *that* long. More likely, he was trying to goad me into counter-attacking right after one of his attacks.

I spun out of the way as he finally launched another blast, then he started flying towards me. He must have realised I wasn't going to close the distance, so was attempting to do so himself. In my crippled state he was faster than me, so there was nothing I could do about it. Hmm, ingenuity, huh? Maybe I *could* improvise a ranged attack. I spun, and with my back to him, used my foot to slice off the tip of my remaining wing. It stung, but that was a small price to pay to detach the three claws. Severely limited in the limb department, I could only grab one, needing to let the other two fall.

I dived towards him and watched him grin as he brought up his weapon. I spun before he had it in place, using the momentum to fling my severed claw, and then flapping hard to push myself to the side. His shot still caught me, taking a chunk from my torso, burnt fur and flesh mixing in with the smell of blood.

My claw had also found its mark, piercing deep into his eye and into the brain behind. He didn't have the capability to dodge, and hadn't expected it to be needed. As far as I could see, his equipment had been designed to counter a templated version of a harpy, one that was limited and predictable, not one capable of planning and subterfuge.

He lost his grip on his weapon and tumbled out of control. I wasn't certain that had been a kill shot, although even if not, from the depth my claw had penetrated he was certainly going to suffer lasting brain damage. I manoeuvred towards him again, and plunged a talon deep into his remaining eye, clawing at the brain behind. That'll teach him to have exposed spots on his armour.

Satisfied that no human could have survived that, albeit still keeping both eyes open in case he wasn't, I grabbed him by the head and dragged him to the ground, aiming for a copse a distance from the car wreckage. I needed time to recover, and no doubt there would be minions of his crawling all over the crash site imminently.

Trying to peel him open with one leg wasn't fun, but I managed it, eating up the juicy flesh within. Canned human. There was a definite market segment open there.

I kept the head, though. I'd be needing the head shortly.

Delivery

By the time enemy reinforcements arrived, I'd finished eating and was trying to figure out the weapon he was using. It was tied into his armour, but only lightly, utilising some sort of energy pack that had been around his waist. I'd been able to rip it out and wear it myself, although I had no idea how many shots it had left, or how to properly use it beyond aiming and pulling the obvious trigger.

From the amount I'd regenerated so far, it seemed like it would take a couple of days for me to fully heal. That was annoying, given that I wanted to go straight for the commissioner next, but given the damage I'd taken, I was happy to be alive. I was missing a leg, most of one wing, a little of the other, and a kidney, or at least a chunk of torso where my kidney would have been if peeing was a

thing I needed to do. That I was still conscious, not in the process of bleeding to death, and would regenerate in only a couple of days, was already blatantly cheating. There was no need to be greedy for more.

Of course, it did mean that despite finally finding out how mayor tasted, which regrettably was much like any other human, I was still starving. Normally I'd have gone for the meals on wheels that had just arrived at the crash site, but in my crippled state, and with the ridiculous weapons I could see them with, I figured it would be best to find a softer target. One of them had a *rocket launcher*, for goodness' sake. The same someone who was now walking in my direction, along with a squad a dozen strong. Poo.

There was no way he could see me, at least with his own eyes. He seemed to be checking his phone as he walked. Tracking something? The mayor? I pushed the stripped carcass onto the floor, along with the helmet, in case there was a tracking chip on one of them, then started edging away sideways. The group kept heading towards my previous location. Great, it wasn't me they were tracking. Or the head, which I still wanted to keep even if it would likely have gone off a little by the time I got I'd recovered enough to use it.

Perhaps I didn't need to forego my food delivery after all? I hid as best as I could, waiting for the group to arrive.

"The hell?" said one of the grunts once they came into view. The mayor's thick armour had been sliced down the torso and limbs and pried open, and the insides were not pretty. Another one of the grunts threw up.

"Stick together," said the leader. "We'll recover what we can, but remember that the monster that did this is still here. Keep eyes in all directions. Shout as..."

His little speech was interrupted by a deafening roar, and eight of the dozen grunts disappeared. Wow, this gun was *good*. How did I take a shot of this and *only* lose a couple of limbs? Alas, trying to fire the thing with one foot didn't work too well, and I lost my grip, causing it to fall out of the tree I was hiding in.

"Shit!" yelled the leader. "His disintegrator is missing! The monster is armed!"

Oh, so that's what this is called? Sounds cliched. An accurate description, though. There's not even dust left! Not great for when I'm hungry, but still pretty cool, and even I couldn't eat *all* of them.

"What? How can a monster use a gun?" one of them shouted while running for his life.

"Whoever is controlling it obviously has a far tighter grip on its reins than the boss can manage," the leader said, dropping his rocket launcher in order to run faster. "Or is here in person and wielding it himself. Either way, we need to assume a fully intelligent and armed enemy," he added, which was a rather hypocritical thing to say when he'd just given me a rocket launcher. Plus, he'd just confirmed that he worked for the mayor, and hence removed the little bit of guilt I felt about killing a bunch of them, and the other little bit of guilt I'd been about to feel from killing the rest.

I dropped to the ground and attempted to aim the rocket launcher with my one good foot. This being crippled business was starting to irritate me, but I managed to point it at one of the vehicles this group had arrived in. I waited for the five runners to get back and then fired. Alas, it would be pretty

clear where it had been fired from, so I hopped back behind the treeline without stopping to watch the fireworks.

The explosion behind me was quickly followed by a second, and then a third ten seconds later. There was the sound of gunfire, smaller explosions, and quite a lot of screaming. That had gone well, I think. A thud nearby and an associated shower of splinters suggested they were firing at random in this general direction, but I was too far in for anything to reach me, and it stopped before long. The sound of an engine followed, and then nothing but silence. I risked a peek and saw nothing. Apparently the survivors had fled. Two burned-out vehicles were the likely source of the secondary explosions, and scattered limbs and corpses were a certain source of dessert.

I ate as much as I could before grabbing a body that was still groaning and wiggling, along with the disintegrator, and fleeing the area as best as I was able, returning to the misty woods. An hour later helicopters swarmed the site, spending most of the day flying overhead, presumably searching for me, but none flew far over the woods, leaving me hidden and safe.

Conversation

"So, what's your name?" I asked my breakfast, flexing my newly formed wing. It was still missing the claws, and my leg was still only half regrown, but it was enough to get full aerial mobility back.

"Please..." my breakfast sobbed. "I have a family."

"That's nice," I replied. "I had one of those too. Then you guys kidnapped me from them and did this to me. Can't really hang around with them much now."

"What? Kidnapped you? What are you talking about?"

"Oh? You're from a different department then? Not one of the people who were kidnapping kids to turn them into monsters so the mayor and his chums could hunt us for sport? Or build a private monster army, or whatever his end goal was. Dunno why he'd even want to do that, given this disintegrator. Seems like he had more than enough weapons already."

"What are you on about? You can't just make monsters."

"No. And monsters can't talk either. Must be a very educational day for you, finding out all this stuff."

Finishing the leg I'd been munching on, I sliced off the next one, tightly wrapping cloth around the wound in the hopes he wouldn't bleed out before I finished.

"Ahhhh!" screamed my breakfast, thrashing around as much as it could with no limbs. Looks like I wouldn't be getting any more conversation out of it for a few more minutes, leaving me munching in... well, not silence. The exact opposite of silence, in fact, but not a noise with any sort of useful conversation in it.

"Why... why are you doing this?" my breakfast asked eventually, having recovered enough to speak.

An interesting philosophical question. "Why what, exactly? Eating you? Because I'm hungry."

"But... how can you claim to be human?"

"I don't. I said I used to be, not that I still was. There wouldn't be much point just changing our bodies. They changed our minds too, you know. Besides, the person who did this to me claimed to be human too, and I don't think I'm doing anything worse than he did. At least I don't pretend I'm not a murderous monster."

My breakfast collapsed against the ground, eyes glazed over, apparently accepting it wasn't going to get out of this. With no arms or legs left by now, it wouldn't have much life even if it survived.

"Jason," it said.

"Huh? Oh, that was your name?"

"Yes, it's Jason. At least remember the name of the person you murdered."

"Sheesh. Sorry, but my memory is nowhere near good enough to remember everyone. Most of the time I don't even bother to ask. I suppose I could start keeping a list, if that would help?"

Jason stared at me in disbelief. Apparently my thought processes were so completely alien to him that he didn't know how to begin trying to understand me. That struck me as a bit odd for one of the mayor's men.

"So what did you even do, anyway?" I asked. "You seem a bit... *innocent* to have been working for that guy."

"What? I'm just a security guard! I just follow instructions and stand around looking intimidating."

"Ah, so the sort of low-level grunt that never actually gets told what it is they're actually guarding?"

"I... Well, that's normal. I don't need to know what something is to guard it, do I?"

"You ever guard a facility to the south of the city?" I asked on a hunch. "About thirty miles out? Quite a large place, in the middle of some wheat fields."

"Yeah, I know that place. It's always in need of a large security contingent. At least, until recently. Seems to have gone dark now."

"Any idea what goes on there?"

"Of course not, and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"You don't need to tell me; I already know. It's where I was made. While you were there standing guard, up to fifty children at a time were locked inside, trapped in tiny cells, naked, alone, fed on raw flesh, unable to do anything as their human bodies and their minds were stripped from them. Then chips were implanted into their brains to take from them whatever small amount of independence might still remain. But I'm sure they were all glad that you were standing guard. Who knows what could have happened to them without your protection?"

Well, I guess it was nice to know that not everyone down there was an evil scumbag. Just a wilfully ignorant scumbag. Jason was looking distinctly un-horrified, so it can't have come as a complete surprise to him that something sleazy was going on. He didn't want to know the details and hadn't tried to find out. Admittedly, he probably would have got killed if he did, but again, no-one claimed the world was fair.

After another minute of silence, Jason spoke up again. "There was a second one."

"Second what?"

"Site. The location you described was codenamed Project Menagerie: A Site. There's a B site too. About twenty miles north-west of the city. Look for a water tower sandwiched between a wheat and a maize field. Should be easily visible from the air. The barn two fields over is the entrance. Now, if that's useful information for you, I beg you, just hurry up and kill me already!"

That was interesting news. And there I had been thinking that talking to my breakfast was just a way to kill time. Taking pity on the guy, I ran a claw through his heart, finally ending his life. Well, pity, and the fact that the second leg had run out, and I didn't fancy the logistical challenges of cutting additional slices of meat while trying to keep him alive.

Queen

After finishing my meal and properly strapping on the disintegrator, I hurriedly took to the skies. While I didn't want to attack until I was back in peak condition, with the mayor dead it was possible they might evacuate or torch the place, or that there would otherwise be some sort of activity I wouldn't want to miss.

I found the water tower and barn easily enough from my sky-high vantage point, but there were no signs of activity. There were no signs of life, even. No cars in the area, no guards standing guard. There was nothing at all to suggest this was some kind of clandestine government facility at all. Which was, presumably, the point. Not even humans were stupid enough to erect 'secret facility here' signs. Of course, this was all assuming I could trust my breakfast; he might have invented the whole story. This could be his uncle's farm or something.

It wasn't until the afternoon that all my claws were present and accounted for, by which time I was getting hungry again. The demands of this body were high, but to be fair, so was its performance, and hopefully I was about to get an all I can eat buffet. The only question was whether I should go in via the front door or the back.

I decided on neither, hovering slightly over the roof and aiming my disintegrator straight down. With a roar, the barn developed a third entrance. This weapon didn't seem as effective on inanimate objects as it did on flesh, but it was plenty for dusting its way through a thin bit of tin sheeting.

Dropping in, the insides were empty; it was just a regular, open barn. The barn doors were visible in one wall, as unguarded on this side as they were from the outside. A couple of horses looked at me curiously, but I couldn't see a single human anywhere. Maybe there was a basement?

"So, you came here after all," echoed a voice. It seemed to come from several places. Above a rafter, below a pile of hay, the horses' trough. Speakers? Dammit, was this a trap? Time to leave then; I flapped my wings and... couldn't move. It wasn't that my wings stopped working, or that I was paralysed. I simply wasn't allowed to fly away. I was *commanded* to stay.

"Oh, don't be like that. Stick around for a while. Let's have a nice little chat."

This was disturbing. It wasn't at all like how Lily felt while she was trapped, but the effect was the same. It wasn't that I couldn't move at all, but I couldn't seem to disobey the voice, however much I wanted to. No, it wasn't the voice; I was stuck even before it told me to stay. Don't tell me I was chipped after all, and someone had just activated it?! Could I slice it out, like the mantises did?

Maybe, if I knew exactly where it was. But I don't. Theirs seemed to be embedded in their brain stem. Not the sort of thing I want to cut into without knowing what I was doing...

"Aww, look at the little panicking harpy. You were feeling so superior to us puny humans, but now your own body is betraying you, and you don't even know why."

Some hay shifted, and a large trapdoor slowly swung open. Up it walked a man in a very business-like suit, his face and outfit very similar to the man I'd killed outside of their A site. I struggled to aim the disintegrator at him, but my traitorous body refused to point it anywhere near him.

"I'm not very happy with you, you know. It was bad enough that you killed my brother, but even worse, you then went and killed our boss. Do you know how much this place costs to run? Even if we found a new sponsor tomorrow, there would be no way we could keep the lights on until they paid up, let alone feed everyone. We had to euthanise our whole collection. But don't worry. I'm sure that you'll make up for it."

His words triggered a burst of hopelessness in me, despite that probably not being his intent. Why was I even here? What was the point? No-one here had personally done anything to me or my friends, so I wasn't out for revenge. The police commissioner was supposed to have been my next target. Yet once I'd heard about this place, I ended up coming over without thinking. What for?

It was Lily's fault. The bit of me that came from her didn't want to leave other children to suffer the same fate. She was here to conduct a rescue. Even Leona could justify it by saying she was here to collect minions. But I'd just found out that the children here were already dead. I was here too late, so what was the point now?

Well, I could make a new reason easily enough. This guy thought he could control me. That was enough for him to instantly make the top of my shit list... From the brother thing, it sounded like he was the one on the other end of the phone back when I first escaped, too. The one delivering the control chips.

"Oh? Given up already? No, those aren't the eyes of someone who intends to surrender. Don't tell me... You actually *care* about those animals? Aww, you came here to mount a *rescue*?"

And now he'd risen above the top, blasting off into the stratosphere. This guy was going to *suffer*. I swung the disintegrator around, fighting against every muscle in my body, straining to point it in the right direction.

"Drop it," he said, and I very nearly did. Even though I managed to barely hang on, it disrupted my attempts to point the weapon at him, leaving me back where I started. "You can still resist? Impressive, but useless in the end. Come here, my pet."

For a brief moment I expected my feet to betray me too, to carry me over to him, but nothing came. Instead, I saw horns rise from the trapdoor, followed by pointed feline ears, pale blue hair, a human face. A fur covered torso and feather covered wings. Long claws and scaled legs. A little taller than me, sharper claws and brighter plumage, but the biggest difference was in the horns; longer and whiter, with five smaller horns spaced evenly around her head, giving the appearance of a crown. A harpy queen.

I looked into her eyes, and found myself completely unable to look away, enamoured by the beauty within. "Drop it," the man repeated, and this time I did.

Challenge

Another upside/downside situation. Upside, it's not a control chip. Downside, he has a bloody *harpy queen*, and apparently my body is hardwired to obey her. And of course, her body is being remote controlled by a chip of her own. This guy is controlling me by proxy. How is she sending me commands? Can I block it?

"Tell me," he said, "just how *did* you maintain your intelligence? There wasn't anything special about you. You completed your metamorphosis quicker than most, yes, but you hardly hold the record. Most need to be sedated once their mind starts to break, but again, your case of lasting the duration wasn't unique. You went a few days without showing intelligence, but we've tried leaving subjects unchipped for months before and they never recovered. But you did. How?"

I did my best to hold my mouth shut, but it was useless. "Cooperation," I said through clenched teeth, at least managing to limit the amount of information I was spilling.

"Cooperation? Who with? I know my brother didn't order anything special with regards to you, so tell me."

"Leona," I muttered.

"And who is that?" he asked. "Come now, there's no point in resisting. You're only delaying the inevitable."

He was right. I could slow him down with one word or misleading answers, but unless I came up with some way out of this mess, it wasn't going to buy me anything in the long run.

The harpy part of me was confused. It was *right* that I should submit to the queen. Even if she ordered me to die, I would, without question and without hesitation. Circumstances didn't matter, so why was I trying to resist? Yet the intelligent part of me knew it *wasn't* the queen giving orders. Someone else was abusing her power. There was a crack there, somewhere. I just needed to find and lever it.

"Me," I answered, continuing my stalling tactics.

"So the secret to maintaining your intelligence was cooperation with yourself? Sorry, but I really lack the patience to play games. Tell me, precisely and concisely, without omission or deception, what you know."

"One plus one is two. One plus..."

"Ah! Shut up!"

Well, if he does ask me for such an ambiguous thing as 'what I know', obviously I'm going to start at the beginning.

"Perhaps an alternative method of encouragement is needed. Remove your left wing."

