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His Merwife and Other Metamorphic Fantasies
by Brian Brookwell
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Fantasy

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HIS MERWIFE
& Other Metamorphic Fantasies
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Illustrated by the Author
A Renaissance E Books publication
ISBN 1-58873-418-8
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For information contact:
Publisher@renebooks.com
PageTurner Editions/A Futures Past Fantasy

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INTRODUCTION

I spend most of my day teaching computer science at Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton, Alberta. Although teaching is rewarding and interesting, it can be mentally exhausting as well. My fantasy and science fiction art and stories are an escape into a world of imagination not pressured by deadlines and things-to-do lists.

I've always been fascinated by transformation stories and art. The stories I remember best from childhood had the hero becoming a frog or the mermaid becoming a woman. As I grew a little older, my fascination with transformation grew and I started creating my own transformations. My tools changed from pencils and pencil crayons through various traditional art media and finally to the computer. The computer, and digital art, gave me the freedom to create the images I could see in my minds eye as the stories wove themselves around those images. For me, there's seldom an image without a story and a story without an image.

There's a real challenge for me in creating photomorphs (changing a

photograph of someone into a mythological creature). The images that result when I start with a person (or part of a person) from a photograph and weave a new fantasy creature and scene around them are ever so exciting and, even at times, erotic. I have recently started to use 3D computer graphics as the source for my images as well. It's easier to get the positions I want for my characters just right that way, even though the resulting images require a good deal of post-production work.

Mythology is an excellent source of ideas. The wondrous creatures from various cultures are endlessly fascinating. When I get to combine that with the entirely alluring idea of an ordinary person becoming something so exotic and strange, the combination is all but irresistible.

Illustrations to these stories can be found at my webpages:

www.furnation.com/MermaidsTail/

Brian Brookwell

2004

KIRA

CHAPTER 1

Unrequited Love

"Look kid," he sternly said as Kira blocked his way to his pickup truck. "You're too young. Dammit all, if I date you the cops'll get me for sure. You're what? Maybe fifteen?"

"Freddie, please," Kira begged. "I'm sixteen ... almost seventeen. I'm old enough. Why don't you want me?"

"Look it's not you. I want something else in a woman. Something you don't have. Something you'll never have. Here," he said handing her a handkerchief. "Stop crying. I can't stand to see a woman cry."

"It's not like you have women falling all over you. Why can't we just try it?" Kira dried her tears with the handkerchief.

"Won't work. You're not my type. Never will be."

"I can be anything you want. Anything," she started to cry.

"Oh shit," he shook his head. "You could never be what I want. You're cute, see. You can find someone who wants you. It isn't me," he brushed her aside.

"I can be," she sniffed. "I can be. You just wait."

"Sure," Fred nodded. This stupid argument had played out dozens of time. Kira had decided, somehow, that he was her life mate ... whatever the hell that meant. "Look. I gotta go now. See you around." He pointedly got into his truck and started the engine. As he drove away he caught sight of her in his rear view mirror. Stupid kid. How could she ever know what he wanted in a woman? He didn't know himself.

Kira watched as truck sped away. Once more Fred had left her in a cloud of dust. Why were men so insensitive? All she wanted was a little attention and all he did was bugger off. The next time would be different, she vowed. Very different.

When she got home she hid herself in her room. When her mother got home an hour or so later, Kira was still crying into her pillow.

"Your boyfriend again, honey?"

"He told me I wasn't old enough for him," she sniffed.

"But darling, you're only sixteen..."

"Almost seventeen. I'm old enough."

"You're young yet. There's plenty of time. He's just not the right one."

"How will I know? The last three have wanted sex, sex, sex, and more sex. They dumped me when I kept saying no. Are they all the same?"

"Many are. Just wait. The right one will come along."

"Fred's the right one. I just need to look older. To not be a kid anymore."

Kira's mother gave a quiet laugh. "When you're my age you'll want the youth back."

"That's then. This is now. I won't let Fred off that easy."

"Are you sure you don't want to just date a little. There's Jimmy next door. He's more your age."

"Mother!" Kira retorted in exasperation. "He's a kid. Boys like Jimmy are just plain immature."

"They'll mature in a few years. Just give them a chance."

"Fat chance," Kira scowled. "Especially that ... that ... child."

"Well," she said in an attempt to cheer her up. "Why don't you go down to the shops? Looking around always did cheer you up."

"Oh, Mother," Kira sighed. Then she thought about it. "Maybe I will at that. Be back for supper." She grabbed her jacket, waved to her mother, and headed for Main Street.

CHAPTER 2

Fantasies Come True

Kira wandered down Main Street. In the town of Gilliam, all the shops and services were in a ten block stretch along Main Street that everyone simply called "the shops." Kira wandered from one store to the next. It was all boring today. Even the boutique had nothing of interest. She was just about to give up and head home when she noticed that the seamstress' shop, which had been vacant for years, had been replaced by a fancy looking shop called 'Fantasies Come True'.

Kira wandered over and looked in the window. The shop was darkened and this heightened its mystery. Her cousin, in the nearby town, had taken her to see one of the adult shops the last time she'd visited. She found herself appalled and yet strangely attracted by the skimpy outfits. Kira wondered whether this was the same kind of shop.

Carefully looking both ways to make sure no one was looking at her, she entered the store. An old fairly plump woman met her as she entered.

"May I be of any assistance?" she asked.

"I -- uh-", Kira was having trouble seeing in the dim light and the strange incense smell was nearly overpowering. This was obviously not one of the adult shops like this in the city. "I just thought I'd sort of -- "

"You are curious?"

"Uh. Well. Yes, I guess I am," Kira looked around. "What do you sell? I don't see any skimpy stuff or perfumes or stuff like that there."

"My name is Cassie. I sell fantasies. I help people get their fantasies fulfilled."

"Like what? Costumes? Skimpy stuff? I don't see anything like that around."

"True enough. Sometimes costumes and lingerie are what is needed but, most times, I use something stronger."

"Stronger?"

"Stronger," repeated Cassie calmly.

"Can anyone get their fantasies fulfilled? Like even a kid like me?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I suppose it's expensive?"

"I never charge more than the person can afford or wants to afford. After all a possible fantasy which is too expensive to experience is worse than fantasy which can't be experienced."

"I want to be older. You know? There's this guy and he called me a kid."

"Ah," Cassie nodded. "Unrequited love?"

"He told me I was too young. Not his type of woman. I want him. You know? I want to be his type of woman. To have him love me. Forever, like?"

"What kind of woman does he want?"

"Older, I think."

"Not much to go on."

"Well he's not exactly talked to me much since last summer. When he ditched me to attend some mare giving birth or something."

"Ah. A farmer or a vet?"

"His dad left him the horse ranch and he's taking care of it all alone."

"Well you know that horses giving birth often need help."

"He's always running off to his damned horses. They cough, he drives off."

"Have you got anything of his? A handkerchief, lock of hair, anything?"

"No nothing. Um. Just a sec," she rummaged in her handbag for the handkerchief he had given her that morning "This do?"

"Might. We'll just have to see." Cassie took the handkerchief and walked into the back room, brushing aside a beaded curtain in the process. When Kira attempted to follow, the curtain felt like a wall. Kira continued to tug at the curtain for a while and then sat down on a nearby chair. Kira occasionally looked at the curtain but strangely found no desire to go through it any longer. She wondered momentarily at this sudden change in desires and then the wonder faded too.

About five minutes later, Cassie came through the curtain. Kira got up and walked over to her.

"Kira," she began.

"How did you know my name? I didn't tell you my name." Kira was becoming agitated and more than a little scared.

"I have certain skills. One of which is to read the desires of the owner or user of an object. You cried into the handkerchief and left your mark on it."

"I see," said Kira skeptically. "And?"

"Although you left your aura on the handkerchief, Fred's aura is stronger." Cassie smiled a wry smile. "Do you know that he doesn't know what kind of woman he wants? He's buried his desires since his father left him an orphan."

"But he has desires? If his dream girl appeared before him..."

"He'd know it. I know his dream girl but..."

"Make me his dream girl! I'll do anything. Really!"

"It's not that simple. It really isn't. I need to let you know that..."

"She got an extra head or something? I need to be her, so he'll love me"

"But you don't..."

"Don't stall. I haven't a lot of money but..."

"It's not money. I told you that before. It's just that..."

"Look make me that girl, right now."

"That's part of it. It will take about a week to get things ready. But only if you truly want me to build your fantasy. There's something you..."

"Damn right I want the fantasy. Start. Please start. I need Fred. He's my dream hunk. You know?"

"Yes, you've told me but I must..."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Well, not to everyone, of course. But, I guess she is."

"Then do it! I'm sick of this waffling. Can you do it or not?"

Cassie just shook her head. The young were so impatient. They always were, right from that cute Greek on. "Yes," she said with exasperation.

"Fine," interrupted Kira. "Then do it. I'll come back next week." She turned and quickly fled home. Cassie watched her run off and sighed. The silly little thing hadn't stopped to listen but her obligation was clear. She hoped everything would turn out right.

CHAPTER 3

The Contract

Kira spent the next week in anxious anticipation. One part of her said that this was the answer to her prayers and that she'd soon have Fred all for

herself. Another part was equally convinced that it was just a fraud, that nothing would happen. She reappeared at the shop exactly one week to the hour later. She entered the shop without hesitation this time. Since it wasn't one of those adult shops, there was nothing to be worried about.

"Ah, Kira," said Cassie quietly. "How are you?"

"Did you do it? Please say you have."

"Yes. You didn't give me a chance though to..."

"How much? How much will it cost?"

"If you use it, you and I will decide on a price afterwards."

"Hey ... I don't know. Like you could like really bump up the price. Like I wouldn't be able to ever pay it off?"

"Never. The price must be affordable. I cannot do otherwise."

"You do have it?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then when..."

"Kira. You will listen. This is not some kind of makeup or clothes that will catch your Fred for you."

"Course not. I've tried..."

"Kira. Be quiet. I'm a sorceress. My specialty is transformation magic. When we change you into his dream woman, it's forever. Do you hear me: Forever."

"And that's a problem? Then he'll love me forever."

"Your body will be lost. Once you are changed, I will not be able to change you back."

"I don't want to be me. I want to be his dream woman. Forever."

"But there's..."

"Wave your wand or whatever..."

"Too much stage magic. Transformations take time. Particularly this kind of change. When you're finished you..."

"I don't care. Do you hear me? I don't care!"

"You should care! You're being changed!" Cassie was becoming angry.

"If you can do it, then do it!"

"Very well. Be it on your head, then. I have tried to explain. We'll begin and I'll explain what to expect as we go on."

"About time."

"Okay then," began Cassie. "First. You talk too much." Cassie tossed some fine powder on a smoking brazier. A cloud of smoke billowed up and enveloped Kira. She tried to protest but found she'd lost her voice. She became agitated.

"I'll give you your voice back in a few minutes. There are a few things that I must tell you without interruption. This transformation is one of the most difficult I've ever done for a number of reasons. You will be gaining a considerable amount of body mass. A lot more than you would imagine. The magic to do this won't work quickly. In fact, it will take nearly two weeks. You are under the impression that the dream woman Fred wants is a redhead or blonde or brunette, or that he wants some shape of body, or something of the sort. This isn't completely true. Fred wants a filly, of sorts. But not just any filly. His dream woman is a centaur. To become a centaur, the magic will have to give you a horse's body instead of your legs. You will lose your ears and have them replaced by a horse's ears higher up on your head. Your hair and your horse body will have to match the chestnut brown he finds so beautiful. Do you understand?"

Kira merely nodded. While Cassie had been speaking, she had been afraid. Real magic, when spoken of so calmly, terrified her. But as Cassie went on, Kira found she becoming excited. So what if she would be a centaur? She'd have Fred!

"Okay then," Cassie smiled. "This is what will happen unless you decide to back out when I release your voice." Cassie took a deep breath. "First you will drink the brew I have brewing in the back room. You must drink all of it as it is the focus for the magic which is to come." Kira just nodded.

"Then, you will eat three handfuls of the grain from the box beside the teacup. You must measure this yourself, as your hand is the only correct measure for you. The grain controls the transformation. Too little and you'll end up as part horse part woman but the proportions will be wrong. You won't match his ideal. Too much is just as bad as too much of you would be horse." Cassie cocked one eyebrow and Kira nodded again.

"I believe you should stay here with me for this transformation. I doubt your mother would understand. I have created a magic for everyone in this town which will make them believe that you're visiting a cousin." Cassie threw another handful of powder on the brazier.

"Wa..." began Kira and then she paused. "It sounds too easy. We do this and I get Fred and then what?"

"Then we discuss price. But you'll be easily able to pay."

"But with Fred?"

"I know that he won't be able to control himself. When he sees you as a centaur, he'll be in love before he knows it. But if not ... well I'm sure you'll be able to think of something."

"But I won't be able to get to him..."

"You are afraid that you are here and he's out there?"

"Something like that."

"Teleportation is a fairly exact magic. You'll end up in his barn a few minutes before he arrives. Then we'll let nature take its course."

"Does it hurt? The change?"

"No, not really. You will have to get used to a new body though ... That will cause some difficulties but the magic will help there too."

Kira fell silent for a few minutes. This was a big step but she couldn't live without Fred.

"Cassie?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, dear?"

"I want to do this but I what if Fred still doesn't want me?"

"I doubt that's possible. I read him, remember?"

"Yes but how can I be sure?"

"You can't. Nothing is certain. This is as close to certain as it is possible for anything to be."

"I don't know whether I want to lie to everyone. I'd feel badly. You know?"

"I understand but when you wake up some morning with four hooves instead of feet..."

"Uh, oh. S'pose so. When would we start then?"

"Whenever you want to start. Everything is prepared."

"Okay. Let's start. I guess you have a house guest."

CHAPTER 4

The Back Room

Cassie nodded and led the way into the back room. Kira was hesitant at first. The last time she had tried to pass the curtain, she'd been unable to. This time, though, the curtain parted easily and Kira stepped through into such a bright light that it brought tears to her eyes. When her eyes adjusted, she found herself facing row upon row of curtains. It reminded her of the curtains behind exhibits at the state fair before anyone arrived to set things up. She looked up, expecting a ceiling. The strange blue-green sky and the twin suns at the horizon convinced her she was nuts. Cassie looked back and saw Kira's uncertainty.

"Kira?" she asked. "We aren't on Earth anymore."

"Uh, yeah," was all Kira could manage.

"The curtain is a teleportation gate to my home away from home here."

"Gate?"

"You are safe. Very safe. Do you see the palace up on the hill?" She pointed to a Greek palace.

"Are we in Greece somewhere?"