My foot moved before my mind had even finished processing his order, kicking upwards and severing my wing at its base. I tried to scream, but with his 'shut up' order I couldn't even do that, leaving me crumpled on the floor, a panting mess.

"Now then, shall we try this again? Why don't you..."

I glared upwards, and my expression must have been harsh enough that even he hesitated, despite his supposed control. But I wasn't staring at him anymore; my contempt was reserved for the queen. I'd found my crack; that she was *weak*. She permitted herself to be controlled and abused. Let her flock be stolen for the purposes of another. A *human*, of all things. She didn't fight; she submitted. She was weak, and *she did not deserve to be queen*. That position would be *mine*!

I let the rage take me, freeing me from her control. This was a fight for dominance, the prize being the position of queen and control of the flock. Admittedly, as far as I knew, I *was* the whole flock, but that didn't matter. It still worked to end this puppet show. My flight was crippled again, this time even worse than before given that I'd lost my whole wing, but we were indoors. A large barn, admittedly, but it wasn't the open skies. I climbed to my feet and charged.

"Stop," shouted the goon, but I didn't. I kicked out as I passed him, cutting into his side, my claw sliding deep between his ribs and slicing open a lung. That would have to do for now. I needed to keep my attention on the queen.

The queen remained silent. Whether she was the stoic type or had been ordered to shut up herself, I had no idea, but she hadn't been ordered against self defence, and she obviously did not appreciate this challenge to her authority. She took to the air while I remained grounded, her cold eyes watching me in mockery.

Lightning sparked around her horns, and I dived to the side just as lightning struck my old position. The sparks danced around, and a few stray pieces of hay caught alight. Great, now I could add a barn fire to my list of troubles. She flung a few more lightning bolts, but finding them ineffective, she dived in person.

Although I'd dropped the disintegrator earlier, it was still wired up to the battery pack around my waist. It was a simple matter to yank the wire and pick it back up. The diving harpy queen found herself staring down the barrel, just as I pulled the trigger.

It went phut, and a sad little red light started to flash.

Regicide

My third upside/downside situation of recent days. Upside, I now knew how many shots this thing could get off before a recharge. Downside, I had a very angry, very undisintegrated harpy queen heading feet-first for my face. I thrust the weapon's barrel upwards, catching her foot, pushing her off course, and giving me time to dive out of her way.

I cut away the weapon and turned to face the queen once more. She resumed showing off her magic, flinging more bolts of lightning at me. There were now a few fires around the place, and with all the dry hay and wooden structure, they were really starting to get going. The horses were panicking, and I saw the goon crawling along the floor back to his trap door, trying to hold his side shut. I was

a bit worried about what he would do if he made it, but right now I didn't have the leeway to do anything about it.

The queen was far faster than the mantis monsters, and given how freely she was flinging her supernatural abilities around, I had to assume she was well fed. Then again, the goon had said something about killing off their whole stock. They would have had a sudden influx of meat available.

Thinking that maybe she had eaten the children I subconsciously wanted to rescue enraged me once again. She was still chipped, which weakened her. Her base form had an advantage over me, and I had lost a wing, but that only served to counter her chip disadvantage. The end result was that we were evenly matched.

I decided to repeat my ranged attack, evading her attacks as I made my way back to my severed wing, and grabbing a claw in each foot. With the smoke rising and filling the top of the barn, the queen was having a worse time of the fire than I was, although that would all change once I ran out of fire-free floor to tread on.

From first hand experience I knew that a harpy struggled to switch direction while diving unless it pre-planned the movement first, so for my best chance at hitting her I needed her to dive. A few lightning bolts later, and she obliged, once more heading for me feet first at a ridiculous speed. I spun and kicked up both claws, one colliding with her scales and leaving nothing more than a scratch, but the other tearing through a wing. It wasn't a large wound, but it was good enough, the brief loss of control causing her to slam into the ground. I took the opportunity to jump on top, kicking down and leaving her with multiple gashes and stab wounds before she managed to throw me off.

Her hide was tough, and I failed to leave any fatal wounds, but she came up limping, and with one wing hanging uselessly. It seemed that we were now both grounded. In the middle of a barn that was, by now, a raging inferno. Deciding that it would be advisable to take this fight outside, I charged towards the barn doors, barrelling my way through. The old Lily would have decried my abandonment of the horses, but they were hardly high up on my priority list.

A messy fight followed. Harpies weren't supposed to fight on the ground, and the unintelligent queen had little idea how to compensate. If it wasn't for her bolts of lightning I'd have taken her out in seconds, but I quickly learnt that taking one of them to the chest at close range *hurt*. Wishing that I'd grabbed my third severed claw on the way out, I was reduced to grabbing stones from the floor and flinging them instead. One struck the queen in the face, stunning her, and that single second was all I needed to end it. A single kick severed her head and ended her life. It was my victory. I was the new queen.

A slow hand clap started up behind me, and I turned to see Mr Goon sat on a tree stump. He had wrapped something very tightly around his chest, but he didn't look healthy, and was making odd gurgling noises. I was impressed he'd made it out this far.

"Well done, well done," he rasped. "You've successfully foiled my plan to capture you, and you've killed my pet. No doubt I could survive this wound with prompt medical attention, but I struggle to

imagine that you're going to let me get it. So go ahead and ask me. Ask me *why I'm smiling*, I dare you."

"I wouldn't call what you're currently doing 'smiling', but sure, why not? What did you do?"

Some self destruct device for this facility, trying to take me out too? There wasn't too much I could imagine him doing in this situation.

"You see, the reason this site was built here is that the water main that supplies Kholakel runs underneath. Right under where I'm sitting, in fact. What do you suppose would happen if that pipe was flooded with mutagen?"

"Then the entire city would die. It kills everyone outside of a very narrow age range, and those it doesn't kill wouldn't last long enough to transform without the rest of the city functioning." I have to admit; that wasn't one of my guesses. Just how vindictive is this guy? Now I'm going to have to find another city to live in again.

A brief image of my family flashed through my mind. Dammit Lily, I'm going to have to go and rescue them now, aren't I? That's going to be hard with my injuries...

"Bah, you're no fun. Yeah, you're completely right. The mayor had some mad idea of turning the whole city into monsters and using them to take over the world, but it never would have worked. He had us trying to make delivery vehicles for the mutagen that would only infect those who would survive the process, as well as researching ways to increase the age range, but we were a long way off. My opinion was that we were better off with a smaller number of highly advanced super soldiers, but alas, I wasn't the one holding the purse strings. Seeing you makes it obvious that I was the one in the right."

As annoying as it was, there wasn't much I could do right now. Yes, I could kill him easily, but I didn't fancy walking back to the city. My parents pretty much lived off tea. Would boiling the water destroy the mutagen? Ben lived off anything that was fizzy and a minimum of fifty percent sugar, and hence wouldn't normally drink tap water. But did it have to be drunk in the first place? A shower? A hand wash? If I asked this guy, would he lie?

I tore a leg off the harpy queen, sliced through the scales, which seemed to have lost their durability once she died, and peeled open the flesh within. I hadn't tried eating monster before. How would it compare to human?

"That used to be a girl, just like you, you know. Eighteen years old, named Alice."

I paused for a moment, but I couldn't work up any sort of emotion towards that fact. "Alice was murdered some time ago. This was just something that was manufactured from the corpse." She tasted... okay, I guess. Human was better, but I could tell already that this was more energy dense. Whatever it was I needed, monster flesh had by the bucketful. Maybe the reason it seemed less appetising despite that was the fact that this was basically cannibalism.

"Oh? Is that how you feel about yourself too?"

Oh drat, we're back to the 'who am I?' question again. "Lily is a part of me, but she's not all of me. I have her memories, knowledge, intelligence. Not her personality, obviously, but even there there are bits of her. Like I said, cooperation. Lily chose to cooperate with me, not to fight me, and became a

part of me as a result. If you wanted an intelligent monster army, all you needed to do was to use willing volunteers instead of kidnapping people. What sort of kid *wouldn't* panic and fight back when a monster starts taking over their mind? Well, apart from the obvious one, but Lily was weird."

The goon's mouth flopped open. To be fair, that wasn't the full story. Someone with a weaker mind couldn't have managed it without being overcome completely. The escape had helped too, calming down the raging harpy and giving Lily an opening to act. If I'd been trapped in the cell much longer, Lily's consciousness probably wouldn't have lasted against the rage and hunger. It also helped that my body shape was still basically humanoid, reducing her dysphoria and helping her not to panic. That sort of thing could be overcome; I'm sure there were some weirdos out there who *wanted* to be giant insects or worms or whatever, but it would never have worked for Lily.

"Anyway, I answered your question, so your turn to answer one of mine. What's the deal with the control chips?"

"Oh, they aren't anything new. It's a neural interface we shove into the brainstem, that filters the signals passing through. They've been around for ages, fitted to slaves and such to keep them under control. Ah, there's another juicy titbit for you. How many of the people you killed were actually obeying the mayor of their own free will, do you think? Anyway, despite giving us total control of the recipient, the filter slows down neurological signals. It makes them slow and stupid."

Most of them, as far as I knew... The brain is one of the tastiest bits, and I'd have noticed if they contained chunks of metal. Maybe there were a bunch in that group that had come seeking the mayor's crashed car, but aside from that, I hadn't really been on any mass killing sprees in the first place.

"Anything else you want to ask? Otherwise I've still got one more."

"Yes, you seem disappointingly blasé about me poisoning a whole city. Don't you care? I even used the harpy payload to make sure it was related to you, you know."

"Not really. Lily's family and friends, maybe a little, but right now I can't fly, and there's no point stressing about something I can't do anything about." He looked disappointed with my answer, apparently hoping to hurt me with this last act. To be fair, the bit of me that was Lily was shouting pretty loudly to do something, but it was perfectly true that I couldn't think of anything *to* do. Eat the queen and regenerate as swiftly as possible was the best I could come up with. "Okay, my turn. Why are monsters so weak? Three hundred years ago we supposedly wiped out most of the planet. Your pets are chipped and kept half starved to keep their strength down, but I'm not, and I'm pretty damn sure that I couldn't fight off a whole city."

"Yes, they were stronger, but they also all starved to death within days. What you need to keep running is in very limited supply in this world, so we needed to make a trade. Less raw power, lowered energy requirements."

Fair enough, but further conversation was interrupted by the goon hacking and coughing. I was impressed at how much talking he'd managed to do with his injury, but this seemed to be the limit. I ripped a claw from the harpy queen and flung it at him, piercing his throat, and leaving him to suffocate.

Once I got as far as the queen's brain, the control chip was obvious. It was huge, and from the look of it, some amount of brain matter had been lobotomised to make space. If I'd eaten anyone in this condition, I would have noticed. I was also pretty sure that there was no recovering from such an operation. I stowed it away in my bag next to the mayor's head, in case I needed extra evidence at some point.

Something else that had become apparent by that point was that my regeneration was... strange. My head ached, my wing was regrowing faster than I expected, and I felt stronger. Poking at my head revealed that my skull had sprouted new bumps. Apparently calling myself the new harpy queen wasn't just empty words, but also physical reality. Whether that was from beating her or eating her, I had no idea.

Upside, I'd soon have lightning bolts to play with. Downside, I was now strong enough to fly despite my wing damage. I couldn't deny the part of me that was Lily. She was as much 'me' as Leona was, and for all the psychopathic murderer that I was, I wouldn't let my family die if I could help it, regardless of my personal safety. I limped into the sky on my one good wing and made my way home.

Poison

"Ben! Ben! Stay with me!"

We'll that's not a promising thing to hear from outside the house before I'd even landed. Mum sounded frantic. Hopefully, he'd just slipped and banged his head or something, and hadn't chosen this exact moment to stop being a fussy drinker...

"I can't get through to emergency services," came dad's voice, equally loud, shouting from another room. "Line is busy!"

"How can the line be busy?!"

I hurriedly let myself in through the back door, glad my waist bag had survived my adventures. I'd left most of my phone collection and looted money here, but still needed it to carry some amount of stuff, thankfully including the door keys.

"It's in the water!" I shouted the moment the door was opened. "Don't run the taps!"

"What?" asked mum. "Lily? When did you... What happened to your arm?!"

"After I went around dismantling the mayor's little operation, one of his minions decided to take revenge by poisoning the city's water supply. I'm sorry... this is all my fault..."

"Well, that explains why the line is busy," said dad, hanging up. "Do you know what poison it is, or if there's an antidote?"

"It's the mutagen that's used to turn people into monsters," I answered, causing dad to immediately pale; he'd read enough of the research notes to know about the age limits.

"What can we do?" he asked.

I saw Ben in mum's arms, eyes open but unfocused, sweating profusely. He seemed conscious, but only barely. The mayor's minions hadn't had any luck, but they'd been trying to make it work. I

didn't; I wanted it to *not* work. That may or may not have made the solution easier, but even if it was a hundred times easier, that didn't mean I could come up with an answer on the spur of the moment. I was no scientist!

From what I remembered, death in the young was because they tried to transform too fast. The body simply couldn't support it. That probably explained why Ben was already showing symptoms when the water had only been poisoned hours ago. Adults who ingested the water would probably be okay for a few days yet. The youngest may well already be dead.

"Ben? Can you hear me? You've got to try to relax. Don't panic, just rest and don't try to move." Telling someone not to panic was rarely successful, and even if it was, it would only buy time, but I couldn't think of anything else.

"Lily?" he asked, looking up weakly. "Your eyes... beautiful..."

Well, that's nice, but his infatuation with the improved fluffy and cuddly version of Lily was hardly relevant right now. Or was it? His comment about my eyes was disturbingly similar to my own thoughts when I'd first seen the queen. Of course; this is harpy mutagen, and I am the bloody harpy queen. And I also thought how wilfully I would die for her, if so ordered. Then *I* so order. Everything harpy in this city. *Perish!*

"Lily! Your horns are glowing," exclaimed mum.

"Good, that means I'm doing this right!" I answered. I didn't know *what* I was doing, but I was damn well doing something. I was going to save Ben, and if I accidentally saved the rest of the city in the process, well, lucky them. What I wanted to happen was to stop the mutagen dead, and kill off everything 'harpy' that had infected his body, but I'd settle for slowing it down enough for him to survive the process. The mutagen was hardly a harpy itself, even if the mutagen *made* harpies, but logic could go screw itself. I'd just been fighting something that shot lightning bolts from its face, so logic was obviously not a required participant in these proceedings.

Ben's fever abated, his breathing steadied, and he fell to sleep, mum sleeping next to him, still holding him in her arms. I kept up whatever it was I was doing, just in case. I wasn't going to stop just because he looked better. I was going to stay right here until he woke back up.

Dad, relieved at his improvement, quietly switched on the TV. All channels were broadcasting the same thing, a public warning that a poison had been introduced to the water supply and not to drink it until further notice, and to please stay away from hospitals as they were overwhelmed. They advised inducing vomiting followed by rest for anyone who had drunk any. Maybe that would help, if they were quick enough.

"Have either of you two used the water?" I asked.

"Yes, but boiled if that makes a difference."

"No idea. If not, hopefully whatever I'm doing to help Ben will help you too."

"So..." started dad, carefully, "now that the panic is over... I saw you on the news yesterday."

Oops. Well, I wasn't expecting to have got away with that one in the first place. "Nothing bad, I hope?"

"Twenty-two deaths, apparently."

"Really? There was the mayor, and some others in the car with him, then eight of the thirteen who came at my hiding place, then whatever the rocket did. I didn't do an audit afterwards or anything. Oh, and then there was breakfast, I mean, Jason. I suppose it could add up to twenty-two."

"Well, whatever you did, the military has been called in."

"Bah. Don't suppose they said when?" Very quickly, judging by the swarming choppers at the crash site.

"No, but I can't help but notice that you turned up here in daylight, with the entire city watching out for you."

And going slower than normal too, thanks to my missing wing. Thankfully, it was back now, my upgrades apparently having increased my regeneration significantly. "I needed to warn you about the water. I couldn't wait till night. I was almost too late as it was."

"I know. I'm just saying, those helicopters we can hear outside are probably for you."

Crap. I'd been so busy concentrating on Ben that I hadn't even noticed.

Monster

The doorbell rung. "Coming!" dad shouted. "Don't worry. I'll play it off as a mistake or a prank," he added more quietly, leaving me with the sleeping duo. If they came in, this would not be pretty. How do I keep my family safe from the crossfire? I heard the door open, and dad giving a greeting.

"Hello? Can I help..."

Dad's voice was cut off with a grunt, followed by pounding footsteps. Forget hiding... They just hurt my father! They dared to *harm my flock*. If they killed him, I will end this whole damn country! I marched out to the top of the stairs in righteous indignation. Well, maybe not *completely* righteous, but very definitely indignant.

"Target sighted on staircase, engaging," said a figure in body armour and gas mask, *after* opening fire on me with some sort of machine gun. That obviously woke mum up, who started screaming.

Oddly, it hadn't even occurred to me that walking into the line of fire of some sort of specialist military group was probably ill advised. It just seemed completely implausible to me that they could harm me. And indeed, they couldn't, so I just stood there until they stopped firing.

"Weapons ineffective," the same figure said. "Repeat, weapons ineffective."

"If you wake up my little brother with all this noise," I said, "I'm going to take those guns of yours and shove them so far up your arses you'll be spitting bullets." I at least maintained enough presence of mind to not threaten to rip their hearts out and eat them, not that I particularly wanted to eat this lot. They looked unappetising.

"Permission granted for explosives," came another voice from some communications device.

"Collateral damage authorised."

"And if you *hurt* my little brother..." I continued, any presence of mind now utterly shattered, walking slowly down the stairs. "I will show the whole country of Lecolie the true meaning of the word monster."

He didn't respond, but grabbed a grenade from his waist, dying to a lightning bolt to the head before he'd even been able to lift his hand. Apparently I've developed enough to shoot them now. Nice.

"Target unconfirmed," shouted a second soldier. "We have a harpy queen here, not a regular harpy. It's intelligent, talking, and apparently defending the residents of this house."

Now at the bottom of the stairs, I could see my dad lying unconscious outside of the front door, bleeding from his head, and being lifted onto a stretcher. "And which one of you bastards did that?" I asked, coldly, as a half dozen burly, masked soldiers with body armour and heavy weaponry backed away from me. Dad was breathing, but had clearly been knocked out. He didn't seem to be in danger, thank goodness, but they did seem to be in the process of taking him somewhere. As if I would let them... The soldiers moving him melted under my torrent of lightning.

To avoid further danger to my family, I stepped out into the street. "Well, come on then! I shouted. No collateral damage to worry about out here. If you want me, come and get me!"

Okay... did not think this through. There's a *tank* in the road. Should not have gone outdoors, or at least taken the back door. How did they get a tank down a residential street? This one's barely wide enough for a bike! At least five copters in the sky too. Can't see what sort of armaments they have at first glance, but I'll assume some rather big guns. And yet, none of it scared me. It *still* didn't feel like anything could hurt me.

The tank actually fired, which seemed like a spectacularly bad idea in such a narrow street, but I just held up a wing and the shell failed to penetrate. Even my feathers were unruffled. I could probably just fly away if needed, now that my other wing had finished regenerating, but I didn't. I heard the clatter of grenades landing around me, and ignored them, considering them unworthy of dodging. The explosions did nothing, failing to even deafen me.

More bullets struck me, snipers in the choppers. Again, they did nothing. Another chopper launched missiles, so *then* I took off, but not because I was worried about myself; I just didn't want to see the street destroyed. I zapped them with lightning before they could reach me, anyway.

By this point, I'd finally got it through my head that something weird was going on. I shouldn't be able to tank a literal tank, upgraded to a harpy queen or not. The queen I'd fought hadn't had *that* much higher base specs than me. It didn't take much thought to work out what exactly the problem was either; it wasn't just the soldiers in my house, but none of the humans arrayed in front of me looked appetising. Nor did the thought of human in general or, for that matter, squirrel. I was hungry, but the whole idea of 'eating' suddenly seemed unnatural and unpleasant. I hadn't evolved into the human-modified and limited version of a harpy queen. I was the pure blooded original, utterly above anything humanity could throw at me, and destined to starve to death in mere days.

Rampage

"If one more person shoots at me, I'm going to start fighting back," I said, not needing to shout because I knew full well that the wind would carry my voice to whoever I wanted to hear it. There

had been a natural lull in the fighting, and for now all was quiet. I was hovering in the air a short distance above the rooftops, and I could see the damage these guys had inflicted; windows shattered by stray bullets, crushed cars that their tank had run over, cratered tarmac where grenades had fallen. Goodness knows how much worse it would have been had the missiles landed.

A bullet struck me in the back of the head, unable to penetrate, but showing that my warning had been unheeded. I turned and saw the surprised-looking sniper hanging out of the helicopter. "So be it," I muttered, sending a blinding shaft of lightning into it, causing it to explode in a bright fireball, raining shards of glowing metal out over the neighbourhood. It was a different level entirely to the harpy queen I'd fought, and for a brief moment, I could see Maximilian's point.

That seemed to be the signal for all hell to break loose once more, as bullets rained on me from above and below. I downed each chopper in turn, melted the tank, then dived back to ground level, racing along the road and slaughtering the contingent of soldiers. It took mere minutes to reduce the whole attack force to a pile of corpses. This was... a waste. They were no threat to me, and I couldn't feed on them. I was simply angry because they'd invaded my home. It was a pointless slaughter.

I flew high in the sky and looked around. That many helicopters arriving that quickly didn't come from nowhere, and sure enough, I spotted a bunch of tents outside of the city. Some sort of forward base? It was impressive they'd set it up within a couple of days. It would take even less time to tear it back down.

I descended out of the sky, greeted by yet more gunfire. Why did they think two hundred bullets would work when one hundred didn't? I washed the ground with lightning, leaving streams of molten rock in my wake, soldiers, vehicles, structures reduced to nothing. This was all so stupid. Why didn't they just stop? For that matter, why were they using boring, plain old guns? The mayor's disintegrator was much better. It might even be able to sting me a bit.

A voice shouted out across the battlefield, from whatever bits of PA system were still intact. "Cease fire! Cease fire!"

Most of them did, faces twisted with despair. Those who didn't swiftly had the option taken from them, as I reaped yet more lives. Then all fell silent once more. I looked around until I spotted the man with the microphone in his hands, watching him shiver as he looked back at me. It hadn't been the same voice as the one that had declared collateral damage acceptable, or else he'd already be dead, but he still may have given the order. It was time to find out.

"You invaded my home," I stated as I descended, "attacked my father, traumatised my mother, almost blew up my brother. Why? Dad politely opened the door to your men. Yet they didn't even let him finish his sentence before forcing their way in."

"Because a monster was sighted entering the property. It's our job to..."

"Feel free to finish. Your job is what? Kill monsters? Because I thought it would be your job to protect people from monsters. Which you spectacularly failed at."

"That's..."

"Do you even know where monsters come from?"

"Of course not! No-one does!"

"I do," I answered, taking a seat on the burnt-out remains of some sort of armoured car. "Originally, three hundred years ago, from another world. Dunno how they got here, but I do know that once they were here, they couldn't get back. They wiped out most human life within days, then promptly died of starvation because our world didn't have any of what they considered food."

He didn't look surprised at that, so presumably was in on that little secret already. His grunts weren't, judging by their surprise. "Which is exactly why it's so important that we deal with newcomers swiftly, now that they're making a return!" he shouted.

"Except that they aren't. The weapons you just used on me weren't any better than what was available three hundred years ago, and they sure didn't work back then, so what do you think is different now?"

"Nothing! It's just numbers. Back then we were flooded, now it's just one at a time."

"Nope, as I've just proven, everything you can throw at me is completely useless. The fact is that you haven't been hunting monsters all this time. You've been hunting people."

Now his eyes opened wide in surprise. "What's that supposed to mean? I can assure you that what we've been hunting are *not* people."

"Okay, that was a little inaccurate, I'll admit. Let's go with *former* people. You see, Maximilian of Ascendant Technologies fame decided that those monsters were so far beyond humanity that they deserved to own this world. Dunno why, but having met the guy, he was definitely a tad cuckoo, so I doubt there was a logical reason. Anyway, point is that he set about splicing monster DNA into humans. Came up with a way of manufacturing hybrids. Then the ex-mayor of this place got in on the action, wanting to build himself a mind-controlled monster army. When I called those humans you just hurt 'family', I wasn't being figurative; I was one of that man's victims. I managed to escape before they lobotomised me and stuck one of their mind control chips in my head."

Actually, now that I think about it, doesn't that mean this guy owes me? "So, in summary, you've been chasing down an unending supply of monsters all this time, while I was left to go and do your real job for you, by taking out those responsible for making them. You're welcome."

"And you have evidence of that?"

"Yes, but I'm sure as hell not giving it to the military. Goodness knows what *you* would do with a mind-controlled monster army. Believe me or don't, I couldn't care less. You needn't worry about me, anyway. I only returned to Kholakel in such a non-sneaky manner because my brother was poisoned, and I was in a hurry. Normally I'd do my best not to scare people. Now, if you're done here, can I go back home and starve to death in peace?"

"Starve to death?"

"Yes, starve to death. Isn't it obvious from the way you couldn't hurt me? When I evolved from harpy to harpy queen, I lost my spliced human hybrid bits. Upside, I'm now almost invulnerable. Downside, I can no longer eat, and will now meet the same fate as all the other invaders from three hundred years ago. Sorry, but you wasted your time and your men. I was dying anyway."

"Well, you'll have to forgive me for not taking you at your word."

"Like I said, believe me or not, I don't care. I could kill the whole lot of you if I wanted. If any of my family had actually been hurt, I *would* have. Now get lost." Actually... Maybe I should cash in that favour already... "Or if you do insist on staying, at least go after the masterminds while you're here. I still have a bunch of people on my kill list I intend to take care of, so if you'd prefer them to have a proper trial and whatnot, you might want to get there before I do."

"For a self declared human, you sure resort to killing rather easily."

I stared with incredulity. "Really? First, I'm not human and I don't pretend to be. I may have some lingering familial feelings, but I'm very definitely a monster. Second, you've apparently not met many humans, or at least the subset of them that manage to percolate to the top of society. The sort of scum that floats on the top. The sort of scum that turns children into monsters and releases them into a forest so they can enjoy hunting them."

At this point, my little rant was rather spoilt by the approaching roar of yet another missile, but this one was *loud*, and I had no idea where it had even come from. "I will not be swayed by the words of an invading monster. I will do my duty, at the cost of my own life if needed." he stated coldly.

I twisted and attempted to zap the incoming missile, but it was moving too quickly, and my lance of lightning harmlessly passed by its side. It wasn't aimed straight at me, but impacted the ground nearby. The entirety of the surviving camp was blown away, and I was pushed up into the air, but even with this much I remained uninjured. Whether the general type guy I'd been ranting at had survived was doubtful, but right now, I didn't care. If they wanted to blow themselves up out of some sort of sense of duty, they were welcome to.

As for me, since I hadn't convinced these guys to finish my clean-up for me, it was time to visit the police.

Flock

"Hi, I'm here to see the commissioner. He has an appointment with me. He may not know about it yet though."

The terrified receptionist pointed at a lift. "T... Top floor. Room 501."

"Thanks. Have a nice day."

I was actually impressed she'd managed to speak. Unlike my phone buying experience, no-one had complimented me on the quality of my costume this time. Three people had pissed themselves when they saw me, and several more had fled out of the back. No-one had outright collapsed, which was nice, given that I didn't actually intend them harm. Equally nice was that no-one had shot me. In fact, about half of the remaining people kept stealing glances at me, looking rather conflicted about whether they should run or welcome me. That was a little weird, but I guess I am something of a local celebrity now. Maybe they were the few uncorrupted cops?

One far calmer person had snuck off into a side room, but alas x-ray vision was not among my abilities, and I had no idea what he was up to. My assumption would be phoning up a warning, which meant I should hurry before my target ran away. I ignored the lift for the stairs next door,

flying up them far faster than an elevator would manage. As the receptionist had pointed out, the doors were helpfully labelled, so I found the one marked 501 and gave it a good kick.

I stepped into the room and was welcomed by a familiar roar, followed by what felt like a punch to the gut, a louder bang, a lot of sudden sunshine and the personal attention of gravity. Apparently he had used the warning to prepare to fight, rather than to run away. How impolite...

I caught myself in mid-air, facing the me-shaped hole that had abruptly appeared in the side of the police station, but I suddenly found myself distracted from my prey. My mouth was salivating; I smelt something *tasty* in that room. That was unexpected. Does that mean there is something in the world I can eat?

I flew back through the hole, slightly enlarging it in the process, and this time I got a good view of the police commissioner, wielding the same sort of disintegrator that the mayor had. Last time, one shot had robbed me of two limbs, but this time it just threw me backwards. My fur was a little scorched, but I hadn't taken anything I'd consider an injury.

He fired again, but this time I was ready for it and dodged the blast, which massively enlarged the hole in the wall and spoilt the humorous neat harpy shape. I heard brickwork and parts of the roof falling off into the street below, and on the basis that I probably shouldn't let him fire that thing too many times, given that I had more business here once I was done with him, I chopped his head off. It wasn't as if he'd seemed interested in talking, and even if he was, I should stop indulging people. After my chat with the general, I was starting to worry I was developing some sort of supervillain necessity to always explain myself.

With one freshly made corpse, it was time to find out what smelt so nice. At first I thought it was the commissioner himself, but closer investigation revealed it was actually coming from his weapon. Metal? There was plenty of that elsewhere. I started chopping it up and found it was actually the batteries. Well, I could shoot lightning, so it wasn't out of the question for me to have some method of absorbing it, but why wasn't I being attracted to every plug socket?

I sliced one in half, and it was no battery. The inside contained a spherical translucent blue lump surrounded by electronics and miniaturised equipment. And from the cut I'd just made in the orb, blue mist was leaking, the air shimmering around it. Very *tasty* blue mist. I held a claw over it, and following an instinct I didn't even know I had, I drew it all into myself, my hunger abating and the orb darkening to a dull grey.

Seeing that, my best theory was that the reason the military didn't have these weapons was because they had been born from monster research. That blue mist was something not of this world. Alas, I'd already killed most of the people who might know what it was, and how to get more. Drat. I'd have to go back to the monster production facilities once I was done here and see what I could find. Hopefully, they hadn't been completely scrubbed.

For now, I had another task to do. Taking the head of the commissioner, I made my way back to reception, hastening my journey by dropping out of the new hole in the wall and going back through the front entrance.

"Hello again," I said to the empty space where the receptionist had been standing a few minutes earlier. "Please stop hiding behind your desk. I'm not going to hurt you."

"H... How can I help you?" came a stuttering voice, the receptionist's head poking cautiously up into view.

"I have an appointment with the rest of the corrupt cops, in two hours' time, right here, but I suspect they might not know about it either. Could you inform them all, please? Just the ones who were doing cover-ups for the mayor. Particularly the kidnapping of me and the other children, and the framing of the guy who tried to rescue us. Justin, I think his name was. I don't care where they are, or if they're on vacation. Just get them all here. If I find any missing, I'm liable to start burning down buildings trying to find them."

The receptionist just stood there gaping, but it wasn't like I was really expecting her to be able to do that. I was hoping that the other people in the room would spread the word, and I'd get a decent crop, even if not everyone. In fact, all the people who had been looking at me earlier snapped to attention the moment I started to give my instructions, and once I'd finished, there was a chorus of 'at once', 'right away' and 'yes my queen'. That last one in particular was strange...

And then one of them turned to me on the way out, blushed lightly, and whispered, "your eyes are beautiful," before turning back and running away. Ah, so these are people who drank the poisoned water? Apparently, despite me attempting to kill off the mutation before it even got going, they still saw me as their queen. Great. Adding to the rest of my ridiculous abilities, I apparently now ruled a sizeable chunk of the city. A flock of my very own. If I do manage to find a new food supply, I am definitely running for mayor.

Clean-up

While my loyal subjects were running around arresting their colleagues, I paid a visit to the newspaper offices. Once again, some amount of panic was caused by my entrance, but this time I wasn't after anyone specific. I simply walked into the middle of the room, held up the heads of the commissioner and mayor, one in each wing, and shouted out. "I look forward to reading your front-page retraction of your story about Justin in tomorrow's edition, along with the story about what really happened."

I dumped the heads on a particularly snazzy looking desk, hoping it belonged to someone important, then turned around to leave. I didn't feel that explicit threats were required, given the situation. I'd made it halfway to the door when a very nervous lady whimpered, "excuse me, but what really happened? We... kinda need to know if you want us to print it."

For a moment I thought she meant that she wanted me to give her my own made-up version of events, but on reflection, they probably really *didn't* know what had happened. Having someone lie for you doesn't necessarily require them to be in on the truth. Thus began a very strange hour in which a bunch of newspaper reporters interviewed a harpy queen. From my own questioning, it turned out they didn't even know what they were printing was a lie; it was all based on information received from police PR, which at least saved me from needing to murder anyone mid-conversation.

A biologist friend of one of the reporters was magicked up from somewhere to inspect the data I'd swiped from Maximilian, and concluded that yes, it looked plausible. Someone looked at the mind control chip, and confirmed that yes, it was indeed a very complicated piece of electronics and that it did still have brain matter plastered to it, but they had no idea what it actually did. Someone

poked at my face and concluded that I was indeed not wearing a mask to make myself look like Lily. I fired a bolt of lightning at a potted plant to confirm that yes, I can shoot lightning, and also to give an example of what would happen to the next person to poke my face.

When the time came for my appointment at the police station, they even sent a couple of people with me, a reporter and photographer. I believe that, aside from carrying Ben up the stairs, that was my first time giving someone a lift of their own free will and without intending to eat them afterwards. From their faces by the time we landed, it might also be the last. Harpy-airways apparently did not make for a comfortable flight experience.

There was a crowd outside of police headquarters, at least half in uniform. Apparently, when I'd ordered them gathered in the foyer, I'd neglected to account for just how many corrupt cops there were in this city. A lot of them were raging, contained by handcuffs, rope or in several cases broken legs. Others weren't, just standing there like zombies. At least until they saw me, when their eyes lit up. Silly me for not considering that; of course the corrupt ones would have been poisoned just like everyone else. That would explain how they'd gathered so many; their own had turned against them.