"No. Not any more. That was built for me by a previous client several thousand years ago. That's where we will live for the next few weeks."

"Not Greece?"

"No. Not Greece. You'll like it though."

Kira shrugged and walked up the hill behind Cassie. She was totally unprepared for what she saw when the great brass doors swung open. They were greeted by a number of servants but not servants as had ever been seen on Earth. There were satyrs, fawns, fairies, angels, harpies, and every other manner of creatures.

"Were these all people? Too?" asked Kira with a lump in her throat.

"No. None of them. They are all as you see them. You don't think that Earth is the only place with life do you?"

"I hadn't thought..." Kira's voice tailed off. "My price? A slave?"

"It is one option. However, the price I have in mind will be far easier on you."

"What price?" Kira was becoming increasingly worried and suspicious of Cassie's refusal to name a price. She was sure she was going to end up a slave like these or end up pulling a carriage or something like that.

"After you leave here in two weeks, you will never see this place again," said Cassie soothingly. She reads minds! Kira began to turn towards the doors. Without any apparent signal from Cassie, two of the satyrs swung the doors closed with a metallic clang.

"Yes, Kira. I do read minds. So did everyone where I came from. Alas Anarath destroyed itself. There are only four or five of my kind left. None of the survivors will ever willingly hurt another again."

"Oh," Kira's face still held the last vestiges of her fright. "Why do you do magic?"

"Why do you breathe?"

"It's not the same. If I don't breathe I die in short order."

"My kind is the same way. Although we look human, we are not. If my magic is not used, it will backfire and destroy me totally. Have you heard of Spontaneous Human Combustion?"

"Sure. Supermarket stuff. A myth."

"No. Merely another my race dying..."

"But all the scientists say..."

"Have any of them actually seen someone burst into flames?"

"That's their point! People don't" Kira protested.

"People don't," replied Cassie. "My race does."

"But..."

"You know something Kira?"

"What?"

"You talk too much. I need to rest after all of my magic use of the past week. You'll need to excuse me." She walked off towards a corridor to their right. Just before she entered one of the rooms, she turned back to Kira.

"Your room is the next one along this corridor. Your tea and grain is on the table in the dining room. Just ask any of my servants, they'll be happy to show you." Cassie then entered her room and the door closed behind her.

CHAPTER 5

The Changing

Kira suddenly found herself the centre of attention. There was a general clamouring for her attention. The servants wanted to know where she came from, how long she was staying, what she was doing here, how she was related to Cassie and what they could do for her. Kira was at first confused by all of the questions. She found it extremely annoying to be interrupted half way through an answer by another question. She smiled remembering the smoke that had shut her up long enough for Cassie to finish her explanation. Finally she called a halt to the whole affair.

"Cassie said my tea and grain are in the dining room. Can you show me

where that is?"

"Sure, mistress," said a fairy fluttering up to eye level and heading to the left.

"No, me," protested a satyr.

"Excuse me, the fairy there. What is your name?"

"Ancrysta" came the response.

"Ancrysta will show me this time. I'll be here several days and I'm sure all of you will get to help me. Thank you to you all." The satyr looked sad as Kira set out after the fairy. Within minutes, the fairy landed near a great marble table. On one end of the table stood a golden teapot and a clear crystal goblet. The teapot apparently held an enormous amount of fluid. By Kira's estimation, she'd be drinking tea for days if not weeks. She pulled one of the chairs out from under the table and sat down. Picking up the crystal cup, she stared at it for a while.

"Ah well," Kira said to no one in particular. "Best get started."

It was the most bitter tea she'd ever tasted and she hunted around for some sugar to sweeten it. When she couldn't find any, she called Ancrysta.

"Is there any sugar for the tea?"

"Oh no. Mustn't you. Horrible effects it will have," Ancrysta looked shocked.

"I don't understand. It's just tea..."

"Magic tea. Change it not or strange things happen will."

"Okay. You know best."

"Knows best Cassie. Tea, no sugar. Cassie said."

"I see. She must have forgotten to tell me."

"Not told need you."

"I suppose so."

"So."

"Thanks Ancrysta. I'll drink it straight," she held up her first cup. Steeling herself, she quickly drank the brew down. An involuntary shudder passed down her spine. She quickly poured another cup and downed it like a large dose of medicine as well. She poured her third cup and, holding the cup, stared at the contents. She remembered someone had told her you could make bad things taste better if you held your nose. It had sounded stupid then but anything was worth a try. The trick worked! The third cup was much easier to handle than either of the first two had been. It was with extreme trepidation, she approached the teapot to refill her cup. Kira discovered that the huge pot only held three cups of tea. She was done with the tea.

She paused a moment before sliding the small jeweled chest beside the teapot. Something told Kira that this held her grain. The box was locked, however. Try as she might, Kira found she couldn't undo the clasp. She tried twisting the clasps, pressing them left and right, pulling them and pushing them. The clasps defied her! Damn it! Cassie said she had to eat the grain. How could she get Fred without the grain? Why did Cassie have to pick now to rest? Didn't she care? Of course she didn't. All she cared about was her magic and staying alive.

"Ancrysta?" called Kira. The fairy quickly flew over to her and settled, sitting on the table.

"Yes, mistress?"

"Just Kira, please. How do I open this thing?"

"Open it will at right time."

"That's cryptic."

"Cryptic it is. But truth."

There was a click and the clasps stood open. How did Cassie know? Did the tea have to work for a time? Kira opened the lid and stared at a small satin lined box half full of wheat. Wheat? Kira was puzzled. She'd been expecting something exotic, strange even. Mentally shrugging, Kira took her first handful. Chewing the grain was hard work. It became quite gummy after a while and it took a quarter of an hour before she could swallow the paste. Her second and third handfuls were easier to chew. She closed the box and watched

in interest but no real surprise when the teapot, teacup, and the box suddenly faded out.

"Neat special effects," she said aloud.

"Magic," responded a familiar voice.

"Cassie, how?"

"The answer to that is either trite and meaningless or it takes a lifetime of study. Which answer do you want?"

"I think I know the trite answer: 'magic'?"

"Yes, true enough."

"I guess I'm a little overwhelmed, you know?"

"Not everyone of your race has been this far off planet."

"How far are we from Earth?"

"Well since we're not even in the same universe as the Earth, that's a little hard to answer."

"Okay," said Kira in a long breath. "Cassie, what happens now? To me I mean?"

"You become a female centaur, go back to Fred and live happily ever after," she said with a wink. "At least that's the plan, isn't it?"

"Yes but the price?"

"Later. After I've done everything I said I would. It must be this way."

"So when does it all start?"

"It has already started but you aren't aware of it just yet."

"What time is it?"

"At home, it's evening. Why?"

"I guess I'm feeling tired. You know? Like really wiped."

"Don't worry about when everyone sleeps here. It doesn't ever get dark here."

"The two suns?"

"And the way the planet turns. We have a dark side that's always dark."

"Neat. I'd like to go visit some of this planet if I can. But I don't want to make any problems like."

"Go to bed. Transformation takes a lot out of a body."

"I'll see you in the morning."

Kira awoke the next morning ravenous. She was met by Ancrysta outside her door and taken to the dining room. The entire group that met them the evening before was seated around the table. Two large and comfortable chairs were placed at the head of the table. Just as Kira seated herself, Cassie, wearing a Greek-style dress with gold trimming and fancy gold sandals, arrived as well. As soon as she seated herself, several of the servants got up to serve everyone else.

"Was everyone waiting for us?" asked Kira.

"In a sense. But not really. Magic runs this universe. So we all arrive where we're supposed to when we're supposed to."

"Coincidence?"

"No. Magic. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Hungry."

"Excellent. You'll start seeing changes soon."

"What changes?"

"You must find them out. That too is part of the magic. There's clean clothes in your room if you want to change."

"Like yours?"

"Same style. I rather enjoyed Earth's Greek period. The styles were so elegant and yet so simple."

"You sound as if you were there?"

"Indeed. Bright people, the Greeks. Very inventive. Superstitious lot, in general, though. Even their kings had superstitious streaks. Some, though, had real strength."

"Yeah. Their heroes were real fighters."

"No. More strength of mind. Odysseus was a superstitious lout in many

ways but he was loyal to his wife, family, and men. Not many have turned down a sorceress for a wife back home."

"You seem more impressed by determination than muscles." Kira found herself attracted by the physical. The jocks were more interesting than the brains. Yet Cassie, who could have anything and anyone, found the mind more important.

"I can magic up the muscles if that's important. Magic doesn't touch the core, though. The mind that was before the magic is always the mind that is after the magic. I get pleasure talking to people of strong mind."

"And me?"

"You wouldn't be here otherwise."

"But I'm weak..."

"No. Not so. How many weak ones would voluntarily become something entirely different to get what they want?"

"But what of plastic surgery? I know lots that did that."

"But they merely make minor changes to look more like the ideal. You are becoming something non-human. That takes a lot of mental strength."

"Is this the price you spoke of?"

"It is part of it. There is more."

"More?"

"You will find out. I can't say any more."

Kira remained silent during breakfast. After breakfast, Cassie left the palace and walked towards the rows of curtains. Kira watched her walk down the hill and vanish.

"Ancrysta, what do I do now?" she asked.

"On your own, you are," Ancrysta said as she fluttered over.

"Doing what? Helping?"

"Oh no. Helping our job. Important."

"Can I go for a walk?"

"Okay, it is. Not okay to curtains."

"I don't want to go anywhere near the curtains. What is there to see around here?"

"Stay near. Important first day. Forest to sun. River away sun. Mountains too far away."

"Who do I tell if I decide to go there?"

"Anyone. No one. Be there, if needed." Kira shook her head. This magic stuff was harder to get used to than she'd imagined. When she didn't say anything more, Ancrysta flew off. Kira was feeling out of place but couldn't quite place the reason. After wandering around the palace and exploring every corner she could get into, she realised she was the only one dressed in modern clothing. Every servant was dressed in a Greek style.

"When in Rome ... or is it Athens," mused Kira. She stopped off in her room and picked out a short dress. Somehow, it made her feel less out of place.

It took Kira the rest of the day to make sense of Ancrysta's directions. She didn't get too far into the forest but it looked beautiful. It was light and airy and not at all tangled. She vowed she'd return the next day.

Once again everyone except Kira and Cassie were around the table when they arrived. The two arrived simultaneously and seated themselves. Kira found that she was very uncomfortable and kept squirming about.

"Is the food not to your liking?" asked Cassie.

"No. I can't get comfortable. It's like I'm sitting on a stick or something." A knowing look came into Cassie's eyes. She smiled, looking at Kira.

"You might want to find out why," she hinted.

"Why? I don't understand. Like what do you mean?"

"Just find out. I know the reason but you must discover the reason."

"Can't you just tell ... oh never mind. Magic rules, right?"

"Just so."

Kira began to feel around the seat of the chair but found nothing. It was only when she felt along the base of her spine through her dress that she found the stick.

"I guess I must have picked up a stick somehow," she said knowingly. "Would anyone be offended if I adjusted my dress, sort of?"

Of course, since all the servants were busy eating, no one cared in the least. Or even acknowledged her enquiry. Cassie merely smiled her assent. Kira was in for a bit of a shock, though. Her stick was part of her. She now had a tail with short hair at its end!

"I've a tail! I ... oh yeah. I guess a tail's expected, isn't it?"

"It is a good sign."

"But how can I get comfortable?"

"Pillows?" asked Ancrysta from behind her.

"Thank you so much," sighed Kira as she arranged two pillows with space between them for the tail. Ancrysta, seeing Kira was now comfortable, flew off.

"But why did I have to discover my tail? Why couldn't I be told? I guess I don't understand."

"Magic is all about focus. If I tell you then I am the focus. If you discover something, then you are the focus. Do you understand?"

"Then how could I learn magic? I mean could someone..."

"Ah. Now we come to the rest of your fee. When you have finished being a centaur, you will become my apprentice. Your focus abilities have drawn me across the multiverse."

"But I could die a centaur ... then what?"

"You'd return here, alive, as my apprentice."

"As a centaur or as I was?"

"As you wish. You would be the focus for you, not I."

"Where's the price? I get what I want now, I get to live forever like you, I get to be a sorceress and do magic. I mean like what do you get out of this?"

"I get someone to carry the Anarath knowledge when I've gone."

"But why me?"

"Magic is as much natural ability as learning. You have that ability. If you hadn't come into my shop when you had, I would have had to contrive a reason for you to come in. You must be apprenticed before you become too adult to be able to handle the magic."

"But if I don't come back until I'm old, then what?"

"Your image will be of the time you apprenticed, not of the time you serve after your apprenticeship."

"Bitchin'! After everything else, I get to be young again."

Kira looked down at her meal and began to eat again. She had much to think about. Apprentice to a sorceress! Unbelievable!

CHAPTER 6

Apprentice

That night, just as she was about to turn in, Kira was met by Ancrysta and another fairy carrying some kind of leather harness.

"What's that?" asked Kira.

"Yours, it is," responded Ancrysta.

"For sleeping, required it is," added the second fairy.

"Good centaur make you, it will," finished Ancrysta.

"Cassie?" asked Kira.

"Oh yes," replied both the fairies together.

Kira merely shrugged, took the harness, and entered her room. At first it seemed a tangle of leather straps, rings and cups. When she got it sorted out, she found herself holding something that looked like a horse harness. Instead of a bit, though, it had leather cups for her breasts and a leather strip for her genitals. She wondered whether she should wear anything else. After a few moments thought, she decided it would probably affect the magic.

As the harness was comfortable and risking problems with the magic wasn't worth it, she went to bed.

The next morning she awoke with a larger lump at the base of her spine and a furry strip down her back. Her tail had grown over night and the hair on her tail had become quite long. As she sat wondering whether she should brush her tail and how, there was a discrete knock at her door. It was Ancrysta with a brush. Kira was about to start on her tail herself when Ancrysta laughed and took the brush herself.

"Bend you don't. Help I will," she smiled.

"Yes, thank you," replied Kira. The tail was soon combed out. Just as Ancrysta was about to leave, Kira slid her hand across one of the straps to her harness.

"Ancrysta? Do I have to wear this harness all the time?"

"Night time only. Second focus it is. Faster change Kira it will"

"Thank you," Kira replied with relief. It was one thing to wear the thing at night when no one could see her and another thing to run around nearly nude in the thing all day. Kira hung the harness on a peg above her bed that she'd not noticed before, chose one of the delightful Greek silk dresses in her closet, dressed and went out for breakfast.

At breakfast, Cassie brought up the apprenticeship again.

"Are you willing to be my apprentice?"

"I hate school, you know. I'd be a lousy pupil."

"I don't think so. Last night proved that."

"I don't understand."

"Why did you wear nothing but the harness?"

"The magic."

"But the harness made you uncomfortable."

"I felt naked. I almost expected someone or something to burst in with a camera."

"Why not cover up then?"

"The magic would have been affected."

"How did you know that? I didn't tell you. Ancrysta and Diristy didn't tell you."

"Well it's like the sugar and the tea. I guess I just thought that magic works best alone."

"Just so. Lesson number one passed with flying colours."

"Oh wow. Could I really be your apprentice?"

"Any time you want to sign the apprenticeship."

"I think I want that very much."

"Excellent! After breakfast."

Kira ate in relative silence. She hoped she knew what she was getting herself into. Still, to be able to do the magic Cassie obviously could would be the neatest thing she could imagine. After breakfast, she and Cassie headed for the great front doors. Oddly enough, the entire household entourage hopped, flew, ran, slithered, or whatever along with them. This apprenticeship thing was obviously a real big deal. Kira couldn't figure out where they were going. After all, you needed a table, pen, and paper to sign. Didn't you?

As it turned out you didn't. There was a huge crystal set in an altar of sorts in the middle of the river. Cassie merely floated out to it. The others flew or seemingly walked on the water. That was impossible, Kira knew. Regardless, she thought to herself. Without the slightest hesitation, Kira simply stepped out onto the river and was only mildly surprised to find herself standing on a surface that felt like foam rubber. Kira smiled, as did Cassie from the altar. She shrugged and walked across, watching the fish swim beneath her feet. Lesson two?

"Excellent Kira! I half drowned when I was an apprentice. I didn't trust the magic entirely. You will be an excellent apprentice."

"I ... uh ... thank you, I guess."

"Indeed. The image crystal is before us." Kira could see a young girl in its depths, trapped like a fly in amber.

"Who is she?" Kira asked and then looked over to Cassie. "She's you as you were when you apprenticed?"

"Marvelous. You are learning far faster than any I know of. You will be a truly formidable sorceress."

"I don't understand. It's obvious, isn't it?"

"Where do you see the similarities?" Kira looked at the image in the crystal and at Cassie several times.

"I guess I don't really. Nothings the same. But there's a ... a..." Kira stopped, words failing her. Cassie merely waited and Kira knew this was another lesson. "It's like there's a glow around the girl in there that's like the one around you. But it's not a glow either because I don't see it with my eyes. I don't quite know what to call it." Kira caught a slight smile on Cassie's face. "You know it's kinda like those aura thingies that psychics talk about on TV and stuff. But it's not either. This is like trying to tell someone who can't hear about rock music, you know. The words just don't work."

"You are quite right about that," Cassie smiled again.

"I know! I'm seeing your magic. That's what it is. But that means each person's magic is different. How do I learn then if my magic is different?"

"There are parallels between individuals but some things each must learn for themselves."

"Ah. But how do I get into the crystal? I assume I must to be apprenticed."

"Just your magic essence must. The visual image you see is your magic's interpretation of the essence trapped in the crystal."

"But how? Another lesson?" Cassie merely smiled. Kira looked at the altar but could find no markings or controls. She walked around the crystal but found no openings. She wondered if there were some incantations she must make. Then it was her turn to smile. None of the magic Cassie had used around her required incantations. She decided to joke a bit.

"Ooga Booga," she intoned in a dark sepulchral tone. Ancrysta laughed.

"Silly you are."

"Indeed," responded Cassie as she watched Kira's image appear in the crystal. "You didn't take very long. That is very good."

"It was rather obvious, wasn't it? With all the talk of magic essences and all? I merely had to ... to ... you know, I don't quite know what I did. But I did, didn't I?"

"You projected your essence. Most take hours, some even days."

"Really?" Although Cassie had never lied to Kira, past experiences in school left her a little doubtful.

"Very much so," responded Cassie.

"Kira apprentice," beamed Ancrysta. Kira's essence had strengthened in the crystal to the level at which all with any magic could see her image.

"Yes," announced Cassie. "She's now my apprentice."

"Learn magic she will?" asked Ancrysta.

"Indeed!"

"When?" asked Kira.

"You will finish your transformation and go to your Fred. Before you leave here, you will learn enough magic to return here when you are ready to start your actual apprenticeship. But your past life calls you, too."

"I feel I'm taking advantage of you," Kira said quietly. "You're giving me everything but it's all for something I may not do for years. It doesn't seem fair."

"Good. Very good. Fairness is most important. But time isn't for me as you might assume."

"I don't understand. Time is, well, time, isn't it?" Kira had a thought. "Cassie, how old are you?"

"Old?"

"Like years, you know."

"I knew the Greeks and Minoans of old. I knew the Romans. I rode with knights on their crusades. I rode with the Janissaries. I was with British at

the height of their empire."

"That's like thousands of years."

"Yes, and no."

"Time is flexible, somehow?" asked Kira. The answer felt right so she went on. "Here? Is time different here? Or, it's the curtains! They link to a time as well as a location! Unbelievable!"

"Not unbelievable. But you are most correct. Time is flexible and the curtains link to other times. Some to your time, some to others?"

"Did you make them, Cassie?"

"Alas, no. I could never understand their weaving from my mentor. She sometimes despaired of my learning anything."

"Oh Cassie. You're kidding. Right?"

"No. Look at the crystal." Kira saw a bright clear image of herself. It looked like a photograph except it glowed in a strange way.

"My image is clearer than yours was. Do the images degrade over time?"

"No, Kira. The crystal holds them as they were projected perfect and forever."

"But your image..."

"Yes, Kira. My image was not strong. You will be a much more powerful sorceress than I ever could be."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? It will be my greatest achievement to be the mentor for such a powerful sorceress. You will, one day, join the council. The group of five which understand all of Anarath knowledge. I could not join them. No woman ever has for some reason."

"Why?"

"Women are all of about the same level in magic. Each has small variations in abilities but none yet has had the magic to attain the highest levels. With men it's different. They have much greater variation. Most men of Anarath have little or no magic. But when a man has the magic it is as if he has all of the magic of all the men who had none."

"Conservation like?"

"I do not know. My mentor did not have an answer. Perhaps you will find that answer."

"I'm not that special, you know. I couldn't even get the man I wanted without help."

"You are not of Anarath either. That one of your race could be such a strong focus is a great surprise. There are many different kinds of special as well. Your super-models could not handle the magic even at the apprentice level. Yet you use the magic easily. They could likely get any man they desired, though."

"I think I understand. Maybe."

The entire entourage made its way back to the palace. Kira was quiet the entire walk back. Cassie knew she needed to think and left without disturbing her. Kira sat in the main hall on a pile of pillows thinking. When Cassie returned some hours later, Kira suddenly felt herself falling.

"Whoa!" she flailed as she bounced from the pillows.

"Excellent, Kira! Outstanding!"

"What happened?" asked a confused Kira.

"Levitation," Cassie shook her head remembering her difficulty learning that skill.

"Say what?" asked an incredulous Kira. "Like those fakers and stuff? Imp..." Then she smiled and shook her head. Levitation, indeed, and without courses or even thinking about it. Her shock of the day occurred when she tried to stand, though. Her hips were huge! And she no longer had feet! She looked like a horse version of a satyr: Kira from the waist up and a horse from the waist down. Balancing on hooves was difficult, though. Try as she might, she'd topple over again and again. Cassie merely watched without saying a thing.

"Oh shit!" exclaimed Kira as the answer hit her.

"Here no. Mess it will make," Ancrysta looked annoyed.

"Levitation," Kira frowned at forgetting the skill she'd just learned. She quickly learned to levitate just enough to balance and joined the evening meal to Cassie's almost excessive praise. Kira found she was extremely hungry and was amazed at the amount of food she was able to eat. After the meal, Kira turned to Cassie, a look of worry on her face.

"Is this normal? I mean huge appetite? Suddenly hooves and all?"

"It is early. I was not expecting this degree of change for two or three days."

"Why then?"

"Your own magic is pushing things along now. It's like another battery is in the circuit. There is more power and a faster change."

"I'm not sure I want a faster change. This magic stuff is wild! Really wild! I really want to learn more. You know?"

"Indeed I do. But regardless of the amount of time it takes for your change and the amount of time you spend back on Earth with Fred, you will return here and find only a few days have passed."

"Oh wow!"

"Wow, indeed."

Kira felt tired, extremely tired, and went to bed early. She wondered about her harness and whether she'd have to wear it. Her magic told her the answer, of course. And she started to put it on. It didn't fit, though. Her equine portions were too large for the harness. Kira looked at the harness and wondered how she would be able to make it fit. Because there were no tools around, her first impulse was to call for Cassie and get her to adjust the harness. It seemed that either the lower part of the harness had to be made larger or removed entirely. She could see both possibilities clearly in her mind. Something told her more changes were in store that night and that the harness could not be made to fit now and after the changes too. Once more Kira began to look around for a knife to cut away the lower portion. Then she laughed. She realised that she was still thinking like she was on Earth. She held the harness in front of her and brought the trimmed harness to mind. After several minutes, Kira found she couldn't just wish it. She wondered what was special about the harness. She somehow felt that she should be able to wish its new shape. It was as she ran her fingers along the harness and turned it over and side to side that she felt the magic in the thing. Once she had its measure, she brought the image of the trimmed harness to mind.

When she opened her eyes, she found she was holding only the top half of the harness. She smiled broadly as she got into the harness and composed herself for sleep. Another lesson? Perhaps or perhaps not. Cassie would tell her in the morning.

CHAPTER 7

Quadruped!

She awoke hungry and uncomfortable. As she was getting dressed, she discovered the reason for her discomfort. She was pregnant! Or at least it looked like she was eight months pregnant! How was this possible? Kira began to panic. Cassie would be so disappointed with her. At breakfast, Cassie was more interested in her adjustments to the harness the previous night.

"You were able to modify a focus created by a more experienced sorceress!"

"Cassie, I'm..."

"I was never able to break or modify my mentor's foci. You're doing it after only a few hours of apprenticeship. That council had better watch out!"

"Sorry, but I need to..."

"What was it like? How did it feel?"

"Cassie, I'm..."

"Never mind. You can't really tell me anyway. Each feels it their own way."

"But Cassie, I didn't, you know. I mean."

"You did modify the harness. I'm not angry. I'm ecstatic! You're an amazing apprentice, Kira. Simply amazing"

"Cassie, I..."

"You will be the most powerful sorceress ever! When you finish your training with me, you really must go to the circle."

"Cassie! Dammit! I'm pregnant!" Kira's eyes narrowed. "More magic?"

"You're not pregnant," Cassie remarked offhand. "Part of your shape change."

"What?! Why didn't you tell me? ... The magic again!" Cassie merely cocked her head and smiled.

The day's surprises were not finished for Kira, however. She felt anxious for some reason. She felt more comfortable outside than inside. For some reason Ancrysta followed her at a discrete distance. She'd never done that before but Kira was too anxious to notice or care. About an hour before their evening meal, Kira began to feel extreme pain in her huge but not-pregnant belly. Ancrysta appeared suddenly by her side.

"Soon time is," she announced. "Help come soon."

"Time?" Kira gasped through her pain.

"Change time. Big change."

"Change?" asked an agonised Kira.

"Change yes. Help I get."

"No, don't go!" shrieked Kira to the retreating fairy. Within a few moments, however, Cassie and several servants stepped through shimmering air circles.

"Help me!" shrieked Kira.

"As much as possible," replied Cassie. She touched Kira's belly and then jerked back as if burned. "I am unable to read you," she said incredulously. "Your magic is preventing me."

"I hurt!" Kira screamed.

"I feel your pain. We all do. The magic links us all. I'm not sure I can do anything." Cassie's eyes held a look of concern.

"Stop the pain! Please!"

"I will do what I can," Cassie said calmly. "Try to drink this." Kira quickly quaffed the potion. Instead of a full stomach and the expected relief, Kira felt her stomach was as empty as before. Cassie's eyes were wide with wonder.

"Teleportation! The potion vanished after you drank it! Kira, I'm sorry. I can do nothing."

"Help me! Use your magic! Please!"

"I can't. Your magic is too strong."

"What can I do?"

"It will be over soon. Only a few more minutes."

Cassie's prediction was accurate. Only a few minutes later, Kira watched in panic and pain as two spindly forelegs tore free of her belly. Kira passed out and vanished.

"She's in her room," announced Cassie as she created a portal and she and the entourage stepped through.

Half an hour later, a pale Kira walked out of her room using her new legs. They were as long as her hind legs but were thinner than Kira's arms. She found she had considerable difficulty learning to coordinate four legs instead of her usual two. She continually protested her lack of appetite but, in the end, Cassie's insistence wore her down. Once she started eating, her appetite returned in force.

Her strength didn't last, though. She turned in very early that night. Or at least tried to. She couldn't find a comfortable position to lie down. After half an hour, she got up and paced up and down by the bed worrying about getting to sleep. Slowly the speed of her pacing lessened until she was standing beside the bed. The next morning, she awoke to find herself still standing beside her bed. Centaurs must sleep the way horses sleep, standing upright. She felt rested and decided it really didn't matter.

As she was arranging her hair, she discovered another surprise. Her ears were gone! Instead she had horse ears high up on her head.

"Well what did you expect?" she asked of no one. She fixed her hair as well as the ears allowed. Then she used the hand mirror to get a look at her equine half. Her body was all horse; of that there was no doubt. It looked strangely complete. At breakfast, she broached the subject with Cassie.

"Indeed, dear. The proportions are correct. It's just the size that's the problem. You're a touch small yet but will grow in size soon. Two days, I guess, but it will probably be less than that."

"My magic?"

"Exactly so?"

"Can I practice my magic back on Earth?"

"I suspect not."

"Why not?"

"Earth's mana field is weak. I must come back here when I create magic."

"But my magic?"

"It may be possible. I do not know."

"Must I go?"

"Yes, dear. My contract with you is not complete until you return to Fred. Afterwards, it will be up to you when you return here."

"Where is here, Cassie?"

"Anarath, child. Anarath."

"I understand."

"Yes, I believe you do."

CHAPTER 8

Earth

Kira completed her development early by that evening, in fact. Kira was so fascinated by magic that she was convinced she'd go to Fred, call him a jerk, and immediately return to Cassie. It didn't quite work out that way.

Kira appeared beside the straw bales in Fred's horse barn wearing a Greek dress suitable for her new form. Kira could tell it was early morning by the blue-grey light coming through the window. She stood beside the bales, calmly waiting for Fred. This wouldn't take long, that was certain.

Fred entered the barn whistling after a few moments, he caught sight of the profile of her upper body and face. His face hardened.