With reporters watching, and me having a half-formed wish to take the city for myself, I decided that indiscriminate lightning was not the way forward, and instead had them each talk about what sort of things they'd done. I was even kind enough to think of their well-being, and that they didn't want to be stuck out here in the sun with nothing to drink, and that people should go and fetch them something. Preferably something fresh from the tap.

It was actually surprising how well the city was holding together, given that it had theoretically lost its water supply. My best guess was that my actions had meant that some sick kids were all that had happened, and now that they'd got better, the panic had died down. I didn't even know if the mutagen was detectable. They might think the whole incident was over already.

Despite my intolerance for being controlled, I had no qualms about controlling others, and before long the whole group was infected. That was a titbit I didn't let the newspaper know; I let them believe that they were being so cooperative on account of their terror, which was not only plausible but also not completely inaccurate.

Some of the tales were harrowing. Innocents killed just because they'd seen something they shouldn't, being in the wrong place and the wrong time. Police being brought into the kidnapping squads when they needed more manpower. One man admitted murdering the woman I'd rescued from muggers back when I'd first escaped, simply because she'd recognised my face. That one needed all of my self-control to not vaporise there and then, but I noted down an address, and would certainly be making a more personal, private visit later on.

Criminals would no doubt have a field day today, with pretty much the entire police force tied up here, but it wasn't as if they'd been particularly effective to start with, so the city would probably survive. I let them get back to their jobs eventually, with suitable orders to start doing them properly, by which point the newspaper must have had months worth of material. The reporter and photographer decided to go back to the office by bus, having had their fill of the monster express, which left me with my last task of the day.

I flew back to Project Menagerie: B Site, hoping to find the secret of the batteries. My revenge was done. I'd dismantled the mayor's operation, killed the people at the top of the command chain, and exposed those who helped cover it up. I didn't know if the orders I'd given to the infected would stick around after my death, but neither did I know if they'd stick around long term even if I was alive. I'd carried out all of the goals I had when I first escaped, but that didn't mean I planned to give up and die.

Yes, I was a monster, a thief, a murderer. With a few exceptions, I cared little for human life. But even the original, innocent Lily hadn't wanted me to die. She'd made the decision to protect Leona, even when Leona was a berserking beast incapable of anything except raging at her captivity. Now that there was a chance, however remote, I had to try to seize it.

The underground tunnels were dark and cold, power to the place apparently having been disabled or lost. I made my own light, channelling a tiny amount of lightning and making my horns glow. I found the metal prisons, closed and locked, but the doors providing no resistance to my claws. Inside were corpses, some half or fully transformed, others completely human, but none alive. They weren't starved or injured, so I assumed that poison had been pumped in through the vents. From the distressed state of most of them, it hadn't been fast acting.

In one of the cells, I found Alicia. She still looked human, except for the white hair and skin, and blood-red eyes. She also had significantly lengthened and sharpened canines. At a guess, she had been some sort of vampire. What was she doing here? Had she not been killed back at A site? They'd transported some of them here? Samantha wasn't here, nor were there any monsters that matched the transformation she'd been going through, but even so, Alicia was. I'd been mourning her death when she was still alive and imprisoned. I could have rescued her... The Lily side of me was distraught at that knowledge, leaving Leona to be the logical one for once, insisting that Alicia's mind would have long since been gone. Despite how much it looked like her, I had to remember that it wasn't.

I moved further in, finding labs full of unidentifiable equipment and monster parts. A half-dissected corpse still lay on an operating table, a cache of control chips nearby suggesting that the table was used for more than just research. The well-worn straps on the table suggested that some of the patients to cross this room hadn't been sedated at the time. Everything was clinically clean, smooth white walls, steel surfaces, not a single plant or decoration.

I found what I was looking for even further in. A room in which the walls were lined with green fluid filled cylinders, each containing a human floating within. Tubes were inserted into every orifice, more embedded into an arm, presumably tapping into the bloodstream. All were dead now, but they had obviously been kept alive in there while the setup was active. Wires fed from the top of each cylinder up and across the ceiling, all congregating in the centre, where they dropped back down to a pedestal in the centre of the room. On top sat one of the small blue orbs.

So, whatever it was, they pulled it out of humans, apparently not killing them in the process, and then stored it in those orbs. Would it all start working again if I got the power turned back on and found some fresh meat? Did I need to find someone who worked here? Would the computer systems have data on what this was and how it worked? They were answers I didn't need

immediately; I estimated that I would need two orbs a day to stay at full power, or could survive on one, and at the back of this room was a cupboard containing hundreds.

Even if it's a monster like me, it's okay if I live a little longer, right?

Family

The next morning, I dropped down once more into my own backyard, the street at the front still bearing the scars of the previous day's incident. It had been a busy couple of days, between the queen, the poison, the military, the police and the newspaper. Going from thinking I only had a few days to live to having around a year, or more if I could get the production facility back online. I was rather hoping that today would be less... *full*. Heck, it had been a busy few *weeks*. Wasn't it less than a month ago that I'd been a perfectly normal human schoolgirl?

I opened the back door to find Ben sitting at the table in the kitchen, eating breakfast in his school uniform, because of course a mere military strike on the neighbourhood and poisoned water supply was no excuse to cancel the school day.

"Lily!" he shouted as I walked in.

"Hi," I responded. "How's my favourite little brother? Are you feeling better?"

Mum came running in, looking at me with a mix of fear and reverence. Oh damn; I recognised that look. Terror over what had happened yesterday, and reverence from the water supply. Guess boiling it hadn't helped. And now that I looked at Ben, he had the same look of admiration about him. He wasn't looking at me like a little brother who was proud of his big sister. He was looking at his queen.

Dad walked in, and unlike the others, he was under no delusion. "What I'm feeling towards you right now isn't natural, is it? What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I sighed, noting with relief that his head seemed fine, other than a small bump. "At least not deliberately. The water contained harpy mutagen, and I'm the harpy queen. Even if I neutralised it, it seems there's still some lingering effects."

This was... uncomfortable. My family were my anchor, the thing that tied Lily to this world. I didn't want them as *subjects*. If they didn't maintain free will, the ability to tell me when they thought I was wrong, I was likely to end up flying off the deep end and going full Leona, and that would not end well for anyone, particularly now that I probably couldn't be stopped by anything short of a nuke. "Right," I tried, completely uncertain if this would work, "as your queen, I command you to think of me as family, and not royalty. You do not take your orders from me, and you are not inferior to me."

Everyone blinked a few times before Ben said, "huh? You're being weird."

"That... helped, I think," said dad.

"Good, now will someone please go out and buy a paper?"

"I thought you just told us not to take orders from you?" quipped dad.

"That's why I said please," I answered, giving him a full-fat harpy grin.

Mum was not in such a jovial mood, and after yesterday I didn't blame her. Heck, dad was the weird one for being okay with it, while Ben just didn't understand, and had been knocked out by the poison anyway. She kept her silence for now, waiting for dad to take Ben to school.

"I'm... not sure who you are anymore," she finally admitted. "Lily wouldn't... Lily *couldn't*... But you just killed them all."

"They were about to start throwing grenades *inside our house*. What should I have done?"

"I... don't know. This world is shit. Why did you have to..."

"It's over now, I hope. I don't think anyone will be stupid enough to attack me again. I'm more worried about people taking you guys hostage, but right now half the city is under my control. I can... make this city safe. *Very* safe. And I don't even need to use violence anymore to do it."

"But isn't that just as bad? You're only replacing Grant with yourself."

"I'm not intending to kidnap children," I snapped, before considering my food supply. Even if they weren't children, I fully intended to lock people into tubes, nutrients forcibly pumped in one end, waste pumped out the other, left imprisoned just so that I could eat. Maybe I could pay them and organise some sort of rotation system? Make a respectable job out of it? But the truth was that I didn't care even if I couldn't. Just like the way I didn't care back in the ancient history of two days ago, when I ate people directly.

"Okay, maybe I would be almost as bad. I want to keep you safe and don't care about anyone else. The Leona side of me simply doesn't see people as important, and things could go badly if the Lily side of me doesn't keep up. So it needs to be up to you to make sure Lily stays strong. Is taking advantage of the poisoned water to purge the police force of corruption a bad thing? Tell me if you think it is, because I can easily stop."

Mum looked at me in confusion, not giving an answer. Frankly, I would be likely to get better answers from dad. Or would I just consider them 'better' because I thought they would be the answers I wanted? Dad would answer from a place of logic, whereas mum would be more swayed by emotion. Mum would be less likely to accept the ends justifying the means as an excuse.

"It's going to take some getting used to, having a monster for a daughter," she finally sighed, "but I'll do my best to keep you human."

"Oh, hell no," I said with a shudder. "Not human. Say 'good' or 'on the straight and narrow' or something, but not 'human'. I've met enough humans to know that you can be far more monstrous than any monster."

"Hah. However did I raise such a cynic? Fine, you can debate morality all you like with your dad instead, and I'll just make sure you know you're loved."

"That's... not bad, actually. That's something I need."

Dad returned home sometime later, with a newspaper. It was rather spectacular, laying out a list of over a thousand names of people who had lost their lives to the experiments. How they'd come by *that* information, I had no idea, but it showed what they could do when they put their mind to it, and were properly incentivised. Or when they were being manipulated by alien DNA. I hadn't actually

checked if anyone in that office had been under my influence, but it was safe to assume that at least some of them were.

There was also one story told the tale of me as a lone heroine, seeking justice at great personal risk despite the whole corrupt city moving against me. It was of debatable accuracy and strongly implied that the writer was high on mutagen, or possibly whatever Maximilian had been smoking. In any case, it was portrayed in such a way as to not paint me as dangerous, which was nice. Maybe I'd be able to walking into stores and buy things again?

Maybe things would flare up again in a few days, once the military realised that I wasn't going to die on schedule and they had something that was a threat to the whole country flying around, but for today I could relax with my family. Oh, drat... The military probably didn't know I'd said that, given that the one guy I told had exploded himself... I just want to relax for a few hours, dammit! I suppose that means they'll be less upset when I don't die, at least. Hopefully, they'll be too scared to come near me, or will believe the papers...

It was a pity the army guy had exploded himself; with a thousand names, I wanted to question him on how they had they never noticed the faces of their kills matched those of missing people... The man himself had seemed excessively patriotic, but it wouldn't surprise me if there were conspirators embedded in his unit somewhere. Or maybe the monsters scattered around the country were those without human faces, and anyone that might be recognised was kept in the forest.

Ben interrupted my musings by returning home and diving straight into a big, heart-warming hug. "See!" he said, slightly muffled by all the fur in his mouth. "I told you my sister was super fluffy."

Wait, what? I looked up to find another boy of Ben's age staring from the doorway. He brought a *friend* home? I recognised him as one of Ben's school friends, Tommy, who lives across the street and does visit us regularly. I suppose I hadn't told him not to, and he is only eight... So, now what? He was still staring at me. Would he scream and run? Follow Ben's lead and go for snuggles? Was he infected by mutagen and about to start gushing about how beautiful my eyes were? Really, none of the options I could think of particularly appealed...

"Why are you naked?" he asked. "Aren't you cold?"

Ah. Somehow, he managed to come up with something worse than any of my suggestions. I know I have no private bits, but for the sake of the kiddies, perhaps I should wear a dress or something?

Normality

"Whee," shouted Ben. "Faster!"

"Ahhhh!" screamed Tommy.

"I can see my house from here!" exclaimed a third kid, whose name I didn't even know. Seriously, since when did Ben get the idea that he could rent me out for cheap thrills? And why did I go along with it? Tommy's dad had welded together some sort of circular contraption with four seatbelted seats, and I was taking it for loops around the neighbourhood, much to their delight. I still hadn't convinced mum to have a go though.

It had been a few days since what had become nationally known as the Kholakel monster scandal, as if the city itself was somehow responsible, and the humans within had been completely unrelated to the whole incident. My parents had been visited by a couple of very nervous officials, who agreed that I was still legally Lily, and that I'd done nothing except act in self defence, so I wasn't about to face somewhere over a thousand murder charges. They thanked me for ending the production of monsters and asked *very* politely if I could possibly try to tone things down a bit in the future, please, if I didn't mind.

Surprisingly, I found that I *didn't* mind. I still had an innate desire to go and kill stuff, but I didn't *need* to anymore. I was back with my family, I'd taken revenge for my friends, and no-one seemed to be actively trying to kill me. On top of that, I knew that if I did, mum would be disappointed in me. Somehow, mum's disappointment was far more terrifying to me than any weapon.

Of course, toning things down didn't mean stopping completely, as someone I'd caught mid rape in the city centre could attest to, had he been conscious. Instead, he was sedated and wired into a funky green tube while my minions worked to get the mana extraction equipment running again after its sudden shutdown.

And mana it was, apparently. I never did get the name of the goon that was running the B site, but obviously he hadn't had the whole thing to himself. There were plenty of researchers previously working there, who had scattered back to Kholakel when the mayor died, promptly getting poisoned by the water. Once I found a few, I had all the information I needed to work out what was going on, and all the minions I needed to get it running again. The equipment they'd invented used humans as first stage concentrators, then drew mana out of their blood, storing it in prepared crystals. The crystals themselves came from the corpses of dead monsters, which meant we now had a limited supply, and that I needed to absorb the mana from them without slicing them in half in the future.

At some point, someone was going to ask me to pay an electricity bill or sign a pay cheque, or the state was going to try to claim the facility, but I could leave that problem up to future-me. Sometimes, I could be *incredibly* mean to future-me.

Mana fuelled magic and the supernatural in the same way that electricity fuelled a light bulb. Apparently it was incredibly sparse in our world, but living beings took it in and concentrated it, with higher life forms building up greater concentrations. Not enough to actually make use of it, but enough that the monster hybrids could survive off mammal flesh. It was hypothesised that in the world monsters originally came from, the natural density was far higher, and that humans would build up a sufficient concentration to make magic a reality.

That led to some of the more insane researchers wanting to build a portal to travel there. I noped on that one pretty hard. Not only did I not want to connect us to a world where monsters like me were common, given what had happened last time, but it raised some interesting questions about why life here could process mana at all when there wasn't enough of it to do anything with. What would be the evolutionary basis for that? Was life here somehow a refugee from this other world, escaping the monsters? Were mana levels higher here in the past? Those films with fire breathing dinosaurs may not be as inaccurate as I thought.

Among the minions, I unexpectedly found the operator who had originally been in charge of my cell block; the one responsible for watching me and sending me the notes. He'd been moved to B

site after A site shut down and had continued to watch cells here. Whether by coincidence or design, he'd remained in charge of Alicia after she'd been moved. I'd wanted to talk to him about her, and about me and Samantha, but when I got to his desk and saw the 'world's greatest dad' mug sitting on top, next to a photo of a smiling family, I lost control for the first time in a long while. Suffice to say, he did not survive the encounter. Between the mayor himself and the casual evil displayed by his employees, I'm not actually sure which was worse.

Not that I could claim the moral high ground here; I would be perfectly prepared to sacrifice strangers in order to protect my family too. I would not, however, *ever* sip coffee from a world's greatest daughter mug while I did the sacrificing. I would never make it a *job*. It was also rather hypocritical. I'd focused on him because he'd dealt with me and my friends, but wasn't everyone here just as guilty? Yet I was keeping them around because I needed feeding. They were all brainwashed with mutagen, admittedly, and while I hadn't been taking advantage of it for the rest of the city, I was happy to abuse it here, but that didn't excuse what they'd done.

I brought the kiddies in for a safe landing in front of our house, where a collection of parents were waiting to grab them, some still not entirely comfortable with the harpy express. Still, it was progress; comfortable or not, they'd entrusted their children to me. They accepted that I was as much a resident here as anyone else. This was my life now, I guess. Lily the harpy queen. My new normal. Should I go back to school too? I'd missed a month, but I could probably catch up.

What sort of job would I go for if I graduated? Despite my half-jokes about running for mayor, I was currently under the age limit, on top of lacking any relevant knowledge or qualifications. For all his depravities, the previous mayor did actually keep the city ticking over, which given its state was no minor achievement. I'd certainly be keeping a very close eye on whoever got the job next, but it wouldn't be me.

Back when I'd flown to Gronorlie, I'd been expecting a life of moving constantly from city to city or country to country, eating their criminal population, living on rooftops or empty housing, often being the cause of the aforementioned emptiness. Living back home with family and being an allegedly normal, minimally murderous member of society was a grating change. But for their sake, I could try to fit in.

I took back to the skies on my own, zooming upwards way above the clouds, climbing until the sky itself started to fade away and my face became layered with ice, neither the temperature nor thin air bothering me in the slightest. From this high up, I could see the world curving away beneath me. It was a beautiful sight and reminded me once more how glad I was to have my magical wings. I had taken everything the worst of humanity had thrown at me, and I'd not only survived, but I was happy with my changed life. I'm sure I'll have all sorts of problems in the future, but I can live secure in the knowledge that whatever comes my way, I can always flee up here to enjoy the view. And then throw lightning at my problems until they go away. Lightning is every bit as cool as wings.