"All right Kira. I see you," he said in exasperation. "How did you get in here?"

"There's ways," Kira replied. She was sure Fred wouldn't understand teleportation.

"Come down off those bales. I'll take you home." He had the usual exasperated look he reserved for her. When Kira was slow to respond, he walked toward her. "And that fancy dress won't make any difference either. Shouldn't be in a horse barn anyway."

"I'm not on any bales," she smiled as she began to walk out from behind the half wall. Fred, when he heard the clopping of a horse's hooves, quickly looked left and right to see which of his fillies had gotten out of her stall. His worry was apparent. Because he was scanning all around the barn, he missed the moment when Kira stepped from the darkness of the straw bales into the well-lit centre of the barn. When his gaze returned to Kira, his eyes widened. He couldn't believe his eyes at all. Kira watched as he blinked, closed his eyes, and then opened them again. His pupils had become very large and dark. Kira just smiled.

"You're ... you're beautiful," was all he managed.

"I love you too," she smiled and meant it. She would live two lives now. The first as Fred's centaur dream woman. That would be exciting, Kira decided. And after that? Anarath and Cassie. Bitchin'!

HIS MERWIFE

Gillian and Willy had been sweethearts for quite a while before they themselves knew it. All their colleagues at work knew of their growing attachment long before they did. There were the usual pools as to when they'd go on their first date, when they'd marry, everything. They themselves, of course, remained blissfully unaware of their own growing attachment.

Oh, I should let you in on something. Willy and Gillian weren't high-school sweethearts or anything like that. They'd met at work when both were assigned to the same project. Gillian was the technical writer responsible for a readable users manual and Willy was one of the projects many implementers. He'd been assigned to help Gillian learn the new program well enough to write the manual.

Manual writing isn't the easiest of tasks. The programmers (and Willy was one of those) knew all the details of the program but spoke their own technical language. Gillian, though one of the best technical writers in the company, didn't understand the terminology nearly as well. It meant long hours as Willy demonstrated the program's capabilities again and again.

Over the months, they'd become closer. They discovered that they had many shared interests. There was their love of art, for example and particularly mermaid and fairy art. Not that they considered themselves a couple, for in their own minds, they were good friends with many shared interests only. To everyone else, they had already become a couple, hence all of the surreptitious pools.

Eventually, to the delight of most (except maybe a few of the losers in the first date pool), they did go on a date. Willy, not a terribly demonstrative person at the best of times, was nearly scared off by the calm announcement that Gillian's department had them married already and were just awaiting the announcement of formalities.

Willy, though, was resilient and timidly asked Gillian out several more times. Soon they were going on dates twice weekly in addition to working closely together on their joint project. The months passed and soon all of the dates in the wedding pool were things of the past. New dates were (secretly, of course) chosen but, in the end, it took a conference that saw them apart for two weeks that brought things to a head.

When Willy returned, he immediately headed for Gillian's office. He knew Gillian would be there even though it was well after her official quitting time. The final draft of the latest user manual had to be ready in a week and nearly a month before the original deadline. He surprised her by coming up behind her and giving her a big hug.

"I missed you more than I can say," he stammered.

"I missed you too, you crazy," was her reply. She inclined her cheek to accept the kiss he placed there.

"I, uh, have something for you." He shyly extended a large box. Gillian turned and hugged him.

"You didn't have to do that," she murmured in his ear.

"I did. I thought of you constantly at the conference. I love you, you know." Willy had never been able to say those words. He'd hinted at them, he'd bluffed his way around them, but he'd never actually said them. Gillian, the more verbal of the pair, was at first speechless. Then she smiled and kissed him full on the lips.

"I love you too," she threw her arms around him and held the hug and kiss for several wonderful moments.

"I've something else for you, too," he announced after a few minutes. Yet another package appeared from the large bag he had behind him. It was a lovely Chinese paper parasol. Gillian, who collected Chinese art pieces of all kinds, grinned. After carefully unwrapping it, she opened it. It wasn't the usual cheap knockoff either. This one was clearly hand made and very well put together.

"It's beautiful." Willy accepted her affection again. Then he reached into the bag yet again. "What more have you got in there, Santa?" Gillian grinned.

"It's just a small stuffie," he hedged. Gillian collected stuffed animals, too, and Willy knew it. It was a small mermaid bear with a silvery tail just the way Gillian's loved her mermaids.

"Oh, Willy. It's wonderful. You didn't have to."

"I love you," he announced again almost as an explanation for his gifts.

"I know," she smiled at him. She raised a quizzical eyebrow as he reached one last time into the bag.

"Can you, uh -- that is, have you had supper?" he asked nervously.

"As it happens," she replied. "No. Have you somewhere in mind?"

"Can I make it a surprise?" he asked shyly. She got up, logged off her computer and gave him her arm. He, ever the gentleman, helped her into her coat then they walked arm-in-arm to the elevator.

His surprise was far more that Gillian could ever have expected. Dinner was at one of the local theatre-restaurants. After a wonderful play and a wonderfully decadent meal, Gillian was stunned when the spotlights came on again. The cast of the play sauntered over to their table carrying a huge roll of paper. Taking a deep bow, they unfurled a 15 meter long decorated scroll reading "Will you marry me?" Willy, a small box in hand, was on his knee beside her chair. Throwing her arms around him, she answered through tears of joy, "Yes." The ring was a beauty, just the kind of ring she'd have chosen. It was apparent Willy had been paying attention on their shopping trips.

Their wedding was set for 14 months later. Gillian was a vision in shimmering white, Willy stunning in a black tuxedo. The music and ceremony were a heady mix that left the newlyweds completely overwhelmed. The dance and dinner left them exhausted, so exhausted that they fell asleep in each others arms in bed after they relaxed in the hot tub in the bridal suite for less than ten minutes. Their honeymoon had been planned around the ending of their latest project so they delayed their departure nearly three weeks.

They packed their suitcases and waited nearly twenty minutes for the cab to the airport. That the driver was late didn't bother them. They're happiness at a three-week cruise and all that wonderful time together glossed over such minor details.

The driver was a maniac. He seemed to be in an insane hurry to get them to the airport. Willy became concerned and asked the man to take more care. He did slow down for a few minutes but was soon back to weaving through traffic at breakneck speeds. Their worst fears were soon realized. The cabbie ran a light and, to Gillian's horror, she watched as a fully loaded 18-wheeler swerved to miss them. The cab missed but the second of three trailers jackknifed on top the cab, pinning them in an all but totally destroyed vehicle. The firefighters and paramedics had Willy out in twenty minutes but Gillian took considerably longer.

Weeks later, Willy awakened. He hurt everywhere. He saw tubes leading from his arms to IV bags hung overhead. Someone in a white lab coat was evaluating him.

"You're awake," a male voice on the other side of his bed stated. "Excellent!"

"Gillian?" was all he could say.

"She survived and is in ICU," the voice announced. Willy switched his gaze and waited while his eyes focused on a face. "I'm Doctor Killiard. I'm the surgeon who put you back together."

"Uh, thanks. Is she?"

"She was hurt pretty badly. I'll have someone check on her status for you though. You, on the other hand, will likely be out of here in a few days. You'll be much bruised and be moving slowly for a few weeks but you'll recover."

"Thanks, Doc. What happened?"

"The truck overturned on the cab. Your cabbie, by the way, is under arrest. He was high on amphetamines and God knows what else. His insurance wants to settle out of court, of course. I'd get a good lawyer. They deserve

to be blown away for letting their drivers get into that kind of state."

"Thanks, I'll do that," Willy was still more concerned about Gillian's injuries than about mere legal issues. The doctor signaled to the nurse and held a conference in a low voice just outside his hearing in the hall.

True to the doctor's prediction, though, Willy was soon up and about. He started with short jaunts up and down the hall to regain his strength but soon extended his range. His first act, as soon as he was able, was to visit Gillian. She was badly hurt and still in the ICU. He held her hand and talked to her, his heart aching. He read to her and cried, his heart breaking. Eventually, he left the hospital but returned to visit his beloved often.

The months that followed were filled with days of great happiness and despondency. Willy was soon healed and Gillian transferred to a normal ward. But her damage was severe. She'd never walk again and she'd lost the use of her right arm. There was damage to her left arm as well and she'd never have the full use of it again. The insurance company did settle out of court and the settlement was immense. The insurance company for the cab company, faced with a sympathetic plaintiff, settled for a sum that left the young couple set for life. Gillian, though, remained in a coma and Willy would have gladly traded all the money for Gillian back and whole again.

Willy had taken to reading the latest medical advances in hopes that there would be some way that Gillian might be cured. There were numerous experimental treatments that offered some hope. Some even provided some minor improvements but nothing produced the cure he so desperately wanted. Although he didn't have to work, he did to take his mind off Gillian. He became interested in the new Alternity Project the company was working on. There were, it seemed many alternate realities. Some were so different from this universe that nothing could survive there. Others were extremely similar. One of the most promising was a world that the discoverer had named "Atlantis".

Atlantis was a water world. Its continents were completely submerged and it had few really deep ocean areas. The only problem was that normal humans would have a hard time living there. They set up a few deep-sea mining domes and these made enough money to keep the portal open but, without changes, it would never really turn a profit.

The discovery that microscopic robots called nanites could be programmed to modify living creatures into new forms was the breakthrough of the century. It even netted the developers a joint Nobel Prize. The first volunteers for Atlantis were remade into forms that made Atlantis a paying proposition. The colony on Atlantis was soon in the hundreds as couples volunteered from around the world to join the colonization effort.

* * * *

At first, Willy didn't think of nanites as a solution to Gillian's injuries. He thought of the Atlantis colony as a wonderful adventure, of course. He imagined he and Gillian swimming in the warm waters of the new world and helping create the new world. He'd have left it at that had he not sat next to one of the design group from the nanite research group at lunch. He overheard them talking about how the nanites even fixed minor problems and seem to make the volunteers biologically younger during the conversion process.

Using his connections, he quickly arranged an interview with the head of the nanite research group. After the usual pleasantries, he came directly to the point.

"You know that my wife's in a coma," he asked. It was common knowledge and Dr. Finian just nodded. "Would the nanites help her?"

"I don't know," he replied candidly. "We've only dealt with healthy volunteers before."

"I've heard rumors that nanites repair damage."

"Well," the doctor hedged. "Minor things only, superficial details really. We've had cases of scars disappearing, minor blemishes vanishing, even one case of vision being corrected."

"But you've only had healthy people to work with."

"Well yes, but -- "
"You don't know then?"
"You're right in that. It's just never been tried with anyone as severely injured as Gillian."
"But there's a chance?"
"Well, yes. A chance but -- "
"What would it cost?"
"It's not the cost. You know that. If you were both healthy, all you'd have to do is volunteer."
"So I volunteer. I'll sign for Gillian."
"But it's never been done. It's just not in the protocol."
"Damn the protocol. If there's a chance she'll awaken and be able to move, it would be worth it."
"But you'd have to -- "
"Volunteer, too? What of it? They need good technical people of all kinds in the colony. I know that as well as anyone here."
"But if it didn't work, she'd end up -- "
"No worse than she is now. Still unconscious, still in a coma."
"I couldn't take the authority. I'd need someone to authorize it."
Willy nodded.
"I'll get that authorization," was all Willy said.
* * * *

He did, of course. He had to sign all kinds of legal waivers, of course. Even if the process failed, he couldn't sue them. He accepted that as he signed the forms to begin the process. He insisted though that his conversion be delayed until the results for Gillian were known. He might have to take care of an invalid mermaid and couldn't see himself doing that if he had a fish tail, too.

Sitting down with the Dr. Finian he began the chore of completing all the necessary paperwork. Once he'd signed everything, he was presented with a choice he hadn't thought he'd have to make.

"Choose her new form? I thought there was only one," he frowned.

"Hardly. We had no way of knowing what would work best. We created several based on various sea creatures."

"Like what?"

"We started with mammals: dolphins and seals. We've been trying others now. Sharks, rays, octopi, various reef fish. Let me show you," he said leading Willy to a large monitor. There he saw each of the forms. Some were beautiful, others he found disquieting somehow. There were only a few that he could see his beloved as: a dolphin, a seal or one of the reef fish. But none were really satisfactory. When it became apparent that none of them caught Willy's fancy, Dr. Finian shrugged "There's a new one, but it's not been approved yet. They're still working on the nanite programs in development."

What he saw took his breath away. It looked just like the painting Gillian had done as a teenager of her "perfect" mermaid. From the long thin lines of the tail, to the wide fish-like fins, from the hip and forearm fins to the crest on her head, this was Gillian's mermaid.

"That's the one," he whispered.

"Don't you want to see the male version?"

"No, not really. Just so Gillian is healed and I can be with her."

"It's not guaranteed. I have to stress that. And this one's not been completely tested yet."

"How long?"

"Six weeks, maybe more."

"This one it is. When you are ready, we'll be ready. Please keep me informed. Thanks ever so much"

"I will do that," the man shrugged. They discussed other matters for a while and then Willy left, happier than he had been in a long time. Yes, he knew it was a bit of a long shot. He knew, too, he might end up with a paralyzed mermaid for a wife. But he couldn't just sit and do nothing. Doing

something was better than waiting for a cure that might not happen.

* * * *

The next nine weeks were hell. After the first five weeks, Willy could not resist a daily call to the nanite project to find out how his mermaid was testing out. Each time he heard of new problems and progress, sometimes more of one than the other. Eventually, though, the nanites passed muster and they were ready.

Willy had Gillian transferred from the ward at the hospital into the transformation quarters at the Alternities project building. There were several other couples present going through transformation and training at the same time. After the formal signing of the contracts, they were escorted to various places to await the fitting of the nanite containment suits. They would be monitored for several days until the nanites had been monitored to ensure they were doing their jobs.

Willy had paid little attention to the part about a common room. His only concern was Gillian and he felt he'd spend little time socializing. He glowered at the underling who brought in Gillian's containment suit and offered to help get Gillian into it. The underling dropped off the suit and beat a hasty retreat. Willy unpacked it and stretched it out on the bed beside Gillian. The suit was of a shiny, rubber-like material and in the shape of the mermaid Gillian would become. There were also two sleeves for her forearms and a cap-like cover for the top of her head. It worried Willy somewhat that the suit was bright blue and yellow instead of the colors he'd selected. The nurse on duty smiled as she informed him that the suit wasn't the color of the final form.

He assumed it would be difficult to get Gillian into the costume, remembering a Catwoman outfit she'd worn one Halloween that had taken nearly an hour to get into (and out of). Surprisingly, the fabric stretched easily and slid up her body with little resistance. When she was in the costume, she lay there, looking like a one of those rubber costume fetish mermaids he'd run across on the Internet. She was very beautiful to his eyes even in the strange costume. Following the instructions, he slid the forearm sleeves on and placed the cap on her head and aligned it carefully. He then stood back, not quite knowing what to expect.