Side Story 1: The Employee

A horn played two long blasts, before I heard the clunky noise of the heavy cargo bay doors starting to move. That was odd; we didn't normally have deliveries during daylight hours. I looked over

from the screens on my console through the window at the back of our control room, to see a white delivery van pulling in, the door starting to close again behind it.

The floor manager gave me a tap on the shoulder. "It's a little earlier than expected, but you have new intake."

Great, that meant something must have gone wrong; we hadn't been expecting them till tonight, after I'd finished my shift. Fortunately, that was nothing to do with me, and shouldn't cause any complications for my job beyond a little extra work right now. I handed my headset over to the manager who would cover for me while I was away from my console, informed him that nothing interesting was happening, and headed to the cargo area.

Five masked men had already exited the vehicle and had unloaded a trio of unconscious school girls, and had now moved on to stripping them and searching their belongings. I knew this group, mostly. One of them was new, but I knew the team leader, and he wouldn't let his squad take advantage. Seeing me arrive, the leader put down the backpack he was sorting through, and came over to greet me.

"Right, these three are all going to your section. We have Alicia, Samantha and Lily." He pointed at each of the three in turn, letting me know which was which. "They are..."

I held up a hand to stop him there. "Their names are enough. I don't need to know more, nor do I want to." It was selfish perhaps, and certainly unprofessional, as they might have information that might turn out to be relevant. The truth was simply that the less I knew about who they were, the easier it was to pretend that they weren't people, especially once their minds started to break.

"Fair enough. We'll take them to the cages then."

I led them into my section, my eye scans opening the biometric locks, letting them lay the three unconscious bodies down in their respective rooms. Whatever names and lives they used to have, now they were twenty-one, twenty-two and twenty-three, giving my section a full population of six. As ever, I felt sorry for them and whatever family they'd been taken from, but by taking this job I was ensuring that my own children were not the ones inside the cages, and that I had the money to keep my family in luxury. My mild insomnia was a small price to pay for that safety.

I locked back up, double checked the seals, and returned to my console. The floor manager handed back my headset, once again letting me hear the constant screaming coming from number eighteen. She wasn't reacting well at all to her captivity, and despite having had a couple of days to settle it didn't seem likely that she'd ever be cooperative. I made a note for the next shift that if she was still going by night time, I advised sedation. I know the bosses disliked sedating subjects during their metamorphosis, supposedly because it resulted in reduced intelligence in the end products, but sometimes there was simply no other choice.

Nineteen and twenty were doing much better. Nineteen was still crying a lot, but was still in good enough condition that we'd been able to start dosing both with mutagen the previous day. Things might change once they actually started showing physical changes, of course, but for now they were both stable.

The new intake were still sedated, and it was unlikely they'd wake up next shift. I'd probably be back on duty by the time they came around. Hopefully I wouldn't get another screamer.

When I turned up for my shift early the next morning, eighteen had been sedated, and the usual breakfast and welcome note had been delivered to the three newcomers, none of whom were yet awake. Alas, I didn't have long to enjoy the peace and quiet, as twenty soon woke up completely paralysed below his waist. It was unusual for that sort of thing to happen before any other visible changes, but not unheard of in cases like this where the end product wouldn't have legs.

Despite how calm he'd been in the two days since his delivery, he was starting to panic, and I couldn't say I blamed him. I hurriedly typed out a note to reassure him that the lack of mobility would be temporary, and sent it in through the secondary delivery system that was within reach of the bed. I sent a message to the kitchen to use the same delivery system, and was happy to see that by the time I was done, twenty had read his note and calmed down slightly. He was still unhappy and angry, of course, spending some time shouting out some colourful descriptions of what he was going to do to me and my mother. I wasn't even sure what some of the words he used *meant*. Kids these days...

Nineteen awoke, and like normal immediately burst into tears, crying for her mother. If she had any physical changes yet, they weren't sufficient to distract her from her usual routine. I could leave her to get on with it; she'd quieten down as soon as breakfast turned up.

It wasn't much longer until the new intake started stirring, the sedative finally wearing off. Twenty-one was the first to wake, looking around, and screaming for help. It took her ten minutes before she decided that no-one was coming to save her, and she started exploring her cage and reading the note.

Twenty-three was next up, and immediately attempted to climb out of bed, collapsing onto the floor. She didn't scream or shout though, which was a relief. In fact, she didn't say anything at all, which was a bit creepy in its own way. She stood up and explored the cage in complete silence, reading the note and saying nothing, looking with interest at the delivery system but not trying to stick her arm in like so many others. Then she picked up a book and started reading as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Or at least, that was what she must have wanted me to think. The IR monitors in the room could easily detect heart rate, and my readouts showed she wasn't anywhere as close to being as composed as she was acting. She was recovering though, and at the rate she was going, we might even be able to start with the mutagen before the end of day one.

Twenty-two was a bargainer. She awoke half an hour later than the two that had come with her, looked around, realised her circumstances, and immediately tried offering money for her release. If she had enough for that, she wouldn't have been targeted in the first place, and indeed she was being very ambiguous about the figures she was offering. Thankfully, that sort of thing was easier to ignore than the screaming, but that sort of person tended to panic very easily once the physical changes started. She had a nasty one too, I realised, looking at her notes. A sword spider... Arachnid metamorphoses never went down well. Something to not look forward to later in the week.

It also helped me that of the six, regardless of whether they screamed, cried, panicked, bargained or remained stoically silent, it was all for themselves. Not one of them mentioned any of the others that had come in with them. No-one ever did, at least not for a while, always selfishly worrying about their own situation instead. Just one more little fact I could latch on to to help me sleep at night.

Side Story 2: The Incorruptible

I looked at the computer screen in front of me, which was unhelpfully informing me that no match was found. For the third time, I compared the number plate I had entered to the video the witness had provided. I'd certainly typed it in correctly, yet the system insisted no vehicle with that plate existed. They must be using fake plates.

Three more children kidnapped right off a residential street. It was *humiliating*. These criminals were acting with utter impunity. There'd been two witnesses this time, and one of them had even managed to capture a video of the white van driving off. Well, even if it was using fake plates, there were more than enough cameras running on the roads to track its progress. I switched to the road network monitoring system and again entered the plate. It returned a message that no vehicle with that plate had been seen in the city within the last thirty days. So the plates were also covered with a reflector or something to prevent the number plate recognition system picking them up. I'd just need to do it manually.

I spent hours poring over camera footage, trying to track the van as it moved around the city, tracking it to the south side before hitting a set of malfunctioning cameras which had failed to record correctly.

This time I was under no delusions that the missing footage was the result of criminal forward planning; I'd viewed footage from one of those cameras myself this morning for another case, and it was working fine then. The footage must have been deleted since then. *Deliberately*. There's no way that happened by accident. No wonder these kidnappers were acting with such impunity; they had inside help.

How much of the police force was actually committed to working against crime, and how much was aiding and abetting? Sometimes I felt like I was the only straight cop in the building. A fact that meant that I ended up visiting the area personally, not trusting anyone else to do it for me, looking for stores or even residential properties that had cameras facing the roads. It took days of legwork, during which the commissioner was constantly blasting me for putting too much effort into the case when the same amount of effort could solve a dozen simpler ones, but I eventually found what I was looking for.

I found a witness who had seen my van enter a patch of farmland. There would have been no reason for that unless the end goal was in the area. I knew where to look. Alas, my request for police helicopter support was rejected on the grounds that I'd already wasted too much time, and even a search warrant for the grounds was denied. It was obvious that the responsible party had their claws in some pretty high places. I had little choice but to take matters into my own hands.

With a few other cops that I knew personally, along with a hired detachment from one of the reputable private forces that had sprung up once it became clear that no-one could trust the real

police, we made our way to the area. I'd been tempted to join one of the private forces myself, but alas, not everyone could afford their services. There needed to be *someone* looking out for the poor, trying to make a difference in our rotten city.

We found what we were looking for quickly; a barn that had seen far too much traffic, far too many tire marks in the mud for it to be used for only farming. We burst our way in, not caring for the lack of warrant, only to find it empty. Had they been warned and moved on already? I considered each of the people I'd brought with me. Had one of them betrayed us? Or had their inside man been following my investigation and moved the operation pre-emptively once I started getting close?

For once, my pessimism turned out to be unwarranted. The operation wasn't gone, merely well hidden, a trap door disguised under a bed of hay. Unable to open it, we cut our way in, but we found no-one inside. We did see mess rooms with abandoned food, still warm. Lights and computers were still turned on. Another exit stood open. We had made it here undetected, but the time it took us to enter was enough for the personnel to evacuate.

Our search for evidence quickly located an operations room, and it was there that words failed me. Ten stations, each with six screens, displaying separate cells, over fifty of them containing twisted abominations, partially human, and partially monster. A very few contained things that looked fully human, and one contained a full monster, but most were in between. I stood in disbelief as I watched, some of them screaming, some of them crying, some curled up and shaking on their thin cell beds. I watched the monster, a harpy, futility clawing at the walls of its cage. And I recognised its face; one of the three children I was here to find.

"What the hell?" asked someone, echoing my own thoughts exactly. Each station contained notes, and it didn't take us long to find out just what horror was happening here; this was a research facility, and the children were the lab rats. It wasn't just the three. This was a massive, well-funded operation. There's no way this could have been hidden with just one inside man. How many of the captains were in on this? Was the *commissioner*? Given his efforts to dissuade me from pursuing this, it certainly seemed likely.

"Let's... I don't know. Let's see if we can get them out of there, at least," I said, not really sure if it was a good idea. I don't want to unleash a set of monsters on Kholakel, but I really didn't know what else to do. The harpy wasn't the only one berserking, but those who were just crying or sitting there quietly should be okay, right?

We ended up reading through the notes for each prisoner, confirming that most showed no signs of what the notes called 'mental metamorphosis', but that it didn't matter. The effects of the mutagen they'd been exposed to were permanent and progressive. Even if we released them, they would continue to change until they all ended up as mindless monsters. The most we could do would be to break them out of the cells and let them spend their last few days with each other and family.

With a heavy heart, we got going. Most of them were so excited to be rescued... I couldn't bring myself to tell them that there wasn't anything I could do. Some of them were unresponsive, too distraught by their changes to even acknowledge their release. Others were heavily sedated, apparently being judged 'uncooperative', whatever they meant by that.

With most of them released, we were left with the question of what to do with the former Lily, along with two others whose intelligence had already dwindled to monster levels. We should at least give the family a corpse to bury, and we couldn't go back to our corrupt headquarters for reinforcements, so we gathered up outside, guns drawn. The sounds inside stopped briefly, before starting up again louder; it had apparently heard us and started attacking the door. But as we opened it, they stopped once more. It was waiting for us... Heart pounding, I kept my gun level, and looked into the slowly revealed room beyond. There was... nothing there.

The harpy dived in from the side and then leapt over our heads. I got a shot off, as did a few others, but with no sign of blood we must have all missed. I watched in horror as it tore down the corridor and turned towards the foyer where we had gathered the other children. This was a nightmare! We should have got them all out first. It was flying faster than I could ever run, so I fumbled for my radio instead of chasing, trying to give a warning to my colleagues elsewhere in the facility. I heard the sound of more gunfire, but it had all been useless. It wasn't long before the people I'd left guarding the entrance confirmed it had escaped.

Dammit! What have I just done?! I'd let a monster loose, this close to a city! The commissioner didn't need to be corrupt to have my head for a cock-up that monumental... Although a small part of me was actually glad about how hard an escaped harpy would make it to cover this whole thing up, there was no way I was going to get out of it without demotion at best, but more likely prison time.

So focused was I on the escaped harpy that it took far longer than it should have to notice the changed noise of the air conditioning. It wasn't until I'd made it back to the foyer, where I saw a number of the children rubbing their eyes and stumbling around that I realised something was wrong. "Poison gas! Everyone out!" I shouted, but it was too late for most. As I started to run for the entrance, I heard the sounds of people starting to drop behind me.

I only made it halfway up the corridor before I stumbled and fell myself, fighting to keep myself awake, but unable to get back up. Black dressed men in gas masks rushed past me, none of them even pausing to look down at me. One of the last to pass stooped momentarily, and once he'd moved on I saw the package of explosives he'd left behind. Another blunder... I should have had this place crawling with press and public as soon as we found it, and got everyone out immediately.

I fought against the drowsiness for a minute or two more, but it was obvious I wasn't going to win. I was going to pass out here, only a couple of metres away from the explosive that would doubtless claim my life, completely unable to move to disarm it. At least the kids I'd failed to rescue wouldn't have to suffer any further, but that was small comfort given how many friends and colleagues were about to die.

Should I have taken the 'advice' of the commissioner after all? No. *Never*. Despite my near complete failure, I was still glad I had come. Even if I couldn't save the people trapped here, if their captors are forced to destroy this place, then had I not saved the next set of people who would have been taken? I did my best. I may have made mistakes, but I'm not going to start regretting my choices now. I would face death with a smile.

Side Story 3: The Victim

The three thugs waved their weapons menacingly, but kept their distance. I could see two of them had visible pistols, and the fact that they hadn't drawn them was a good sign. They wanted our money, not our lives. This wasn't my first robbery, and I felt confident we could get out of this uninjured. I kept a wad of cash with me for exactly this purpose; enough that it should satisfy them, but not enough that we wouldn't be able to eat this month.

The third member of the thugs was licking his lips while staring hungrily at my wife. That was more concerning, but given that he was the only one without a gun, I hoped that the other two would keep him in line. Money was only money, and could be replaced, but *that* would be something else entirely.

I hurriedly rooted around in my pack, unwilling to risk them growing impatient. I already had my hand around the bundle of notes when a loud thud made me look up. The lecherous thug was on the floor, and his head was... *burst*. It looked like someone had taken a baseball bat to a watermelon. I looked on in shock, completely clueless as to what had just happened. I'd only looked away for ten seconds!

The remaining two thugs were equally confused. "Boss?" Called one of them, turning away from the corpse to the other thug, who presumably was the leader of the three. No, correction, where the other thug *used to be*. He had gone. No honour among thieves apparently; he had fled at the first sign of trouble, leaving the last member alone. Alas, he still had a gun, so little changed for us, unless he decided to flee too. Or had his own head popped. That would also work.

The last thug spun around wildly, presumably looking for his missing boss. Not seeing anything, he turned away from us and ran. He managed three steps before a shadowy shape swooped down from above. I saw movement that I couldn't make out, and the thug fell to his knees, clutching at his throat.

Now I felt a new sort of fear. That *thing* wasn't human. As close as we were to when the annual monster hunt was supposed to take place, had their population overflowed? One had decided to move into the city? And the missing thug hadn't fled. He was right there in front of me, clutched in the monster's talons, missing one arm and very obviously dead. The monster picked up the injured thug too, then turned to face us, hovering casually in mid-air despite carrying a fully grown adult in each of its viciously clawed feet.

I couldn't do anything. It wouldn't go away if I threw money at it. I couldn't fight it or flee from it. There was no method by which I could sacrifice myself to save my wife. I desperately wanted to run, however useless it would be, but I refused to abandon her. We would die here together. I looked into its inhuman yellow eyes, and for a moment I felt pride in the way I was managing to remain standing. Then it leapt, and my resolve fled as if it had never existed. I collapsed to my knees, closed my eyes and whimpered, but the end never came.

I opened my eyes again and looked around. The corpse behind us was gone, and I could see a receding shadow in the sky. It had apparently decided that three was enough. We were saved. As relief flooded my body, my legs gave out completely, and I fell to the floor panting, a warmth in my crotch betraying my previous terror.

"That... That was Lily!"

I looked up at my wife, who despite her reaction to the muggers, seemed to have taken the monster attack rather more calmly than I had.

"Who?"

"One of those missing children from the news today! That was her. I swear it!"

Okay, maybe she was more hysterical than I thought. The thing about the missing children is that they were *children*, not flying monsters. But she was utterly insistent, and although we really should have gone straight to the police, I wasn't averse to a quick trip home to let her try to prove it if it meant that I could get a much needed change of clothes.

And thus it was that I ended up in front of our computer, looking once more at that monster's face. Her hair was brown instead of blue, her eyes hazel instead of that unnatural yellow, the horns and animalistic ears were missing, she was wearing a small smile rather than the look of a predator looking at prey, but there was no doubt that this girl was the one who had attacked us earlier. My wife had been right. How was that even possible?

"I'll go to the police," I said, eventually. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

Leaving my traumatised wife in bed to recover, I headed to the local police station. Our brief piece of research had also let me know that the monster that attacked us was a harpy, not that putting a name to it reduced the horror in any way. When I reported the harpy attack at the front desk, they were *very* interested, as one might imagine, and I soon ended up in an interview room with the police commissioner himself, who had rushed over personally from their headquarters.

"And you're absolutely certain that the harpy had Lily's face?"

"Yes. It was completely identical."

"But you're sure it was unintelligent? It didn't say anything?"

"Yes... Those eyes... I'll never forget them. It was a monster through and through, and I was nothing more than its food. There was no intelligence there."

"Did you see where it went once it left?"

"Towards the city centre. I didn't see exactly where."

"And did you get any evidence? Pictures or video?"

"No, of course not! I had far more important things on my mind!"