* * * *

Willy had been told in the many meetings by the doctor in charge but had been so concerned about Gillian that it had slipped by him. He waited, wanting the nanites to do something instantly. Hoping, almost insanely, for a miracle. Nothing happened for what seemed hours. Finally, he became worried and signaled the nurse.

"Why aren't you in containment, too?" she asked puzzled.

"I'm waiting until Gillian gets better."

"But you won't notice anything for a week, maybe even two. If you aren't changing with her, it'll be harder for you."

"I have to wait until she's better before I start," he replied with a firmness that brooked no argument.

"Why don't you go home? You can visit tomorrow. We'll take good care of her."

"Can I stay?"

"Yes, certainly. There is a room for the two of you prepared, of course. It's just that everyone else will be in the containment suits. You'll feel mighty out of place."

"I just want to be with her. We were on our honeymoon when the accident happened."

"I'm sorry about that, I really am. I sure hope this works for you. Can I give you a hand getting her to your room?" Willy nodded and the nurse soon returned with a wheelchair. Willy lifted his unresisting wife into the chair. The nurse strapped her in and they chatted all the way to the rooms.

"Call me when you have her in her bed," she called as she left. "I'll pick up the chair."

"Thanks," responded Willy automatically.

* * * *

He lifted her into the bed. There was something odd about the way her legs felt near her hip. There seemed to be some kind of extra bumps in places he was sure there hadn't been any before. He put it down to his own exhaustion and went to bed forgetting to page the nurse to pick up the wheelchair. Not wanting to disturb Gillian's sleep, he made up the single bed beside her. His dreams were troubled by Gillian with a fishtail instead of legs hating him forever because he didn't become a merman and live with her.

He awoke in a cold sweat. The sky through the skylight was still dark. Something had changed, that much he knew. He didn't know what but he sensed something had in some way. He turned on the bedside light and looked around. The door was still closed. The rumpled sheets and the blanket on his bed still seemed the same. Nothing at all had changed that he was immediately aware of. He was about to put it down to a bad dream when he looked over at his wife. She'd rolled over in her sleep! Months had passed and she'd not moved. Nurses had had to turn her regularly to prevent bedsores. Now she'd moved on her own!

Frantically, he scrambled for the call bell. He had to be sure. Had a nurse turned her while he slept or had she really moved on her own? Within a few moments, the night nurse let herself into the room.

"Is there a problem?"

"Did you turn her?" Willy asked without any preamble.

"No. She's not due for..." her voice trailed off. "She's moved. Wonderful!" she smiled a wide smile. "I've got to page the doctor." She left the room with Willy following close on her heels. Within a few minutes, two doctors stepped off the elevator.

"...too soon. We won't be seeing nerve regeneration for days yet if it occurs at all," the younger one announced pontifically.

"If she's turned herself, then the process is starting. These nanites could be the regenerative breakthrough we've been hunting for for any number of injuries and disease."

"But creating the pattern is the problem. You know that."

"Indeed, mermaids are one thing. People have no expectations as to what the mermaid tail will look like in any detail. But recreating their own lost limbs..." he noticed the nurse and Willy. "Mr. Thompson?" he asked.

"Call me Willy. Is she healing?"

"It's too soon," the younger one snapped.

"I'm Dr. Harris. Call me Ted. And this is my research assistant, Dr. Harikart."

"Lin," the younger man said extended his hand. Willy shook it automatically.

"He's under the impression that the nanites wouldn't be able to decode your wife's genetic code so quickly. It usually takes days before anything even starts to happen."

"There's a strange bump at the bottom of her spine at her hip, too." Willy put into words what he'd felt earlier when he'd lifted her into bed.

"Caudal development can't happen so soon?" puzzled Dr. Harikart. "That shouldn't be." Dr. Harris merely nodded.

"May I examine her?" he asked.

"Of course," Willy felt an instant liking to Ted Harris. He wasn't so sure about Lin Harikart.

He found himself surprised and left behind as Dr. Harris half ran into the room. He quickly lifted Gillian and felt along her spine from her chest downwards. Much to Willy's surprise he kept going until he was nearly half way down her thighs.

"Caudal development," he announced calmly. Dr. Harikart pushed past him, his eyes denying the assessment and repeated the palpation. He shook his head in surprise.

"That's unprecedented," was all he could say.

"Willy, I want you to feel along your wife's spine just as I did. Do

you notice anything else?"

Willy felt carefully along her spine just as the doctor had, wondering what he was supposed to be feeling for. There were some strange bumps along the spine near her hips as well as a rubbery and totally unexpected section between her thighs.

"There's bumps, here," he pointed to her back.

"Her dorsal fin is starting to develop already. This is very early but maybe her injuries and coma may have something to do with it. Less resistance from her body's defenses. Who really knows. Nanite reconstruction is a science in its infancy."

"I can't see that as a possibility," Dr. Harikart protested. "Conscious state has never been identified as a contributing factor in any past study."

"What other possibility is there then?" Dr. Harris asked, looking at his assistant. His expression was one of give me a better explanation. "It's too early to say," Lin Harikart stated as he backed down.

"Indeed?" Dr. Harris smiled. "I believe this amazing change is an excellent sign." He turned to the nurse. "I want 24 hour monitoring of Mrs. Thompson. This maybe nothing but I want to know. Keep a movement record and I'll schedule a full scan when the diagnostics people come on in the morning. Mr. Thompson, Willy, get some sleep. You'll need it in the morning. There's a lot to do."

After they'd left, the nurse came in with a pill in a cup. "With all the excitement, I thought you might need this. Dr. Harris always leave standing orders for mild sleep aides for the first few days of transformation. Many volunteers are too keyed up to sleep." Willy was reluctant at first. He seldom took medications unless he really needed it. Later, when sleep refused to come, he changed his mind and took the pill.

The next morning, he noticed with delight that Gillian had moved several times during the night. The blankets were rumpled everywhere and her arm was up by her head just as he remembered her sleeping before the accident.

He got dressed and touched her hand. The arm was no longer flaccid and loose. There was a resistance now, however slight. In his heart, he knew she was healing. He dared hope again that he'd have her back again. He made his way quickly to the cafeteria and took a tray. The breakfast was appetizing for a change rather just fuel to keep going. On his way back, he met another couple in wheelchairs. He recognized their shapes from the pictures he'd been shown. They'd chosen dolphin tails.

"I'm Greta. How's your wife?" she asked.

"I..." Willey stuttered a moment wondering how they'd heard so soon about Gillian.

"I'm Wilhelm," responded the man. "We heard she was sick or hurt."

"She's been in a coma for months. A car accident," Willy replied. Then he held out his hand. "I'm Willy."

"Good to meet you," Greta replied. "Why did you volunteer then if she was so sick?"

"The nanites may cure her. At least they won't make it any worse."

"But isn't that risky?"

"Yes. But we've tried all the traditional approaches. There was no other option."

"Is it working?" Wilhelm asked.

"I think so. Well, hope so, anyway," Willy smiled. "She moved last night." Greta looked puzzled. "She's been paralyzed since the accident and hasn't been able to move at all."

"That is good news!"

"I hope it is. I hope you don't mind but..."

"You want to get back to her?" Greta asked kindly.

"Well, yes."

* * * *

Willy turned to walk out and was hailed by another couple. He couldn't tell what kind of fish their legs were being reshaped into. Their tail looked

like a bundle of bumpy ropes instead of any fish he'd ever seen.

"I'm Tim and this is my wife, Rita," he introduced them. "Your wife's getting better?" he asked.

"Some changes," Willy backpedaled. "Can I talk later please? They're taking her to diagnostics and I need to be there."

"I understand," he smiled and waved him towards the door. Willy half ran from the room and met an intern pushing his wife on a gurney.

"Can I tag along?" he asked hopefully.

"Well, uh, it would be better if..." he was interrupted by the nurse at the duty station, who was shaking her head affirmatively. "Sure, why not."

Willy followed the gurney to an elevator, down eight floors and into the diagnostics area. They quickly transferred Gillian, suit and all, onto a flat table. She was quickly strapped down and the scan started. Ten minutes later, the scan completed, she was bundled back onto the gurney. Dr. Harris and Dr. Harikart met them outside the room at the nursing station.

* * * *

"The first results are amazing. She is developing a caudal appendage nearly a week ahead of schedule. There's evidence of nanite activity all up and down her spine. We're putting her on an increased energy and protein diet. The sustainer sprays we've been using won't be enough to handle this kind of growth," Dr. Harikart enthusiastically gushed. Willy's puzzled look caused Dr. Harris to smile.

"She's growing her fish tail nearly a week ahead of our predictions. Her spine is being fixed by the nanites at an accelerated rate. We're going to have to feed her more so she can keep on healing."

"She'll get better?" Willy could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"I think there's a good chance she will. It's a little too early to tell just how much improvement there will be, though."

* * * *

Willy spent the rest of the day with Gillian. He held her hand and talked about anything and everything. Near evening, he noticed yet another change. Her eyes were moving rapidly underneath her closed eyelids instead of being still as they usually were. He quickly went for the nurse who immediately contacted the doctors.

"REM," he concluded after a few seconds of observation.

"Is that serious?" worried Willy.

"Hardly," came the smug response of Dr. Harikart. "The nanites are stimulating her neural cortex. Part of the transformative process is the sleep learning the nanites induce in the subject."

"Sorry?" Willy was confused.

"She's dreaming about being a mermaid," was the dry comment from the nurse who'd just entered the room. She didn't like the technical approach of Dr. Harikart.

"Well, yes," he snapped. "How else will she learn her new neural pathways?" He nodded coldly, made a short notation on Gillian's chart and left.

"What's with him?"

"He's a researcher not a real healer," came the somewhat caustic reply from the nurse.

"What did he mean exactly?"

"I'm no expert, mind you," began the nurse.

"I understand, Helen," Willy read her name from the nametag she wore. "Tell me what you can, please."

"I've seen four groups go through this ahead of you now," she started. "As I understand it, what happens is that the nanites use the nerves, bone and muscle other tissues in the legs to build the new body. That means creating new bones, muscles, nerves and everything else. If the volunteer had to learn on their own how to handle the new body, it would mean physical therapy. Lots of it, too. It would be an unbelievably long time, years maybe, before they'd be able to use their new body. Maybe months alyway."

"But the groups aren't that far apart. The film we watched said the whole process only takes eight weeks or so."

"That's true. Some of the nanites don't rebuild muscles and bones. They rewire your nerves, spine and brain. I believe that's why Gillian's recovering so fast. The damage to her spine was so severe that there wasn't anything that needed to be taken apart before the nerve nanites could start rebuilding her spine and brain."

"The dreams then?"

"Simply building the muscles and nerves up isn't enough. You learned to swim as a child, right?" When Willy nodded, she went on. "You had to practice your swimming to get good at it, right?" Again Willy nodded. "The new muscles, bones and nerves are something Gillian's never had before. Like anything new, she'll have to learn how to use them. Before the nanites, it would have meant physiotherapy and unlearning how to use the legs and learning the new muscles. My guess is that the nanites trigger the dreams to let you learn how to use your new body."

"Well described," came Dr. Harris's voice. Willy startled. "And accurate, as well. I think I'll have to get you to do the descriptions for the next video. The current one is confusing to most of our volunteers."

"Thanks, Ted," the nurse smiled. Ted was someone she could work with easily.

"Now I understand Gillian's dreaming," he said kindly. "That is a very good thing to hear. It means the nanites in her spine are nearly finished their work. I'd not thought it possible so quickly but I believe in miracles. The fastest we've seen before is ten days. She's nearly a week ahead of that timetable."

"Is that good?" Willy asked, suddenly worried.

"It's fast but good or bad, I honestly don't know," Dr. Harris stated calmly. "We'll just have to watch her and make sure." He placed his hand on Willy's shoulder. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

"So it's okay for her to dream so soon?" Willy asked.

"If the nanite program is to that stage, I can't see why it would be a problem."

"Will she wake up?"

"I believe she will. I can't think any reason why she won't continue to recover. If she continues to improve as she has, she might even awaken tomorrow."

* * * *

Willy could scarce believe his ears. After months of his beloved Gillian lying in bed still as a statue, she'd be returned to him so soon. He slumped to the bed and began to cry.

"It's been many long months, hasn't it?" asked Helen quietly.

"Too many," Willy answered through his tears. She placed her hand on his arm, providing support while Willy's pent up emotions spent themselves in tears. After several minutes, Willy looked up and stanchied his tears. "Sorry," he apologized.

"All part of your healing," Dr. Harris warmly stated. "You have as much healing to do as Gillian in many ways." Willy frowned, he thought he'd handled the whole accident very well. "You may want to talk to some of our staff psychologists. They'll help you, if you want. You've had a rough emotional ride the past months."

"I don't need..."

Helen shook her head slowly.

"Maybe I will do at that," Willy finished. "It's just that..." he had trouble finishing his sentence.

"I do understand," Helen touched his shoulder again. "She is very special to you. You'd hoped for a marriage and children and a shared life. Then the accident took it away. Well, now the nanites are going to give some of that back."

"Some?" Willy was puzzled and a bit hurt.

"You're moving away from the rest of your family and friends. Atlantis isn't exactly downtown anywhere yet."

"But we'll be together."

To Willy, that had been all that had ever really mattered. He'd have been happy anywhere Gillian was regardless of where.

"Yes, you will," Dr. Harris announced from Gillian's bedside.

"Willy?" asked a weak voice.

"Gillian!" Willy was on his feet in a flash and by her side. "You're back!"

"Back?" came Gillian's puzzled response.

"The accident. All those months."

"Accident?" she asked puzzled.

"You and Willy were in an accident. You've been in a coma for quite a while."

"Willy? You're okay?" Gillian asked weakly.

"I am now."

"How long?"

"Nearly eight months," Wiley smiled and reached over to hug her.

"Eight?" she tried to get up. "I can't move my legs," she said horrified.

"You were paralyzed. You couldn't move at all," Willey explained still holding her.

"Paralyzed? How?"

"The cabbie busted you up pretty good. You couldn't move anything below your head."

"But I can move now," she raised her arm momentarily. She caught sight of the blue rubber tube on her arm with its fin of bright yellow. "What's this?" she asked puzzled.

"Your only hope..." began Willy. She shifted her weight and her tail flopped over the edge of the bed.

"What is this ... this costume?" she demanded.

"It's not really a costume," Dr. Harris interrupted. "Your husband convinced us that the only way to heal you was to join the Atlantis project."