"Sorry, but I had to ask, just in case. My final question then; who else did you tell? Who knows about this?"

"No-one. Well, my wife knows, obviously, because she was there, but that's it. One of the thugs was alive when it flew off with him, but given the amount of blood he was spewing, I doubt he is by now."

"Okay, that's all. Thank you very much for your cooperation."

I nodded and stood up. The commissioner stood up too, and then drew a silenced pistol, levelling it straight at me.

"Wha..." I started, before I heard a dull thud. I looked down in shock at the blood pouring from my chest, unable to move or react. The head of the police in this city had just *shot* me?! I collapsed to the floor, still in disbelief about what had just happened. Why?

The commissioner walked off without showing a shred of concern, opening the door and talking to someone outside. "We need to get a clean-up crew to Hook Street immediately. We'll claim there was a botched burglary. Everyone died."

"Understood. Shall I call the janitor to clean this mess up too?"

"If you would be so kind."

My wife! They were going to murder her too?! For what? Seeing a harpy?

The commissioner walked back in and looked down at me with an expression of pure contempt. I see... I was wrong. There was nothing evil in the eyes of that harpy. It didn't know any better and was just being itself. There was evil in the eyes of the man in front of me, though. He *did* know better, and yet he chose to do this anyway. Which one of the two was really the monster?

"Damn that mayor, expecting me to clean up his mess," the commissioner muttered, sounding inconvenienced and irritated. And that was the last thing I heard before the darkness took me.

Side Story 4: The Herald

It was a thing of beauty. A work of art. The most amazing thing I had ever set my eyes upon. Those who had brought it here for me had already extolled its magnificence, for none who looked upon it remained unchanged. This... this *god* had been cruelly taken from the world. It was *unfair*. The injustice must be rectified.

Flesh twisted into a hundred tentacles, arranged in seemingly impossible configurations, with some even appearing to pass straight through each other. A thousand eyes, frozen in time, still seemed to stare right through me. A thousand maws, opened wide. Claws and fangs, scales and hair, positioned seemingly at random. A wing jutting out from a lump of flesh here, and a leg there. Mockeries of faces, screwed up into expressions of eternal screams, protruded slightly from the raw flesh. It was pure chaos, and it was *divine*.

One look at the being was enough to change my whole mission. No longer did I want to exploit their alien biology for cures and medicines, or to advance humanity. Humanity was just so... small. It didn't matter. I needed to *bring this being back*. Even at the cost of my body, my sanity, my *self*. It deserved to rise again.

I'd dealt with monster corpses before, of course. Our government was eager to unlock their potential, as were those of every other country, given the destruction they had wrought upon their first visit. As a result, everyone with the necessary expertise were encouraged to provide their own input on the subject. All varieties we had access to had been DNA sequenced already, but even after all this time we were no closer to discovering how they actually worked. The eye-witness accounts

from the invasion had described fantastical, impossible abilities, so how could they be born from mundane biological components like DNA?

The thought of giving up my own body gave rise to the beginnings of an idea. If we couldn't reverse engineer these creatures from first principles, perhaps we could approach it from the other direction? We took tissue samples from the frozen corpses, and implanted them in other creatures. The cells may biologically be dead, but if their supernatural abilities were not grounded in biology, why should that matter?

The effects were quickly apparent. The supposedly dead tissue was virulent, infecting the animals it was implanted into. Trying to *transform* them. It failed, and all animals perished, but it was nevertheless significant progress. Why had no-one ever tried this before?

Further experimentation revealed two things. First that best results were achieved in a narrow age range, and second that higher, more complex, longer lived life progressed further before meeting their demise. Then the obvious solution was to experiment on the highest, most complex form of life we had available to us. After all, one look at the divine corpse was all that it took for anyone to realise the necessity of offering themselves up for the cause. My only regret was that I couldn't offer myself, needing to continue to lead our effort.

The result was a qualified success; an age range was identified in which subjects died not of the metamorphosis, no, the *ascension*, itself, but of starvation before their ascension could complete. It was the same fate as the originals, but no amount of food would help. Even intravenously fed nutrients made no difference. It wasn't mundane nutrients that the subjects were starved off. It was... something else. Something that was not available here, in our lowly world.

That of course posed a problem. How could we offer up our world when it lacked a basic requirement of their existence? In desperation, we tried taking tissue samples from half-ascended individuals. Diluting the original divinity with human taint. It was a high price, but if it led to success, we might at least be able to find out what it was we lacked.

It took several repetitions, but eventually the first subject survived, in body if not in mind. It was a bittersweet victory; our creation was above humanity, yet was so far below the glorious heights we were aiming for. While some of the originals had been mindless beasts, others had been highly intelligent, even communicative, yet all of our creations fell to madness, consumed by an unending rage. We had taken nothing more than the first step towards our goal. Next we needed to solve the starvation and insanity problems.

We observed that our creation favoured the consumption of raw flesh, and given the option preferred that of more complex life forms, up to and including human. That was a clue; the preferences correlated with the survival times of our initial experiments. It would appear that whatever these beings required could be found on our world after all, either produced by or concentrated by life. All we needed to do was find some way to concentrate it further.

It was at that point, when we were so close, that we were shut down. The same authorities that had tasked me with the research started complaining about my methods, and all the deaths. Why? Everyone involved was a volunteer. They'd all signed disclaimers, and all our paperwork was in order. What did they have to complain about? They claimed that viewing the divine corpse caused

madness, and confiscated it, but that was wrong. It merely showed the truth. I'd demonstrably done no wrong, so they couldn't touch me personally, but without some way to share the glory of these beings I could no longer secure test subjects.

I was reduced to entrusting my research to another, outside of Gronorlie and hence out of reach of our authorities. It was incredibly frustrating, particularly since he hadn't seen the truth. But I knew we'd win in the end. He thought he could control them. Control our gods! The very idea was laughable! I would let him build his army for now. I would even cooperate. I knew full well that once he succeeded, created not our current mockeries, but a living, breathing divine being, his creation would never tolerate any form of control. They would rightfully seize our world for themselves, and I would welcome them with open arms.

Side Story 5: The Villain

"Sir, there's an ongoing police raid at the menagerie A site."

Dammit... What's that incompetent police commissioner doing? He was supposed to prevent this sort of thing, or at least give us prior warning. Admittedly, I'd installed him in the position precisely because he was incompetent, so I didn't have much right to complain. A competent commissioner, even a wilfully corrupt one, might start thinking that they could do better than taking my money, and that wouldn't end well for anyone. An incompetent one, while loyal, occasionally caused issues like this. That was why we had a B site.

Acquiring further information showed that the situation was unrecoverable. The facility had been penetrated, and not only was a captain involved, but none of my own men were with him. He'd even brought in an external team. There was no way they would leave without seeing things that couldn't be explained away. They all needed to die.

I gave the order to scrub the site. This was... irritating. The personnel had evacuated, so I had lost neither guards nor researchers, and the scrub team could recover some of the more transportable equipment and even some of the test subjects, but the amount they could bring would be limited, and wouldn't be enough to hold the hunt on schedule. There had been a particularly promising harpy this year, that I was greatly looking forward to hunting down personally. Ah well. If we started using B site for production, we would be able to reschedule for a couple of months time, and I could spin the cancellation as acting in solidarity with the kidnap victims' families. Feigning sympathy was always good for a few votes.

After a quick discussion with the commissioner, we drafted up a cover story that pinned the blame for everything on the dead police captain, and I returned to my day job, just in time for another urgent message.

"Sir, three bodies were just found near A site. Based on ID, the site supervisor and lead researchers. They had been... eaten. The team sent in to perform the scrub report that subject twenty-three, a fully transformed and unchipped harpy, was missing. We assume it got out, and is currently loose."

Oh? Perhaps this hasn't been a complete loss after all. Given harpy nesting habits, it would most likely come here, to Kholakel. Perhaps I could go on a bit of an impromptu hunt of my own. Over the next couple of days, periodic reports came in of dead wildlife, gradually moving towards to city.

There had even been, much to my amusement, a fully grown cow with injuries consistent with a hundred metre drop.

I made sure the information was suppressed; rather than killing the harpy now, having it rampage in the city for a bit would be to our advantage. Those ridiculous animal rights activists were even going after monsters these days, claiming they have as much right to life as we do and that they never left the woods, so were no danger to anyone. If I claimed that I only believed it safe to cancel the hunt because of their claims, and then a harpy attacked the city immediately afterwards, I'd not only get more support for the reschedule, but we could probably raise it to twice a year with no blowback. Plus it would make the protestors look like idiots, which was always a nice bonus.

The day the harpy arrived, a flaw in this plan very quickly became apparent. Harpies have human faces, and this one apparently still looked so much like the brat it had been made from that witnesses could identify it. The commissioner had already needed to terminate two people. I had to move quickly, and so sent out drones to investigate likely nesting sites. We found it quickly, but the damn thing fled into the forest.

Until now, I'd thought it nothing more than a fun diversion, but its behaviour there caught my attention. It had flown straight up. That was odd; if it was going to flee it should have gone sideways, and why did it head to the woods? On its own, I'd have just thought it strange and then forgotten about it, but there had been other bits of strangeness too. The witnesses the commissioner executed had been mugging victims, and the harpy had attacked the muggers but not touched the two victims. It had escaped the facility, not harming any of the police inside, and then immediately killed the site manager. I could chalk one or two up to fluke, but this was starting to look like a pattern.

The mugging witness had insisted that the harpy showed no sign of intelligence, as did the personnel observing it back at A site, before the raid. The drone footage was the same. Were there some lingering bits of human, giving it nascent intelligence or sharper instincts than usual? We knew that sort of thing happened; it was why we tried to keep the test subjects awake during their conversion, but it had never before resulted in them gaining *morals*. They were always universally hostile to humans.

The other alternative was that someone was lying when they claimed it hadn't been chipped, and that someone else held the controls. If that was true, I could guess at the end goal. It must be someone who knew me, or they wouldn't have access to the site or the chips. They would know of my... *interest*. Entering the city, killing once and then leaving for the woods would be nothing more than a lure. With the morality the monster had been forced to show, presumably its master disagreed with some of my more indulgent policies.

Very well, I'll play this game. We shall pitch my mana fuelled weaponry against this harpy and its mysterious backer. I could get anti-harpy armour manufactured quickly enough. A couple of days, and I would finally have prey that was actually worth hunting. I felt more alive than I had for years! Whoever they were, however they did it, I would need to thank the master of this harpy. And then kill them, obviously, but I would certainly thank them first.

I wasn't quite sure how to sell the city mayor personally going after a monster, but that didn't matter. The hunt was more important. Even so, I had to maintain the look of the thing, and we left in a large

motorcade. Perhaps I could claim I was only there to supervise, and the people with me were doing the actual hunting.

I was pondering the matter as we travelled down some random street when the whole car lurched, and the windows showed the landscape retreating beneath us. Oh... well played, my mysterious antagonist. Very well played. Why wait for me to arrive before springing your trap? I had been foolish, too enamoured by the thought of the woods that I hadn't considered an attack on our way there. I could see the claws of the harpy piecing through the roof. All it needed to do was drop us, and my enemy would have won.

It didn't. It was bringing us out of the city. The fool that held the controls probably wanted to gloat or something. Well, they would never get their chance. It was difficult to get equipped in the confines of a car, but it wasn't impossible, so I started strapping on pieces of armour. Really I should have prepared before departure, but I hadn't wanted people to see me. We were originally planning to stop outside the city before reaching the woods.

We were still high in the air by the time I'd finished dressing for the occasion. I had a jetpack for air combat, so why wait for a landing? It wasn't as if there was anyone else of import in the car. I pointed my disintegrator at the one of the claws poking through the roof, and fired.

A large part of the roof vanished, and then the remaining claw tore out, leaving the car in free-fall. I jumped out of the hole, and smiled at my prey, missing one leg and barely hanging in the air with its crippled wing. I shot again, and it dodged, able to manoeuvre in the air despite its injuries. The way it moved was completely unphysical; even when whole, there was no way those wings should support its weight, let alone permit it to dart to the side like that. But of course, that was part of the fun.

My smile widened, and I was rather surprised to see that it grinned back. Not a mocking grin, but it looked genuinely happy. "You fight well for a human," it said, and I almost lost my grip on my disintegrator.

It can speak. We'd never been able to create an intelligent monster, yet this one could talk. A high pitched voice that pierced my ears like nails against a chalkboard, but a voice nonetheless. I couldn't blame that on a control chip.

"A better fight than Maximilian put up, for sure," it continued, "He wanted to give me the world, you know. At least you seem less of a madman."

Maximilian was dead? I'd spoken to him only a couple of days ago, and I'd heard no news since. Although if there was a monster attack, they might have covered it up; Gronorlie was supposed to be free of monsters. No, I couldn't believe that. This thing was baiting me. It was stalling for time.

"Harpy got your tongue?" it added, and now I *knew* it was goading me. I didn't know why it was stalling, but I needed to end this now. I fired another blast, then charged. The harpy spun out of the way of the disintegrator's area of effect, then dove towards me itself. This duel was mine! I brought up my weapon once more, but the harpy started to dodge before I even had it in place. It was too slow though, and my shot still clipped it. How many more shots like that could it survive? It couldn't get close, and was now even more heavily injured. I had this in the bag.

I was suddenly wracked with debilitating pain, as one eye went dark. With no clue what had just happened, I could make no response, tumbling aimlessly through the air. Of course, if this harpy is intelligent, then naturally it would be able to utilise tactics that its dumber brethren couldn't. I didn't know what it had just done, but I'd been struck in the eye by a ranged attack. My body wouldn't listen to me, and I couldn't think of any way to recover. Maximilian had always been convinced that the moment I made a real monster would be my last, and regrettably it seems he was correct. The last thing I saw was the tip of a talon heading for my remaining eye before the world went dark forever.

Side Story 6: The General

I swore under my breath as the order came through: Respond to a monster sighting in Kholakel. Really, did no-one else see this coming? Despite the nearby forest having the greatest monster density in the country, it was managed solely by the city, and they refused military assistance. They treated it as *entertainment*, and not the serious threat that it was. It had always been nothing more than a matter of time before something like this happened.

A monster inside a city was a worst case scenario; the scope for civilian casualties and collateral damage was immense. This one was only a harpy, which at least could be brought down with conventional hand-held firearms, so things could be worse, but it was still a situation I did not relish.

The tactical monster response unit was a thousand men strong, equipped with heavy armaments and vehicles, with even a couple of options of last resort. Destroying a city to take out a single monster was not an option to take lightly, but given the accounts of three hundred years ago, there was the possibility that we might one day be left with no choice.

Despite how anal Kholakel's mayor was about the misty woods, he had no right to refuse us entrance to the city itself, so our unit gathered and moved to the vicinity. Alas, rather than wait for us to arrive, the city launched its own assault, driving the harpy out and into the misty woods. That was conflicting. By the agreements the city had with national governance, we couldn't enter, meaning the harpy was left at large. It could re-enter the city at any time. On the other hand, it would have taken us some amount of time to arrive, and driving the harpy out had at least saved the lives that would have been lost in that time.

I chose to continue to the city anyway, albeit at a more sedate pace, and set up a temporary encampment outside. If it did come back, I wanted to ensure we were in position to act immediately. And I was glad that I did, because the very same week, the harpy returned to the city, killing the *mayor* of all people.

That was... improbable. No way in hell did I believe it was a random attack. That man enjoyed his blood sports far too much, and a few quick calls unsurprisingly indicated that the mayor had been travelling as part of a group to hunt the harpy at the time of his demise. Either we were lied to about the harpy's location, with him trying to keep the 'sport' of hunting it to himself even though it remained within the city, or we were lied to about the location of the attack, and the mayor had actually been in the woods at the time and failed in his hunt.

And then the video footage turned up, which showed the harpy dropping from the sky, picking out the mayor's car from the middle of a motorcade and flying off with it. That certainly ruled out the second option, but that was the least of my worries. Seeing the attack set off all of my alarm bells *ever*. It had picked up a *car*. Not just a small one either, but a proper luxury model. That should be way beyond the capabilities of a harpy. Furthermore, no-one had done anything to provoke it at the time, they'd just been driving, and yet it had picked the one car out of the group. A monster had launched something that looked to my eyes like a targeted attack.

How that was even possible, I had no idea, but I immediately recategorised the situation well away from my original 'only a harpy'. We needed to end this *now*, at any cost. Worst case scenario, this monster had regained intelligence, and we did *not* want a repeat of three hundred years ago. I immediately scrambled half of our helicopters to chase it down, while the rest of us relocated our camp closer to the city.

Our search found a scene of devastation. Forces from Kholakel had obviously arrived first, but had been decimated, with corpses strewn everywhere. Disturbingly, a lot of the damage seemed to have been inflicted by a rocket attack, which implied human involvement on the *other* side of the fight. Was someone controlling this harpy, somehow? I knew that slavery brain implants were available for sale on the black market, but would they work on monsters? Regardless, it did nothing more than confirm the importance of solving this case. I ordered the deployment of spy drones across the whole city. If a fly moved within the perimeter, I would know.