"The what?"

"An alternate universe. A water world," began Willy trying to explain.

"But the costume?" Gillian was becoming agitated.

"It's a containment suit for micro-machines that are rebuilding you to live in Atlantis," Dr. Harris explained.

"As what?" she was becoming increasingly angry. "Some kind of freak?"

"No. One of the colonists," Helen interrupted. "You guys get out of here. We girls have some talking to do. We'll meet you in the cafeteria when we're done Willy, after I've explained things to Gillian here."

Gillian still looked angry but acquiesced.

"I and uh -- " Willy protested. He wanted time with Gillian now that she was awake but Dr. Harris led him to the door of the room. "I'll talk later, okay?" Gillian just frowned.

* * * *

Some time later, Helen brought Gillian out in a wheelchair. Gillian was smiling but still had a slightly puzzled look on her face.

"Why the mermaid?" she asked when Willy hurried over.

"We both love mermaids and the picture they showed me was perfect. If you had to change into something else to get well, I knew that mermaid would be the best choice possible."

"Dr. Harris says you were waiting for me to heal before starting your own change. You don't mind being a merman?"

"No. Not as long as I'm with you"

She smiled a beautiful smile and held out her arms to him. They hugged for a long time. The others in the cafeteria politely left them alone until the next day when they insisted they be introduced. As Willy hadn't really gotten to know the others, he was hard pressed to put names to faces. In the

end, after much good-natured kidding, everyone got to know everyone else.

* * * *

The next day, Willy escorted Gillian to the diagnostic area again. He was surprised to see only faint shadows on the scan where her legs had been. A well-defined spine ran from the base of her hips to the tip of the suit. There were even some hints that rays were developing from the tip out into the flukes on either side. It didn't take Willy long that night to discover other changes. Gillian had the beginnings of a dorsal fin from her buttocks to the middle of her thighs. It felt like a rough comb all along her spine. She had a pair of lumps at her hips, too. Within days, Gillian had made even more progress. Her arm and head fin rays developed to the point that she could move them.

Dr. Harris led both of them into a conference room and showed them the record of her progress. Both were amazed. Gillian was weeks ahead of schedule for some reason and was ready for the final stage of her training as an Atlantis colonist.

"So I have to go into the big training pool?" she asked.

"There's so much you have to practice and learn to be able to handle Atlantis," Dr. Harris said.

"Without me?" asked Willy nonplussed. After all these months, he'd hoped to be able to spend some intimate time with his new wife.

"You could wait, of course," began Dr. Harris. "But I'd not recommend it. She needs to get used to swimming to build up her new muscles."

"Isn't there a pool or something?" Willy asked.

"The only pool in this building is the small swimming pool off the cafeteria and that's really too small to let her build her speed and endurance. Only place large enough is the training pool," Dr. Harris stated. "She's ready for that but you're not."

"What's the training pool?" Gillian wanted to know.

"It's a deep water pool just off shore," Helen responded. "The last group of volunteers is still using it but there's room for one more."

"But..." Willy protested.

"If we wait? Then what?" asked Gillian.

"I really wouldn't advise that. Your muscles are still weak from all the time you've been bed-ridden. You'll need to regain your original strength and then strengthen your new muscles as well. When Willy gets to the same stage, your muscles will still be weak otherwise. It might be months before the two of you would be ready to take the portal to Atlantis. If you go into the training pool now, you'll have a three-week head start. That will mean that you and Willy will likely be at the same stage and not have to wait as long."

"I understand but I want to spend time with my husband," Gillian protested. "We've so much to catch up on."

"We're not that cruel, you know," Helen said grinning. "He'll be able to visit you. The training pool's connected to this building by an electric tramway. The access tube from the reef complex that services the pool is clear and you will be able to see each other."

"You can also talk through the intercom system," Dr. Harris added.

"Can we, you know, do more than that?" Gillian asked shyly.

"Sorry," Dr. Harris laughed, knowing exactly what Gillian wanted. "But it will only be for a few weeks. Then you'll be together again."

"Can we have some time alone?" asked Willy.

"Certainly," Dr. Harris waved the others from the room.

"It's been a long wait for you, hasn't it love?" Gillian smiled sadly.

"Yes and no," Willy smiled. "You were there and I read to you, talked to you, held your hand."

"But I didn't respond. So you were kind of just talking to yourself."

"No," Willy disagreed. "You were there. Somehow, deep down, I knew that. I just had to find a way to wake you up is all."

"Can you wait a few more weeks?" she asked taking his hand.

"It's been eight months already," Willy grinned. "A few more weeks aren't that much more."

"You won't mind then if?" she asked and her voice broke.

"You need to be strong. We can wait until I join you. I'll visit every day, I promise."

"I believe you. You have waited at my side for me for so long already. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

"You were. You were just asleep, waiting for the right kiss from your Prince."

He took her in his arms and demonstrated. They slept together that night for the first time since the accident. Willy was very tentative; afraid he'd hurt her. Instead of anything too strenuous, at first they just talked and held each other. It wasn't until much later that their passion flared into a something more intense and enjoyable.

* * * *

The next day, Dr. Harris and Helen led Gillian and Willy to the elevator that took them to the training pool's access tube. The two healers understood fully when Willy asked to take Gillian to the alone into the access tube. He pushed her wheelchair slowly down the long glass tube. They held hands as they looked out into the clear water at other couples enjoying the water. The other couples were much farther along in their transformation as Atlantis colonists. Seven pairs, wanting a look at their new roommates, soon joined them outside the clear tube.

"I love you, Willy," Gillian smiled as she pulled him down to her level and gave him a big kiss.

"I love you, too," he replied, sad at having to leave her yet again.

"I'll wait, I will," she smiled at their courting phrase.

"Me, too," Willy stopped by the hatch in the floor.

He walked over to the hatch and pressed the release catch. It whooshed open, revealing a long tube half-filled with warm sea water. He helped her from her wheelchair and carefully placed her tail over the edge of the water. Both were reluctant to part. Finally, Gillian swished the water with her tail.

"I should get in there, you know," she hedged.

"Yes, you should get in there," he replied.

"Give me a hug."

She reached for his neck. He wrapped her in his arms and gave her a long kiss. There was a round of whistling over the intercom from the others outside in the water. They'd forgotten the other denizens of the training pool could see them.

"Uh," stammered Willy, never very demonstrative in his affection.

"Help me into the water," she gave him a sad smile.

He nodded and lifted her into the water. She looked up from the water at him and smiled broadly.

"It feels wonderful, you know. Hurry and get changed, Willy," she teased. "The water's fine." She dove down and appeared outside the tube.

"You're okay?" asked Willy.

She ducked into a small bubble attached to the tube. "I'm fine," came her somewhat tinny response.

"It's wonderful out here," she bubbled excitedly. "Just a second."

She dove from the bubble and swam rapidly to one of the other couples and back again. They followed her and entered the talking bubble.

"I wanted to ask someone who'd been through it how long it usually took," Gillian explained.

"I'm Naomi," the beluga-mermaid waved to Willy. "It doesn't take long. I was only topside for two weeks give or take a day."

"I'm Kenneth," her mate introduced himself. "No more than a couple of weeks is all."

"I'm glad to hear that," smiled Willy.

"Why aren't you in a suit, too?" asked Naomi curiously. Willy and Gillian alternated in telling their tale. When they'd finished, Naomi nodded.

"How romantic, really! So you're stuck in here with us and he's just getting started."

"I wish it were otherwise," Willy said sadly. "But two or three weeks isn't that long," he brightened. "Dr. Harris wants to get me started as soon as you're settled in the pool."

"I know. Get going and leave the nurses alone. You're spoken for, even if I can't get you from in here," Gillian grinned.

"Don't I know it," he ducked in a mock cringe at her fist on the other side of the glass. "Love you my beautiful mermaid."

"Me, too. Hurry up and show these folks what a handsome merman really looks like."

"We'll get her settled," Naomi offered.

"Thanks," Willy waved.

* * * *

Willy pushed the wheelchair down the tube with Gillian keeping pace on the other side of the glass. She ducked into each talking bubble along the way and they exchanged their love again. It was a slow walk with many long conversations before they reached the elevator and the last bubble. Eventually though, reach it they did and, placing his hand against the tube, breathed "I love you Gillian."

She placed her hand over his on the other side of the glass. "I love you too, Willy."

Then she quickly dove from the bubble and swam out into the pool. Willy felt a huge lump in his throat as he entered the elevator. Upstairs, Helen was waiting with an orderly. He took the wheelchair and disappeared down the corridor.

"Your turn, big boy," was Helen's sassy remark. "Can't keep your mermaid waiting too long you know. There's lots of other fish in the sea," she howled with laughter. Willy was a bit slow in the uptake but he, too, soon found himself laughing.

* * * *

When they reached the apartment, Willy noticed that Gillian's monitors and bed had been removed. All that remained was his single bed with his containment suit spread across it.

"Can you get into your tail by yourself? Or do you need help?" Helen's eyes twinkled.

"I should be okay," Willy smiled. Helen smiled and, hearing a call bell summons, strode from the room.

Willy quickly strode to the suit, undressed and slipped on the tail. At first it was very loose. He became worried that it was the wrong size or something was wrong with it. Just as he was reaching for the call bell, he felt a tingle from his chest to his feet and felt the suit tighten. He quickly slipped on the arm sleeves and adjusted them. They too were loose but tightened as they warmed to his body temperature. He then realized that fitting the head cap would pose some real problems. Smiling, he triggered the call bell. Helen appeared a few minutes later.

"Problems?" she asked.

"Just the head cap. Wouldn't want a crooked fin, after all," Willy handed her the cap.

"The cap and arm sleeves position themselves, you know," she laughed as she took it from him. "They know where to go, really. It only will attach in the correct position. It's something to do with the bones underneath the skin. But here, let me help you into it."

She adjusted the cap until Willy felt it lock into place. There was a momentary feeling that it was falling off his head as she let go of it but then, like all the other parts of the suit, it sealed itself to his skin. It was strange, Willy mused. The suit felt like it was part of his body now.

* * * *

When he expressed this observation to Dr. Harris at rounds the next morning, Dr. Harris confirmed the observation.

"It has to be a tight bond," he observed. "We wouldn't want the nanites running about loose now would we? Who knows what we'd end up with amongst our staff if we didn't keep them trapped?" Willy had to admit that that was a very good reason for the tight fight.

He'd avoided the cafeteria the night before, feeling somewhat self-conscious at his newbie status. Helen helped him into his wheelchair and insisted he join the others. The others welcomed him. They were, of course, farther along than he was. He could still feel his leg bones inside the suit and could only bend at the knees and ankles. The others were far suppler. They could bend their tails in places no unmodified human would have been able. He saw the entire gamut of the images he'd selected from. There were two couples with dolphin tails, a beluga tailed couple, a shark couple, several reef fish couples and Tim and Rita's strangely shaped tails had separated into the eight tentacles of octopi. They helped him catch up with the knowledge he'd have to know about Atlantis. Atlantis, it seemed, wasn't a completely benign place. There were predators able to take down a human. Some creatures (even some plants) were poisonous to the touch. They were learning how to handle the technology of their new home, too. Their homes were bubbles, half-filled with water. They had to learn to handle the cylinder locks that kept their bubble homes from flooding and how to do even the simplest tasks while floating weightless in the water.

* * * *

Eventually, in pairs, they disappeared to the training pool. Willy, of course, visited them and Gillian daily. Even though the wheelchair was neither the most comfortable nor convenient mode of transportation, Willy would not have missed his time with Gillian for anything. It always ended with the long walk from bubble to bubble and their "touch" through the glass. Willy soon began to notice his legs were becoming more flexible, bending in places he wouldn't have thought possible only days before. He was surprised that the arm and head fins weren't just for show either. He could flex them, raise and lower them, even twist them. But it was his hip fins that surprised him the most. They pivoted in nearly all directions and could be flared. They sure made swimming easier. His dorsal fin was a different matter, though. It stuck out at the back and was uncomfortable to sit on. He soon learned to flatten it when in the wheelchair but it was never really comfortable except when swimming in the swimming pool off the cafeteria. The tail flukes were the last to develop and strengthen but he was soon able to swim with ease. The water felt wonderful. He'd never imagined such freedom or speed in the water.

* * * *

One afternoon, after one of his high-speed dashes the length of the pool, Dr. Harris met him with a wheelchair. "Time to go to Gillian," he smiled. Willy was a bit puzzled. He'd visited her in the tube only an hour before.

"Sure but..." then he realized what Dr. Harris meant. "But it's only been twelve days," he grinned.

"True enough. You seem to have real incentive to get things done faster with Gillian on the other side of the glass tube. You're as ready as you're going to ever be. Besides Gillian's driving the training crew crazy. She's nearly at full strength and she's pushing the limits. Our divers just can't keep up with her. I thought maybe we'd toss you in there to give her something to do besides drive everyone around the bend."

Willy could tell Dr. Harris was kidding from the tone of his voice so he responded in a similar matter. "Can't guarantee anything, Doc. She's weeks ahead of me, you know."

"I guess you'll just have to keep up to her then," he nudged Willy's arm.

Strangely, on the trip down the elevator, Willy felt no great excitement. It was almost as if he were watching this one some tri-vid show. He watched as the doors opened but was unprepared for the crowd of colonists waiting on the other side of the glass. There was a gap, though, near the sea

access tube.

Waiting in the talking bubble was Gillian who'd been warned by Helen over an hour before. "You going to wait all day?" she smiled at him, her hand on the glass.

He helped wheel himself to the tube. It was all he could do to wait while Helen and Dr. Harris lowered him into the water. Taking a breath, he ducked into the water. He expected to see Gillian waiting for him outside the entrance but instead she was still by the tube with her hand on the glass. He swam over to the glass and placed his hand over hers. She quickly wrapped her hand around his and led him off to their bubble home. That evening was spectacular as they discovered what their new bodies could do in the water and later together in their bubble home.

* * * *

The next day, Dr. Harris signaled one of the couples that they needed to swim to the entrance. They had body forms based on lionfish but the containment suits made them look like plastic models rather than living creatures. She and Willy watched as the suits were removed revealing the translucent fins and bright colors of the lionfish. They were quickly returned to the water in their new splendor.

Gillian had begun to hate her suit. She'd enjoyed fashions in all sorts of colors and patterns. Having to spend weeks in a shiny blue rubber suit with yellow fins was beginning to wear on her. She knew that Willy needed a few more weeks in his suit before the nanites were finished their work but she longed to be free of its monotony.

Pair by pair, each of the other couples from the first group was stripped of their suits. Willy could see Gillian was becoming somewhat depressed by the parade of beautiful new forms and colors while she was still in her old suit. One evening, when Gillian was busy back in their bubble, he used the talking bubble to leave a voice mail message for Dr. Harris.

"Ted, this is Willy. I've a favor to ask, if its possible. I know Gillian's ahead of me. If she's ready to have her suit removed, I'd really appreciate having it done sooner. She's getting a bit down with the suit's monotony, you know. Thanks."

He swam back to their bubble.

* * * *

The next day, Gillian was surprised to hear her name on the intercom. She knew Willy wasn't due yet and she couldn't possible understand why she was being called to the entrance tube.

"What's up, doc?" she mimicked Bugs Bunny's voice.

"Time to get out of your old clothes and into some new ones," Dr. Harris smiled.

"But Willy?" she protested.

"He's the one that asked for this," Helen smiled.

"But he's still..."

"Sure, for a week or so. Then he gets the suit off, too," Dr. Harris shook his head. "Besides, we need to get the suit ready for the next volunteer. You can't have it forever, you know."

"Really?" she asked. "I mean, sure, get me out of this thing."

Dr. Harris signaled a pair of assistants who attached a pair of strange vacuum cleaner like things to her suit just below her dorsal fin, at her arm sleeves and to her fin cap. She was surprised to find that the suit ballooned out except where at the edges where it remained solidly attached to her skin. There was a strange glow from one of the machines as it switched from inflation to suction.

"We've got to catch all of the nanites," Dr. Harris answered the unspoken question. "Wouldn't want any of the beasties running loose."

It was then Gillian noticed a counter on the second machine. It was spinning madly at first but soon slowed .Gillian was surprised to see the number was over 5 million.

"That many?" she asked amazed.

"We put in 7.5 million," Dr. Harris stated. "And we want them all back, too."

The process took another thirty minutes and required that Gillian turn over several times in the process as she was scanned by some kind of hand-held device. Eventually, the count reached the required 7.5 million.

"That's the lot of them," the technician doing the hand scanning announced.

"Good. Time to open the containment now. Do you want to watch or see it all at once at the end?" Dr. Harris asked.

"Um, can Willy watch?" she asked. "I'm not sure I want to see it little-by-little."

"Okay. Do you want to ask him?"

Willy was, of course, in the talking bubble nearest where they were working.

"Willy darling, they're taking off the suit now. Do you want to watch or wait for the surprise at the end?"

"I've always enjoyed surprises," he grinned. "See you at the entrance."

He ducked out of the talking bubble and dove downwards. Gillian wondered whether she'd be beautiful or hideous. She hoped Willy had better sense in mermaids than he had in the clothes he used to wear. She nodded to the doctor and closed her eyes. She felt some tugging at her back and then across the tops of her breasts. She felt a silky fabric slowly peel from her body from top to bottom. There were momentary snaggings as the suit was pulled from her fins and again when her tail flukes were released. She then felt the arm sleeves slide off. Finally, her head crest was peeled off, as well.

"You're ready," Helen's quiet voice announced.

Gillian heard something scraping along the rough floor and peeked through half closed eyes to see a full-length mirror on its side. She quickly closed her eyes again. What if Willy had given her some hideous color pattern? Finally, she could take it no longer for the suspense of not knowing was worse than her wildest fears. She looked down at her tail and it took her breath away. Beautiful and silvery she was, from the middle of her breasts to the tip of her smooth tail. She was darker on top, as most fish are. This faded to lighter silver on her tummy but the most spectacular was the pattern. A random pattern of darker spots covered her back and the back of her arms. Her fins were translucent and almost golden in color. Along her sides was a wonderful rainbow of colors that blended with and enhanced the silver of her body. She was beautiful and exactly like her perfect mermaid. Carefully, she slid herself back into the water expecting to see Willy. Strangely he wasn't waiting there.

She swam to the side of the tube to see him, hand against the glass. Putting her hand over his, she beamed at him. Her merman was the most perfect person anywhere and she would certainly show him how much she appreciated him when she got him home.

TEA FOR TWO

CHAPTER 1

Newlywed Fantasies

Jim put his arm around Tina's waist. They were lying 'spoons' with Tina's back and hips snuggled up against Jim's chest and tummy.

"Hmmm," Tina wiggled to get even closer and feel Jim's solid body against her own. They had just spent one of their 'in-bed' days, enjoying each other's company and indulging in the sexual games newlyweds played.

"I love you, you know," she said dreamily.

"I love you, too," Jim replied squeezing her tighter.

"Not so hard. I won't run away. We're married now, remember?"

"And the best thing for both of us, too, I hope."

"Is for me."

"Me, too," responded Tina turning over to face Jim. "I just love your

blue eyes. So clear and deep, like a great sea I could get lost in."

"You're delirious with love," he smiled.

"Only with you, Jimmy. Only with you," she traced the tips of her fingers in the light hair on his chest. Jim took her hand and kissed her fingers. Tina wiggled up to the head of the bed and put her arms around Jim's neck.

"Me, too," he replied looking into her green eyes. Tina seemed to grow slightly distant momentarily. Jim knew that she was thinking of something and trying to figure out how to phrase some awkward question.

"Jimmy, when we make love, what do you fantasize about?"

"Just you, my love."

"You sure? I don't mind if there's something else. The women's mag I subscribe to said most men and women have these fantasies."

"No," Jim said somewhat hesitantly. "Just you."

"I fantasize being alone with you on a deserted beach and making love in the warm sand or in the water. Sometimes I even fantasize making love while swimming naked with you."

"That sounds like fun," Jim was wondering where all this was going.

"Hard to find a deserted beach anywhere in the world any more."

"Just in our imaginations, I guess."

"You sure you don't, I mean, well, like one of your past girlfriends? Something like that?"

"No, I haven't had that many. There have only been three. Two I'd just as soon forget entirely. The last ... well let's just say I'm better off without that one."

"How so?"

"She was into fetish stuff. Latex, leather, whips, chains, that kind of stuff. I tried it to please her but it's not my thing."

"What is your thing?"

"You are. Only you."

* * * *

During the months that followed, they had several 'in-bed' days. Sometimes these would stretch into 'in-bed' weekends. Neither Jim or Tina wanted them to end when the time came to go back to work on Monday. Occasionally Tina would again raise the subject of Jim's fantasies. The slow drip of her interest eventually wore Jim down.

One evening, at bed time, Tina was stroking Jim's tummy. Jim could feel himself begin to stiffen. Tina noticed and continued her stroking.

"Jimmy, I'm sure you fantasize something besides just me. It's okay, really it is. It's normal. Maybe I can even find a way to make your fantasies come true."

"I don't think so. Can't we just leave my fantasies in my head? They involve you, you know."

"Please, Jimmy. I'd really like to know."

"Mermaids," he whispered.

"What?" she whispered back. "I couldn't hear that."

"I fantasize walking along a desert beach..."

"With me?"

"Not at first."

"I come around a large rock wall that juts out into the sea and see a woman sort of sitting on a rock a little ways out."

"Me?"

"Yes and no. You've a shimmery bikini top that catches the light. I start to walk out into the water but make a splash. You dive in from the rock and it's then I discover you have a fish tail instead of legs."

"Ooh, a mermaid. I wanted to be a mermaid as a little girl."

"Anyway, I swim after you and finally catch you. We make love in the waves."

"That would be neat. Maybe your mermaid wouldn't be so hard to catch next time."

"That's part of the fun."

"Hmm. In your fantasy, how do you make love? I mean mermaids don't have legs so how do you make love?"

"Her pussy, I mean, your pussy is on the front not between the legs."

"Ooh, kinky. Do you make love in water or on the beach?"

"In the water or on the beach. Depends."

"Might be fun. I like your fantasy. Why were you so reluctant?"

"I wasn't sure you'd like being imagined with a fish tail is all."

"With you, anything is all right."

CHAPTER 2

Fantasies Come True

Later that week, Tina was shopping at the local mall. They needed some groceries and she'd just purchased them and was heading back to the car. She noticed a new store 'Fantasies Come True.' After dropping the groceries in the trunk of her car, she returned and entered the store. The store was dimly lit and the air heavy with a strange incense. Both were peculiar as the store had appeared quite normal from the outside. There was something strange about the place. Still, what harm was there in inquiring?

"How may I help you miss?" asked a voice at her side. She looked down and saw a short, somewhat plump woman in a long dark dress.

"I'm curious as to what your store sells? Is it some kind of adult shop? I don't see the usual slinky things."

"It is and it isn't," responded the woman.

"I don't understand."

"Those other stores sell clothing, massage oils and various devices to help people create a fantasy. My store is somewhat different. I can make your fantasies come true completely."

"What? I don't understand how."

"You don't need to really. That's my calling, I create whatever is needed to make your fantasy a reality."

"Like what?"

"Sometimes clothes, sometimes entertainment, sometimes a little magic"

"Magic?" said Tina skeptically.

"Well, I see you don't quite believe."

"Well, uh, no," Tina felt strange somehow. This made her nervous. "I've got to get going. Jim's going to be home soon."

"Please," said the woman. "If you want my services at any time, give me a call." She handed Tina her business card. Tina stuffed it into her purse and quickly left the store.

* * * *

Over the next few weeks, Tina found herself thinking more and more about the strange shop. She didn't tell Jim about the shop or her thoughts and hoped that this strange fascination would disappear. It didn't, of course. In the manner of all such thoughts, the more Tina tried to forget the shop and the woman, the more she thought about them. After three weeks, her curiosity got the best of her and she found herself once more outside the shop.

She hesitantly pushed the door open again and waited to be greeted by the strange woman.

"Ah, Tina," she said. "You've returned to us. So glad to have you back."

"Uh, Ms?"

"Just call me Cassie."

"Well, uh, Cassie. Just how far can you take a fantasy? I mean costume and makeup and stuff? Right?"

"Indeed, but much farther than that."

"How much farther?"

"I couldn't call my store 'Fantasies Come True' unless I could make any fantasy come true, now could I?"

"Uh well, other stores might and do."

"I don't. Seems unethical to me to promise what I can't deliver."

"Any fantasy?"

"I've not had anyone in here who has ever been in the least dissatisfied."

"Well, you see, my wedding anniversary is coming up. I was kind of trying to arrange a special fantasy night for my husband."

"Involving you, no doubt."

"Well, of course."

The woman smiled. She looked Tina over carefully without saying a word. "What is the fantasy?"

"He wants to make love with a mermaid."

"Does he indeed? And you want to be that mermaid?"

"Yes. Just for an evening, you know."

"Tell me the whole fantasy."

Tina found herself telling Cassie everything from the rock wall, to the water chase to making love on the beach. She even found herself describing how the mermaid looked. When she was done, she looked at Cassie, expecting her to look amused or to tell her that it was too involved. Instead, Cassie nodded her head slowly.

"It is possible. It will take a few days to arrange it."

"I won't need it for six weeks. That's when our anniversary is."

"Excellent! You'll have everything you need to create and enjoy your mermaid fantasy. Just keep it hidden until you need to use it. Then follow my instructions exactly. You and your husband will have a memorable anniversary, I'm sure."

* * * *

Tina gathered her purse and left the store. She had to get to work as she was on an evening shift. Somehow, her mind wasn't on shoe sales that night. She had an irrational expectation that Cassie would phone at work to tell her that she couldn't arrange it -- or perhaps maybe worse -- could.

CHAPTER 3

The Fantasy

However, it was nearly eight days later that Tina picked up the phone to hear Cassie's now familiar voice.

"Hello, Tina?"

"Yes. Is this Cassie, the woman from the store?"

"Indeed it is, I have your fantasy arranged. Whenever you want to come on down, I'll explain how it works."

"I'll be down in half an hour."

Tina wondered what kind of costume she'd have to wear to give Jim his fantasy. She eagerly pushed open the door and found Cassie with a large cloth sack at the counter.

"Hello, Tina. I have everything you will need. This fantasy was a little more difficult than I thought it would be at first."

Uh-oh, thought Tina. That means 'expensive'.

"I don't have much money, you know."

"I know and don't worry about money. I'll let you have the kit. On your anniversary, use it. If it is unsatisfactory in any way, just return it. Otherwise, you and I will agree on a fair price at that time."

"Oh," said a startled Tina.

"I've written the instructions down, but I want to go over them with you. It's very important that you follow them exactly or strange things may happen."

"Strange?"

"I told you that I used magic. Much of this fantasy will involve magic as you will be changed into a mermaid for an evening. The sea and shore and such uses a special illusion magic as well. So listen carefully and, if you have any questions in the future, you can call me at any time."

"M-m-magic? Real magic?," stammered Tina. "I -- don't know -- uh -- I,"

Tina's voice faded out.

"You don't have to use the magic if you choose not to use the fantasy. This is what you must do if you choose to use the fantasy."

"Okay, I guess."

"In this blue pouch is a special herbal tea. It limits the effects of the rest of the magic to eight hours. Once you become a mermaid, you will remain a mermaid for eight hours."

"And then?"

"You'll change back."

"Oh."

"Make a cup of steaming hot water and put a handful of the leaves from the blue pouch into the cup. When the steam stops rising from the cup, you must drink the tea. Without sugar, without lemon, without cream. Any additives may make the potion ineffective or worse cause strange side-effects. You will drink one cup of the tea in the morning before your fantasy and a second one at noon. Your final cup must be just before you put this on." From the bag, she pulled a bikini which, at first glance, was completely covered by silver sequins.

"Pretty," said Tina as she reached out to touch the fabric. It felt smooth and cold almost slippery, not like sequins at all. "Can I try it on? For size?"

"No! Never ever without the tea. You'd stay a mermaid forever."

"Forever? Not possible."

"Believe it, it's possible. Anyone who wears this bikini without drinking the magic limiting tea is permanently transformed. It was the time limit effect that you wanted that proved so difficult. I've made similar suits for women who wanted to be mermaids forever. I've used my magic to transport them to safe locations to live out their lives as mermaids. Yours is the first short-term mermaid I've created."

"Is this magic safe?"

"With the tea, absolutely. But be sure you drink all three cups. If you only drink one or two, the effect will last much longer. Best guess would be weeks or months."

"There's more tea stuff in the blue pouch than I'll need for the one evening," noted Tina. "I suspect you will want to play your fantasy more than once. If you run out, come back here. I can make more in a few hours."

"Oh, neat. Anything after I change back?"

"You'll need to drink the contents of one of these little green vials after you change back to yourself," Cassie said pulling one from the cloth sack. "It will purge your system of the magic to prevent any accidental flashbacks."

"Flashbacks?"

"Partial transformations which might last anywhere from minutes to hours."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Your legs might grow scales or you might find your feet becoming fins or something like that. None of that will happen if you drink the contents of one vial after you change back to yourself."