Two agonising days went by without any trace of our harpy, or its potential human controller. I could be patient, but it wasn't as if our camp was hidden. All the patience in the world wouldn't help if our target had simply left. Still, with no other leads, there was nothing to do but continue to wait.

Our wait paid off. I watched the drone footage in utter disbelief as the harpy landed in someone's backyard, then with a foot took a key out of a bag tied at its waist and with a surprising feat of dexterity, let itself in through the back door. I actually opened my mouth to accuse the lieutenant making the report of playing a prank, but I let the accusation die in my throat. No-one would joke about *this*.

I decided to throw *everything* at it. We needed that monster *gone*. I even ordered in a tank. While the squads were making their preparation and travelling, we pulled up the details of that house and its occupants. A perfectly ordinary couple, with one young child. Until recently they'd had a much older daughter, but she had been raped and murdered by a member of the local police force. If they blamed the mayor for that, it was perfectly plausible they'd have a desire for revenge. I ordered the whole family brought in alive for questioning; if there was some group around with the ability to control monsters, we needed to crush it immediately.

It took far too long for my men to get there; a city-wide water contamination incident had snarled up the roads. In retrospect, the tank may have been overkill, and we should have just used whoever we could fit in the choppers, but everyone was in place now and were ready to make their move. With the house locked down tight enough to stop a mouse from escaping, they knocked. The father answered, and was promptly incapacitated. I watched on video link as a couple of men moved to retrieve him, while half a dozen more moved in to search the premises.

They'd only taken a few steps when a shout of 'target sighted' came over the radio, along with the sounds of gunfire. I waited with bated breath, smashing my fist into the desk when the next update came back 'weapons ineffective'.

The guns they had should be more than enough for a harpy, so the fact that they weren't added to my unease, and underlined the need to get rid of the monster right now. We already had the father secured, so while I hesitated to call the mother and son expendable, they certainly weren't vital. It was more important to take down the harpy. I nodded at the operator, who relaid my permission to use explosives.

The next update was utterly horrifying. "Target unconfirmed. We have a harpy queen here, not a regular harpy. It's intelligent, talking, and apparently defending the residents of this house."

The monster that had been spotted by drone was certainly a regular harpy, not a queen. The horn configuration of the queens was distinctive. Any thought that the soldier making the report had been mistaken was wiped away when the video link showed lightning lancing out of the doorway, instantly killing the men who were in the process of retrieving the father. The harpy stepped out, picked him up, then gently put him back down indoors. And then casually walked out into the middle of the street and goaded everyone into attacking.

Then where was the original harpy? How many were there in total? Was there a whole *flock* hiding away in this city? And it really did appear to be protecting the family. Why? Was it really being controlled? But it could talk, and from what I'd heard of the slavery implants, they turned their victims practically into zombies. They certainly couldn't talk afterwards. Nothing made sense.

Thankfully casualties were light. Apart from imminent threats to the household, the queen had refrained from attacking, seemingly just standing there and tanking the hits. When it casually knocked away a tank shell with one wing, its feet not budging a millimetre, the floor dropped out of my stomach. If it can do that, do we have *anything* that could kill it?

With a heavy heart, I made the call to ready an option of last resort; a cruise missile strike. The civilian casualties would be immense, but we could not let this thing live. If there were a flock of them here, it could be enough to end the country. By the time I turned my attention back to the action, it was over. At some point the harpy had started fighting back. We still had a video feed from a spy drone, from which I determined that the chances of survivors was slim.

"We have incoming!" came a shout, and I realised that the queen was coming *here*. It may have destroyed an attack squad, but did it really think that it could fight the whole base? I glanced again at the image on the screen, and decided that the answer was very probably yes.

Moments later I heard the gunfire and explosions outside as it started tearing through man and machine alike. I stared on with incredulity as the whole encampment was decimated piece by piece. We were all dead. I'd redirected the missile here, but it was an open question if we could live long enough for it to arrive. At the rate it was tearing through my men, I determined the answer would be no. I needed to delay it long enough for the missile to finish it. It was intelligent... maybe it would talk?

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" I shouted into a microphone, hoping it would stop to talk, and that I could buy enough time. I heard the sounds outside grow quieter, then stepped outside myself, shuddering

involuntarily as I set eyes on the one who had caused this devastation. It descended slowly, its expression practically demonic.

"You invaded my home," it said, its voice a high pitched screech, "attacked my father, traumatised my mother, almost blew up my brother. Why? Dad politely opened the door to your men. Yet they didn't even let him finish his sentence before forcing their way in."

"Because a monster was sighted entering the property. It's our job to..." I stopped... I'm used to explaining myself, but I'm not used to explaining myself to monsters. I need to keep it talking, not spur it into killing me.

Luckily, it was quite prepared to talk, spinning a fanciful tale about how it used to be human, about how *all* the monsters appearing in Lecolie had once been human. If true, it would be utterly horrific, but the monster refused to offer up any evidence to support its claims. We already knew it was hostile towards the city governance, given the death of the mayor, and driving a wedge between them and the larger country would be one way of hurting them further. On balance, I decided the whole story was a lie.

Fortunately, the time it spent in telling its tale was more than enough for our 'last resort' to arrive. The explosion would destroy the camp and everyone in it, but as long as we could take this thing out, it would have been worth it. More people would need to be called in to deal with the lesser harpy and the human collaborators, but they should be far softer targets than this bulletproof queen.

I heard the roar of the missile, and looked down at my microphone as the harpy queen turned to face its doom. The green light was still flashing. Good, this whole conversation will have been broadcast back to base, along with the information I'd sent earlier, so at least the next team won't be going in as blind as we had.

I saw the poorly aimed lightning arc out from the queen, practically grazing the missile, but a miss nonetheless. It must finally be panicked. From this close range, I wouldn't even feel it. I would just... go away. I closed my eyes and smiled, safe in the knowledge that the monster was even closer to the blast than I was. For the safety of Lecolie!

Side Story 7: The Mother

"Mum, when is Lily coming home?" asked Ben. It was a good question; she was running late. I checked out of the windows, but didn't see anyone out there. We didn't live far from her school, and she hadn't mentioned any plans, leaving me with a small knot of worry. Maybe she'd accuse me of being a worrywart, but the city being what it was, I would rather be safe than sorry. I picked up my phone and called her.

The phone immediately went through to voicemail, and my small knot of worry instantly ballooned; Lily does not turn her phone off, *ever*. Even in school she would simply keep it on silent. I tried to tell myself that it was out of battery, or had no reception, but it didn't help. What could I do? I left the house and knocked on the doors of Lily's school friends, Alicia and Samantha, but neither of them were home either. When they tried to call their respective children and also only got voicemail, all of us feared the worst.

I left with Alicia's father to trace the steps they would take to school, but we hadn't got far before we came across a scene that turned my fears to outright panic. A couple of police vehicles were here, and policemen were going door to door.

"Excuse me!" I called to the first one. "What happened here?"

"A suspected kidnapping," he answered. "Do you have any information?"

I dropped to my knees, shaking, as Alicia's father paled beside me.

"Ma'am? are you alright?"

I opened my mouth, but couldn't speak, leaving Alicia's father to fill in for me. "We... Our daughters didn't come home from school today," he stammered. "Three girls, sixteen and seventeen."

"I'm sorry to say this, but that matches the description of the victims."

I don't remember what happened after that, the shock leaving me insensate. I woke back up in bed, hearing the voice of my husband downstairs. By the time I'd made my way down there, it was only in time to see a police officer leaving our house.

"That was Justin," my husband said. "He promises they're going to do everything they can to find Lily, and given that they have the van they used on camera, he says he's confident they can find her quickly." That lit the fires of hope in me, and I prayed every second that I would hear a knock on the door, that he would return, Lily in tow.

The days slipped by until Lily had been missing for a fortnight, and the hope slipped away with them, leaving nothing but despair. The police had made no progress, and we hadn't had a ransom demand. Lily was gone without a trace. And then Alicia's parents called in, her mum holding a newspaper and shaking. She handed it over without a word, and I didn't get past the first paragraph before dropping it. He was *in our house*. Pretending he was *helping*. That evil man who had taken my daughter from me...

My husband picked it back up and read it, frowning. "I can't say for sure, but this reads like a cover-up to me," he said.

My head snapped up instantly. "What do you mean? Are you saying she's not dead?"

"Given the time Lily finished school and the time he was here in our house, there wasn't long enough to leave the southern half of the city and get back. I suppose he could have left her somewhere, but this says he was working alone. It would have to be somewhere isolated that he controlled, and that would be difficult inside the city. But... that doesn't mean she's not dead. Just that Justin uncovered something he shouldn't have and got framed for the trouble."

I blinked in horror... So it was possible he *had* found her, but failed in the rescue?

"Don't ever mention this," he continued. "You two either," he added to Alicia's parents. "If I'm right, this involves people right at the top of the food chain. Try to dig into it, and you'll meet the same fate as Justin."

Alicia's parents recoiled in horror, and I didn't blame them. What he was implying was... depressing, more than anything. Was there really nothing we could do? We just had to accept she was gone, and

we'd never even be certain why? There was nothing we could do against the invisible forces that treated us as pawns?

The next few days were grey and miserable, despite the sun shining outside. Ben kept asking when Lily would come home, and what was I supposed to tell him? I couldn't admit the answer to myself, let alone to him.

"Who are you?" I heard my husband shout from downstairs. The doorbell hadn't rung... Intruder?! I grabbed the phone, but then thought better of it. Calling the police seemed to be more likely to result in them siding with our intruder than helping us. I ran downstairs to help as best as I could, but when I saw who he was looking at, I froze up.

"Lily!"

It was her! She really came back! She looked different, but I knew my daughter when I saw her. I ran to her and wrapped her in a hug, crying my eyes out, and grinning at the uncomfortable expression she pulled. She never did like hugs.

She tried to convince us that she wasn't really Lily, that she was just some monster wearing her face. For a brief moment, I even believed her. Ben was the one that shattered her lies. When I saw her hug her brother, my elation was palpable. Lily was home!

She told us where she'd been. What had been done to her. I should have been angry. Perhaps tomorrow I would be, but for now the joy at her return swamped everything. Who cares if she looked different, or even if she acted a bit different. She was still my little girl!

She left again, promising to return before morning, saying that we should get some sleep. Her room was still here, untouched... She didn't need to leave, but she claimed not to need sleep herself, and would rather spend the night outdoors. I watched her leave, launching herself into the air with no apparent effort.

"You do realise what she is?" asked my husband once she had gone, gently placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, my daughter!" I snapped, knowing full well what he was implying.

"You aren't wrong," he replied with a sigh. "But please, don't delude yourself into thinking everything is back to normal."

I walked back inside, my mood spoilt. She had come back to us not as a human, but as a monster. She'd openly admitted to committing two dozen murders. She feeds on human flesh. The other side of her, that she calls Leona. The lion, the *predator*. Which of them was out there flying through the night? Lily or Leona? While I was climbing into bed, was she out there somewhere hunting a meal? Would the price of my daughter returning to me be some other set of parents losing their own child? I didn't want to ask, and I didn't want to know. I hid under the covers, shooing such thoughts away. They weren't important next to the knowledge that she'd come back to us.

I dreamed of waking up the next morning, finding the house empty, Lily having been hunted and shot in the night. I burst into her room, seeing her sitting on her bed, looking up at me in surprise. "You're really there," I said, my eyes already wet.

"Yes?" she answered, as if being there was the most natural thing in the world.

Alas, it was a work day, and Ben was in school. As much as I wanted to stay with her, I couldn't afford to skip work. We had to leave her on her own once again. She said she didn't mind, but *I* did! I'd just have to forego sleep tonight instead.

The evening was fun, and watching her flying around with Ben clinging to her back made me feel that maybe her changes weren't all that bad. She didn't *have* to kill people, right? That was just to survive, while she was on the run? I cooked her favourite pasta bake for dinner. When my husband saw what I was doing, he looked at me with pity, but didn't stop me. He was right, though. Lily did politely try to take a bite, but wasn't even able to swallow it, running to the bathroom while heaving.

That knocked me out of my delusions. Yes, she was still my daughter, but I couldn't deny that she'd been changed, that she wasn't just Lily wearing a harpy costume. Once Ben went to bed, she shared with us just what she had been through, and what she planned next. Just like she'd openly admitted to murder, she openly expressed her intention to take out the people who had done this to her. The people I couldn't touch, who I'd been forced to ignore. I should tell her not to, to drop it, to continue living her life.

I didn't. I gave her my help instead.

I had just been so angry. The people who did this to her, Alicia and Samantha... She *deserved* her revenge. I saw her on the news the next day, plucking the mayor straight off the road, lifting his whole car into the air with as much ease as an eagle grabbing a rabbit. Part of me was proud of her for ridding the world of that piece of filth. Another part was horrified at the casual way in which she could dispose of the most important man in the city.

Maybe this was, in some small way, how she felt as the conflicting desires of Lily and Leona battled inside her head.

Epilogue

I glanced over the day's mail before vaporising it. Most people would use a shredder, but most people couldn't shoot lightning bolts. I'm pretty sure that wasn't what I was *supposed* to do with them, but when you have a toy like that, it's hard to resist the urge to zap things.

It had been yet another proposition from some foreign country I'd barely heard of, promising me all the riches I could dream of for emigrating. It wasn't as if I had any loyalty to Lecolie in particular, scum pit that it was, but given that no other country seemed any better, there didn't seem any point in moving. It wasn't as if I needed people to offer me riches. If I wanted them, I could just go and take them. That was the problem, really; in the eyes of our foreign neighbours, I was essentially a weapon of mass destruction. If I decided to go for a stroll one day and wipe out a few of their cities, no-one could stop me. I wouldn't, of course, but the simple fact that I *could* was enough to scare people.

Fortunately, people were sticking to bribery instead of threats these days. Gronorlie had tried a threat once. I'd heard they'd built a memorial where their senate building used to be, although I wasn't entirely sure what it was a memorial *to*. Stupidity, possibly.

"Morning Lily," called Ben as he ran past to grab his breakfast.

"Late as usual," I commented, looking at the clock.

"Of course; if I was on time, I wouldn't have an excuse to ask you for a lift."

"I'm not your personal taxi service. That's the job of parents, not sisters."

"And when mum learns to fly, I'll be happy to let her take on the job."

I sighed as I pondered how to convince Ben to stop abusing his flight privileges. It didn't help that he was objectively correct; flying *was* the best. Maybe I should make him wear a fluorescent jacket and safety helmet? That should be sufficiently embarrassing for him to cut down, shouldn't it? I certainly wouldn't have wanted to at his age.

"Okay, let's go," he called, a piece of toast still in hand.

"Don't you dare get crumbs in my fur," I muttered, following him up the stairs and out onto our roof. We'd moved house a few years back, using all the money I'd earned from carrying satellites into space to adapt the place to my unique needs. Back when I'd been wondering what my career options would look like, I was completely stuck on my offensive abilities, despite the fact that I really didn't want to join the military. I'd assumed some sort of police special ops. Biological satellite launcher hadn't even crossed my mind, but it was obvious in retrospect. I have gravity defying supernatural abilities, and can survive in a freezing vacuum. Rockets are *expensive*. Admittedly, I can never get the orbit quite right, so they do still need smaller positioning rockets, but I can do all the heavy lifting.

Taking off from what looked very much like a small helipad, unless you were in on the joke that in this case the big painted H stood for harpy, we were soon on our way to Ben's school. "Stop by Jenny's place," he called over the whistling wind. "I promised her a lift."

"..." I replied, letting my silence do the talking.

"You know you're going to anyway, so don't pout," he said. One day I'm seriously going to tear his head off, I thought to myself for the tenth time this week. Yes, one day, I confirmed as I changed direction. Give me a murderer or a rapist and I could quite happily torture them for days, yet for some reason I was complete putty in the hands of this sixteen-year-old. Maybe there was another level above harpy queen, the monster king or something, and I was subconsciously compelled to obey him?

Fortunately, Jenny was a lot more polite, and I really didn't mind picking her up. On the other hand, she really didn't enjoy unsecured flight as much as Ben did, and if I'd known we were picking her up, I'd have brought a harness for her. Doubtless Ben had waited until we were in the air before mentioning it for exactly that reason.

I ended up reaching their school with one student clinging to each leg, dropping them off for the day, Ben pulling a gloating face at the half of the students who were looking on jealously. The other half were shuddering, or looking at Jenny with pity. Unwilling to let him completely off the hook, I gave Ben a quick zap.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed. "What was that for?"

"Being mean to Jenny," I answered, giggling at his sudden afro. "See you later," I added to them both as I took back off. Why Jenny was dating the idiot, I had no idea, but she seemed happy.

My dating opportunities were rather more limited, being completely asexual. Disturbingly, there had been... volunteers. People wanting to join my flock in a rather more literal sense than my family. I could have had children, of a sort. I turned them all down though; I'd made it a mission of mine to burn corpses of the originals wherever I found them, and to exterminate with extreme prejudice anyone who attempted to replicate Maximilian or Grant's research. This world had enough monsters in it already, albeit wearing the skin of humans. There was no need to manufacture any more.

I'd destroyed the B site too for the same reason, after relocating the mana extracting equipment to the basement of our new house. The tubes were currently occupied by pulsating lumps of raw flesh, the researchers having made some progress on editing humans out of the equation before their mutagen-induced loyalty wore off and I'd had to kill them all. It wasn't as if I had any complaints about using people, but mum did, and she wouldn't have let me put them in the basement otherwise.

Why *she* got to veto what was put in the basement when I was the one who paid for this place, I had no idea. Yet another case of me being soft on family. Was *everyone* in my family a damn monster tamer?

I flew freely in the morning sky, watching the activity below. The city was still a cesspit of horrific proportions, but at least people knew better than to touch me and mine now. Selfish as it was, that was all I really wanted. A safe little bubble to live in, giving as little thought as possible to those on the outside.

Which wasn't to say *no* thought. I spotted some sort of attack going on in a back alley and dropped down to eavesdropping height. I'd quickly learnt that if I was going to play superhero, it was important to make sure I joined in on the correct side. It turns out that harmless-looking little old biddies *can* in fact be muggers, much to my astonishment.

This case turned out to be far simpler. A pair of young women were of the opinion that they would quite like to keep their clothes on. Four young men, all with knives drawn, disagreed. Once again, I wondered which I hated more; the men in this alley, or the constant stream of people walking past the turning, glancing towards the screams and then hurrying on, pretending they'd heard nothing.

Well, *I* wouldn't do that at least. Besides, I hadn't murdered anyone in *days*, and my claws were starting to itch. I dropped lightly to the ground behind my prey, giving a little bow to the now silent victims.

"Oh, finally shut up, have you?" said one of the men, wearing a disgusting leer. "You know no-one's coming to rescue you. However much the media try to scare people straight with tales of mythological monsters, that's not the way the real world works."

That stopped me dead, with a claw practically touching the back of my first victim. "Wait, you don't believe I exist?" I asked. It's not like I do public appearances, but still... I'm hardly a secret. I fly around pretty openly. I've just dropped off kids at school! This is my mobile phone shopping trip all over again.

The four men turned around, and very quickly started to believe in my existence. In the background, one of the girls started laughing while the other turned away and threw up. Ever since my first heroic rescue, I've never stopped traumatising my rescuees, and I doubt I ever will.

Bonus Story 1: The Dungeon

A shadow's width away from the world which, in the future, would hold the countries of Lecolie and Gronorlie, Erryn was bored. She watched a flock of hexauyo wander around a nursery of trees, but the simple fact was that it all needed *time*. She could form adult animals and plants, but she couldn't form an entire stable ecosystem. What sized population of carnivores could those hexauyos sustain? She didn't know, and the only solution was to wait until things reached their own equilibrium.

While she could start forming sentient life prior to the wildlife reaching stability, she felt it would be better to wait. Alas, it looked like she would be waiting for a long time yet. She needed a project to occupy herself in the meantime, but she'd already poked at the ark as much as she could, and talking to *that* slime for any protracted length of time would cost an unacceptable price in sanity.

She decided to make a new dungeon. A big one. The *biggest*. If there were limits, she was determined to find them. No mana-concentrating enchantments this time either; it would be real monsters all the way through. She'd use spatial expansion right from the start too, to avoid hitting the mantle.

The project dragged on for years before she eventually hit floor one thousand. The System didn't have templated monsters for anything above two hundred, but it was a simple matter to create new monster variations adapted for the higher mana. Erryn laughed at the thought of any delvers trying to actually survive these floors; these monsters were outright invulnerable to every skill in the System. Perhaps if it went to rank fifty instead of five, they'd stand a chance.

Monsters aside, there was also the fact that the mana density was high enough to be instantly fatal to anyone, regardless of age or level. In fact, it was so dense that Erryn could barely perceive through it herself. It was like trying to look through dense fog. She had to enclose the dungeon core in multiple layers of mana-attenuating metal simply to stop the thing exploding. Even so, she was looking for the absolute limit, and thanks to these workarounds she was yet to reach it.

The limit turned out to be floor one thousand two hundred and sixty-four. Erryn had made many different materials by infusing mana of various affinities into base metals and substances, but never had she considered that crushing mana itself could create something new. There was an abrupt state-change; the fog collapsed in on itself and the mana condensed, leaving glittering drops of liquid mana floating in the air.

The drops fell, and when they contacted a solid surface, they exploded into bursts of random affinities. *All* affinities. Whole sections of dungeon melted or froze over, were flooded or collapsed. A burst of body affinity somehow resulted in all the monsters of one room getting glued together into a single impossible, fleshy monstrosity that hurt to even look at. A burst of soul affinity interfered with the local dungeon core and sent Erryn's consciousness reeling.

Erryn caught herself, and managed to shift her perception back to the firework display just in time to see a burst of spatial affinity sending cracks through... *something*. The mana rushed towards the

cracks, which widened hungrily. Erryn honestly had no idea what she was looking at; it was as if they were holes straight out of the universe. She was, briefly, worried; if the cracks continued to widen, wouldn't the entire world be in danger?

Fortunately, the worry didn't last long, because before Erryn could think too deeply upon it, the cracks merged. There was, for a single, impossibly long moment, a hole where the bottom floor of the dungeon should have been. Then it snapped shut, with no sign that it had ever been.

The dungeon core was gone, along with all floors below nine hundred and a significant chunk of the surrounding rock. The earth shuddered as a sizeable cavern opened up in its depths, but nothing had a chance to collapse for more than a few seconds, because at that point the spatial expansion shattered. The remainder of the dungeon suddenly found itself crammed into a space far too small for it, and promptly exploded, sending dust, rocks and boulders flying miles across the landscape. Suffice to say, nothing inside the dungeon survived.

Well, that was certainly an interesting experiment, Erryn thought. It was a good job that she'd done it *before* populating the surface with any sentient races, or the consequences could have been dire. As it was, no-one was hurt, Erryn had learnt something new, and had had fun doing it. No harm done.

Unfortunately, a certain world not very far away, into which monsters adapted to the mana of four-digit dungeon floors were pouring in through cracks in the sky, would very much like to disagree with Erryn's conclusion that no harm had been done.

Bonus Story 2: School Life

I peered at my reflection in the mirror. The skirt fitted fine; I still had hips, after all. The shirt, not so much. My school had been quite clear that while I was welcome to return, I was not exempted from any of their regulations. For the most part, that didn't matter. There were no rules against flying on campus, for example, simply because students couldn't normally fly, so the issue would never arise. The problem was the school uniform, which I was still expected to wear, but was now anatomically incompatible with.

The uniform explicitly called for 'black shoes' too, which would be even more of a pain than the shirt. Aside from my talons not fitting into any of my old shoes, my feet were effectively my new hands! Covering them would leave me unable to get things out of my bag, or write, or open doors. Well, I could still open doors the easy way, I guess, but that would probably fail the destruction of school property regulation.

In the end, I sliced the sleeves off the shirt, and mum tied a few black ribbons around my talons. The rules only said that my toes needed to be enclosed, and I had no toes, so no problem there, right?

There was indeed no problem. While the administrators were completely happy to insist on perfect uniform over the phone, they suddenly found my modifications perfectly acceptable once dealing with me face to face, especially once the lightning started to crackle around my horns.

Thus it was that after a little over a month away, I stepped back into my classroom for the first time. It was the first time in a lot longer than a month in which I stepped into the classroom alone.

Samantha and Alicia were no longer with me, a fact that depressed me even more when I thought about the way I could have at least saved Alicia. I'd never mentioned to anyone that I had found her at B site. That knowledge would do nothing but renew the pain felt by her family.

As expected, I was the focus of attention the moment I stepped in. That attention was divided mostly into three groups; pity, curiosity and nervousness. The nervousness was especially strong around the delinquent group at the back, who were forever making suggestive comments at the girls in the class, and engaging in borderline bullying. I flashed them a toothy grin, but my heart wasn't in it. I needed no pity, wasn't here to play the role of a circus freak, and wasn't about to murder anyone, so none of the attention was relevant. Maybe I'd 'play' with the delinquents at break time, if I felt up to it.

More important than dealing with my classmates was working through my next logistical problem; my desk. I could sit down perfectly well, but the desk was at a height suitable for people with arms. Giving it a more careful inspection than I ever had back when I was human, I decided that trying to raise my feet above it wouldn't be possible. Keeping my books on the floor then? The desk would be in the way, and I wouldn't be able to see what I was doing. Maybe I should have taped a pen to one of my wing-claws? Or maybe I could use small bolts of lightning to scorch letters onto a page?

Okay, lesson learnt; not *every* problem can be solved with the liberal application of electricity. Fortunately, I'd managed to put out the resulting fire by the time our teacher arrived. Alas, the smoky smell was still very obvious, and when the teacher's eyes narrowed the moment he stepped through the door, the entire class pointed at me. The traitors.

I ended up sitting at the back of the room, away from any desk and working on the floor. Not that I'd been sent to the back as any sort of punishment or ostracisation, but simply because everyone behind me was complaining that my horns were in their way, and they couldn't see the blackboard. This school really wasn't designed with harpies in mind. Maybe there's some accessibility regulation I can take advantage of, since they like regulations so much?

The actual contents of the lesson made it clear that I had a lot of catching up to do, but I felt confident I could manage it. My struggles also helped to reassure the other students that I was taking this seriously, and wasn't about to eat anyone, with the result that some of my friends dared to come and speak to me, rather than staring from afar.

"Are you okay?" asked one, my partner in floral names, Rose. I struggled not to roll my eyes at the question, the lazy opener that it was.

"Yup, perfectly fine," I answered honestly. Why wouldn't I be? I felt sad for Alicia and Samantha, but I didn't feel *guilty*. What happened to them wasn't my fault, and while in retrospect I could have done something for Alicia, there was no way for me to know that at the time. Never mind rescuing a vampired Alicia, with the benefit of hindsight I could have led all three of us into a store before we were ever ambushed, and hidden there till the kidnapping squad decided to go for another target. Alas, time travel is not a power I possess.

And as for myself, I could fly and shoot lightning. Yes, my brain got a tad scrambled in the process, and I had to worry about silly things like how to fake wearing shoes and how desks worked, but in my opinion it was totally worth it. I wonder if old-Lily would have agreed? I couldn't remember her

ever daydreaming about shooting lightning, but she certainly did about flying. She probably wouldn't have willingly gone through with it though; she'd have been too scared about losing her mind. She wouldn't have approved of becoming me, given a choice, mostly thanks to my flagrant disregard for human life.

"Are you sure? You're just kind of staring off into space."

"Sorry, was just thinking. I'm doing great."

"What's it like?"

I opened my mouth, but no snappy answer came to mind for that one. "It's... different?" I hazarded. "It certainly has its advantages. Can't even say I missed my thumbs until this class. Being able to fly is amazing."

"How *can* you fly, anyway?" asked one of my more intelligent friends, a bespectacled girl by the name of Briany. "With your wingspan, there's no way you should be able to get off the ground."

"Magic," I answered, simply. "I can, whenever convenient, pretend that myself and anything I'm carrying don't weigh anything. Don't bother trying to make sense of it."

"Wait, anything you're carrying?" asked Rose speculatively. Uh-oh; I recognise that face. It's the same one Ben keeps staring at me with.

"If you want to try, at least wait until *after* school, please," I begged.

"Aww."

"So, changing the topic," said the third member of this little group, a tall, athletic girl by the name of Linda. "Are you still staying in the swimming club? Can you swim at all?"

"That is a very good question, actually. I have no idea." I could probably manage something, surely, given that I could fly. Isn't swimming basically just flying underwater? I wasn't sure how fast I'd be, and I doubt I could manage a style that would be recognised by any official competitive organisation, but I'd only joined the swimming club for fun. I wasn't planning on representing the school in any competitions to begin with.

Swimming also had the advantage that the swimming costume would still fit me.

It turned out that I could, in fact, swim. Pretty darn well, too. My unphysical wings let me fly through the water in ways that seemed to spit in the face of such concepts as drag. Not that that prevented me from being permanently banned from the pool only half an hour in, when my fur clogged up the filter and caused a not insignificant amount of damage. It wasn't my fault that I moulted, or that my fur was as invulnerable as I was. I was thankful it degraded so quickly once detached from me, or I'd no doubt have government agents stalking me everywhere to collect the stuff.

So, swimming club was out. What other clubs could I join? Any sort of athletics was out; I wasn't all that fast on the ground, and we didn't have a flying club. Sports mostly required arms, as did gymnastics. Was there *anything* active I could do? I could join the literature or science clubs, possibly? The literature club took their books far too seriously for me; I just wanted to read and enjoy the story, and not spend twice as long as it took to read them analysing them afterwards.

Given some of the people in the science club, Briany included, they'd probably try to dissect me or something. I suppose there was always the chess club, if I ever became that desperate.

The afternoon lessons went very slightly better than the morning, now that I didn't waste any time trying to make a desk work, and before long the school bell rang out the end of the school day. Tomorrow would be worse; today I only had written lessons, but tomorrow had a practical chemistry class. I might be forced to outright skip it...

Rose caught me before I had a chance to leave, staring silently with puppy-dog eyes. It was painfully obvious what she was after... "Fine then," I conceded. "Want a lift home?"

"Yesplease!" she exclaimed, forgoing the concept of individual words in order to get into the air a few milliseconds faster.

We walked out to the front gate, where I pondered how best to do this. She was far larger than Ben, and couldn't just cling to my back without getting in my way. I could hold her by the wrists, but would probably end up dislocating her shoulders when I took off. Holding her elsewhere would damage her clothes. Should I rush home and grab the contraption that Tommy's dad built?

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Rose, excitedly.

"I'm trying to figure out the best way of doing this. Normally, when a harpy picks someone up, their condition upon landing isn't relevant, but I assume you'd prefer to remain in one piece."

"Ah, yes, I would definitely prefer that, please."

We ended up with her clinging to my legs, her arms and legs both wrapped tightly around mine, and sitting on my talons. It didn't look at all comfortable, and she wouldn't get much of a view without awkwardly twisting her neck, but she still insisted on going through with it.

"If I'm going to be giving people lifts, I'm going to need some sort of harness, or a collapsible basket I can carry around," I mused, once we were up in the air.

"Argggg," Rose answered, having decided that heights had seemed much more appealing back when she was on the ground.

"Don't worry, I'll catch you if you fall," I said in reassurance, without mentioning that my idea of catching would result in some fairly nasty claw wounds. Fortunately, she didn't live very far away, and managed to successfully hold on for the distance.

"That was *awesome!*" she shouted out the instant we landed.

I blinked in surprise. "Who are you, and what did you do with the terrified girl I've been up in the air with for the past ten minutes?" I asked.

"What? People scream on roller-coasters, don't they? The terror is part of the fun!"

"*Get the fuck away from my daughter!!!*"

Huh? I turned around to see a man charging out from the house we'd landed in front of, while a woman was staring at me from the doorway with a look of such terror that it made Rose's mid-flight jitters look like a stroll in the park.

"Wait!" shouted Rose. "She was just giving me a lift home!"

The man, presumably her dad, ignored her, charging up to us at top speed and punching me in the face with the full force he could muster. I was too gobsmacked to even dodge.

Not that I needed to. "Would you like a lift to the hospital?" I asked politely, still very much upright and noting the unnatural angle at which his wrist was bent. There was no way that wasn't broken, and it looked like it needed immediate attention. He responded by repeating his misguided attack with his other hand, similarly breaking it. It seems like I won't be the only one around here trying to cope with daily life without hands.

"So, now that you're out of hands, are you going to calm down a bit?" I asked, without too much hope.

"Get away from that monster!" he shouted at Rose, at which point Rose kicked him in the balls. Even I couldn't help but wince as he fell to the floor, twitching.

"You idiot!" she shouted at the prone body. "You too," she yelled at the woman in the doorway, who I assumed was her mum. "What do you think you're doing, attacking Lily after she was nice enough to fly me home?"

She apparently has a rather different parent-child dynamic going on here than I do with my family. Perhaps I should just leave? But her dad really does look like he needs to get to hospital. And no doubt someone will have called the police by now. What a pain... This is what I get for being nice to someone and taking them for a ride.

"Thanks for the lift," Rose said to me, thankfully toning the volume down a little. "I'll deal with these two idiots, so no need to stick around."

"Are you sure? You dad looks... kinda out of it."

"It's his own fault. Don't worry about it."

If she says so. I wasn't going to stick around if Rose was giving me permission to leave, so I took back off, and left her to deal with the fallout.

The police did turn up at my house later in the evening, very politely asking for a statement. Given what I'd done to the police department recently, I doubt there was a single cop in the city who would try anything. At least, not so long as I wasn't actually guilty. There were probably a few heroes around who would try it if they thought I was actually at fault, despite knowing it wouldn't achieve anything, and I respected them for that. The two that turned up tonight were not heroes, however, and nor was I guilty, so after a five-minute statement they left us in peace.

"Is that how every school day is going to end?" asked mum once they left.

"I hope not," I answered.

The following day, we did indeed get another evening visit from the police. It turned out that Bunsen burners are *really* difficult to operate with claws. I didn't mean to set the bench on fire! Or our teacher, either; he just happened to be walking past at an inopportune moment.

This whole going back to school thing is *hard*.