Tina nodded. "What else?"

"To set the stage for the fantasy, you'll need to place the illusion pebbles in this leather pouch. Place them around the outside of the room or rooms you want to have as your beach. You need only one room, though. The magic illusion is like those holodecks in science fiction. Even though the room may be small, the illusion pebbles will make it appear as large as necessary."

"Does Jim have to do anything?"

"Not for this fantasy. Have you ever dreamed of making love to a merman?" asked Cassie.

"No, not really. Why?"

"If you give Jim the tea and have him put on these," Cassie pulled a

man's swim suit made from the same fabric as the bikini from the bag. "You'll have a merman for eight hours. You don't need to use this part, or any of it, for that matter. Just return after your anniversary and we'll discuss payment."

"Thanks, Cassie. You sure? I mean we could have a great time and then lie about it."

"I doubt it. All of my clients thus far have been so satisfied that the matter of the fee seems of little consequence. I guarantee to make the fee no more than you can afford."

"Oh, thank you. I'll be sure to come back. Count on it." Tina quickly gathered everything back into the bag and left the store. She decided that she'd better hide everything to keep the surprise complete. Real magic! A real fantasy! This would be the most fun she and Jim had ever had.

CHAPTER 4

Loose Ends

About two weeks later, Jim was home alone. He had slight case of the flu and had booked off sick. He was wandering around the house trying to find some flu medicine and also something to do. The television was showing nothing but daytime crap and there was nothing worth watching on the sports channel. After wandering the house for nearly an hour, he found himself standing in their walk in closet. He smiled, remembering how Tina claimed the left hand side as hers when they moved in and that the entire right side would be his. Of course, his few things barely filled half of 'his' side and her things quickly spread to fill the vacancy.

He touched the fabric of one of her teddies, remembering the last time she had worn it. That night had been, a lot of fun. They must have made love dozens of times before the sun rose and they fell asleep in each others arms. With both of them working, there were fewer and fewer chances for the passion they'd had just after their marriage.

Jim sneezed suddenly and remembered his original intention. There would be no flu medicine in here. He searched all the places he could think of: the bathrooms, the kitchen even some of the boxes still in the hall. No luck. But there had to be something somewhere.

He opened the drawers on her cupboard one at a time. He carefully searched for something for his flu and to special care to replace everything he'd disturbed in his search. At least for the first three drawers. The fourth one, on first glance, seemed to be more of the same: her undies and bras, her t-shirts, her shorts. At the back, though, under a pile of dark nylons, he found a plastic shopping bag from a store called 'Fantasies Come True'. It held a man's swim suit and a bikini in a strange shimmery sequined fabric. He felt the fabric and found it felt cold and slippery almost like some kind of fish. It was obviously for some kind of surprise Tina was planning. He quickly returned the swim suits to the bag. The only other thing of interest was the bag of ground leaves.

He carefully opened the pouch so as not to spill any. With his nose plugged, of course, he couldn't identify what kind of tea it was. Since he didn't think any harm could come from simply tasting it, he tried a bit. The sharp bitter taste was so strong that he dropped the pouch and ran for the nearby bathroom. With his mouth rinsed, he returned to discover some of the tea from the pouch dumped on the rug. Cursing his clumsiness and whoever packed the pouch, he closed the pouch and vacuumed up the mess. The pouch, though, was decidedly less full. He'd have to do something about that. He felt guilty and didn't want to face his wife with the truth. He walked to the kitchen and found some herbal teas in the kitchen pantry. Eight or ten of the bags from various boxes of herbal tea soon made up for the spillage. The contents of the bag, however, didn't look the same. Jim took a fork and stirred the top layer of teas into the original contents. Tina wouldn't be able to find out how clumsy he'd been. He felt she'd never forgive him.

CHAPTER 5

Anniversary

Tina said nothing about the pouch over the next few weeks. Jim breathed a sigh of relief that he'd managed to cover his clumsiness. He soon forgot the whole incident to the numbing grind of work and the excitement of their marriage. About three weeks before their anniversary, Tina began to drop cryptic comments about an anniversary surprise.

"You will be home early for our anniversary, please?" she asked as he was getting ready for work.

"Of course, hon. It's already arranged. My boss says he understands newlyweds. He says we should go out and have an exciting evening."

"It'll be exciting," she promised. "But definitiely not out..."

"I don't follow."

"It's all taken care of. Let me handle this one, okay?" she said sweetly.

He kissed her and held the embrace.

"Anything you want," he said hugging her.

* * * *

The night of the anniversary, he arrived home hours early with a large bouquet of flowers to a darkened house. The only light was the one in their bedroom. He walked quietly up the stairs to surprise Tina. There was something odd about the light coming from the room. It seemed to pulsate somehow. It was as if there were a veil across the doorway. He reached out to brush it aside only to find there was nothing there. There was a feeling of dizziness as he stepped through the room and onto a long beach with rocks in the distance.

It was his beach! His mermaid beach! How had she arranged...? This was impossible! He walked towards the rocks, part of him knowing that their bedroom -- not even their whole house -- was this big. And it was hot. He peeled off his work clothes and left them by a rock. A short ways on, by another rock, he found a pair of his swimming trunks. 'Beach -- swim suit -- wild!' were his only thoughts.

He continued towards the rocks that held his mermaid. He didn't know what to expect any more. It felt as if he'd walked a kilometer or more but he felt, somehow, that he was still in their bedroom. He shook his head and continued toward the rocks. As he walked around the rock wall from his fantasy, he began to hear a woman's voice singing. It sounded like Tina somehow but clearer even more beautiful. The voice sounded something like the mermaid's from his fantasy. He made his way quitely around the edge of the rock wall. Since everything else matched his fantasy, maybe his mermaid...

And there she was! Shimmery silver top and shiny tail. But she'd made a mistake this time. She was too far from the water. For once she'd be his. Although he'd told Tina he sometimes caught her, he always just missed. Well not this time ... He sprinted towards her and, unlike every other time, she didn't hear him. Catching her around the waist he pulled her towards him.

"Caught you..."

"Happy anniversary, Jim," said his wife, the mermaid.

True to her word, Tina had indeed planned and pulled off an exciting evening. About six or seven hours later, both were exhausted and happy.

"This was special. Really special," said Jim.

"I love you," said Tina.

"Me, too. I love you, too." Jim looked long into Tina's eyes. "Where did you get the costume? And how did you arrange the beach?"

"There's a little shop that specializes in fantasies. They made it all up for me."

"Expensive?"

"I don't know yet. We're to talk about the price tomorrow. She promised me it wouldn't be too expensive."

Jim shook his head. "But the beach ... I walked forever to get to you."

"The illusion pebbles. You can see them around us as the really shiny blue spots," Tina pointed to one.

"What if I touch one?"

"Nothing. Only when we gather them all up and put them away will our beach vanish."

"Can we? I'd like to spend part of our anniversary at home, too."

"Sure, start gathering. There's a half dozen. I'll get the pouch ready."

Jim gather the pebbles and held the glowing rocks in the palm of his hand. They looked hot but weren't. When he popped them into the small leather pouch, there was a quick shimmer and the beach disappeared. He turned toward Tina and fell over the corner of their bed. As he pulled himself up, his eyes widened.

"You're still a mermaid!"

"Yes, dear," Tina smiled. "The effect lasts eight hours. I've got about half an hour before I change back. Can we lie spoons until then?"

"Uh, sure. I guess so," responded Jim uncertainly. They still fit together as they had before but Tina's tail wasn't nearly as warm as her legs were. Jim found it distracting and in a strange way scary. Still, about twenty minutes later, Tina shifted her position and then sat up.

"I think it's starting," she said in a small voice. Jim watch half in awe and half in horror as the fish tail split from flukes to Tina's crotch. The tail quickly formed into her legs, the flukes formed into her feet and the scales vanished. Jim reached out uncertainly to touch her legs.

"It's over now," Tina said happily. "Everything's back to normal."

CHAPTER 6

Flash Back!

It truly seemed over. Jim hugged her a long time. He'd had his fantasy and his wife at the same time. They held each other and watched the sun come up. It was a work day again and their anniversary was over. Both got up and went to work. By evening Jim almost couldn't believe it had happened. He didn't quite know whether to ask Tina to do it again or to be afraid that she could. In the end, he said nothing. The details would fade but the memory of that special night was etched in his memory forever.

* * * *

Ten days later, though, Tina met him as he got home, looking scared.

"Jim," she stammered. "Something's wrong. Real wrong."

"What happened?" he was expecting a burst pipe or some such. Women couldn't handle such things in his experience.

"I .. I ... it's the mermaid. At lunch today. I felt a tickle on my leg. I checked and couldn't see anything."

"And?" Jim wasn't sure where this was going. "What happened?"

"I grew scales. A patch of them on my left leg. Lasted about an hour or so. Then faded."

"They're gone?"

"Yes, but I'm scared."

"Don't worry. If it's gone, it's gone. Okay?"

"But what if..."

"I love you and you'll be okay."

* * * *

Of course, it wasn't okay. The next day it was a scaley patch on her right leg. The following day, her left leg again. Tina was sure it was lasting longer each time.

"What can you do?" asked Jim.

"I don't know? I don't want to be a mermaid forever."

"I 'll love whether you're you or a mermaid," Jim tried to comfort her.

"I'm not sure I will love me. I don't want a tail."

* * * *

Three days passed. Tina's fears seemed to slowly subside. Jim mumbled something about flashback and hoped it was all over. Once again, it was not to be. The scales, when they next appeared, spread from the tips of her toes to

her hips on her right leg. They lasted longer longer, too. For four and a half hours, Tina had a scaled leg. Tina walked around their house looking at her leg and crying. Jim wanted to do something but couldn't figure out what. His offer at love-making was rebuffed and Tina ran for the bathroom and locked herself in. Jim was at loose ends. Tina finally came out of the bathroom, her eyes red. Jim didn't know whether to let her alone or hold her. Tina, looking hurt, walked slowly upstairs and fell asleep. Jim looked at his wife and felt sick. Damn his fantasy and her need to please him.

* * * *

The next day everything seemed back to normal but Tina seemed distant. Jim tried to get her to talk but all she would do is cry. Jim felt he needed to do something but nothing came to mind. He hurt for his wife but couldn't bring himself to tell her. She needed him strong. When evening fell and Tina stayed whole, he quietly broached the subject of going out for some dinner. He didn't feel like cooking and he suspected she didn't either. Throughout their evening, both half expected Tina to start changing again. When it didn't happen, Jim felt relieved. They fell asleep in each others arms.

* * * *

Morning brought catastrophe. Jim awoke with something cold and hard rubbing his legs. Tina was awake and was rubbing his shoulders and back with massage oil.

"You want to play a little before work?" she asked slyly. Jim felt himself slowly become erect as he rolled over.

"Hey," she complained. "That hurts!"

"Uh, sorry," he then awoke a bit more. He wasn't even on her. What could hurt? Quickly, he flipped the covers back.

"Hey! I'm co..." her voice stopped as she caught sight of herself. Jim had rolled over on his wife ... on his wife's mermaid tail. Her feet had been replaced by a pair of large fins and the scales on both legs extended halfway to her knees. "Oh, Jim. It's getting worse."

"I'm booking off sick. I can't leave you now," Jim's voice was hard and strong. He hoped she would see that he cared and that this worried him. Tina returned to normal nearly six hours later.

"Tina, we have to phone a doctor or get you to a hospital," he said.

"Who would believe?" asked Tina. "The only one who could help is Cassie at the store. Maybe she knows what's happening."

"She's done enough," snapped Jim. "Her assurances of safety sure didn't mean much. Damn magic!"

"But Jim..."

"Never again. This will all pass. Then we can get back to normal"

Jim decided to tell the boss that Tina was sick and that he was taking two weeks of vacation time instead of sick time to care for her. Jim's boss was oddly sympathetic and asked him to check in every couple of days. Jim was glad he'd taken two weeks for, over the next week, Tina had three more episodes. Each time, her feet became fins, the scales spread upward towards her hips and she stayed changed longer. The final episode was most frightening for both of them. Tina started the day normally enough but about mid-morning began a change that was so sudden that she literally collapsed in the middle of the floor. She didn't return to normal until well after midnight.

After getting Tina to bed, Jim lay staring at the ceiling. Jim had decided that he had to call Cassie at this 'Fantasies Come True' place. Two in the morning, he grumbled as he turned out the light. First thing in the morning, he assured himself.

* * * *

He awakened to Tina screaming.

"Jim!" she shrieked. "It's happening again. I can feel it. Do something!"

All Jim could do is stare in shocked silence as his wife's feet became fins, scales spread up both of her legs to her hips and she began to fuse together from her feet to the middle of her thighs. It was so fast, she didn't

even have time to take off her teddy.

He picked up the phone. "I'm phoning Cassie," he said through clenched teeth. When the call went through, though, all Jim got was an answering machine. The store was closed today due to a family emergency. "She'll get back to us as soon as she returns," said Jim angrily. "Damn! Damn! And double damn!"

They waited by the phone but no one called. Jim brought Tina meals, helped her to the bathroom, tried to show his love. He hoped he was doing a good enough job. Tina fell into an exhausted sleep just before midnight. Jim couldn't sleep though. He kept his hand on his wife's scaled thigh until, an hour later, he felt it change. Carefully he lifted the covers. Tina was normal again.

* * * *

Less than four hours later, Jim was awakened by his wife shaking. Strange convulsions were gripping her body. It seemed as if her muscles were contracting in waves from head to toe. Once again, Tina began to change. It went the same this time as last time except that her legs joined together to the knees. This time, her legs fused to her crotch and her teddy ripped in the process. When the changes had finished, Tina looked exhausted. Jim was reaching for the phone just as it rang.

"May I speak to Tina?" said an unfamiliar voice.

"She's a little under the weather," replied Jim. "Can I ask who is calling?"

"This is Cassie at 'Fantasies Come True'."

"Thank God," said Jim. "Something terrible has happened."

"What exactly?"

"She's becoming a mermaid."

"Of course. That's what the tea and swim..."

"She doesn't have on the damn bikini. She's just changing and changing and changing."

"Oh my. I'll be right..." there was a click and Cassie stepped through a shimmer in the air.

"How did you?" managed Jim.

"Magic," said Cassie, a look of concern spreading across her face.

"This started after your anniversary?"

"A week or so."

"You drank three cups?"

"Morning, noon and then mid-afternoon."

"Strange. The tea should have had more than enough cleansing effect."

"Tea?" asked Jim.

"You know about the tea?" ask Tina. "I hid it."

"Found it looking for some flu stuff."

"And?" asked Cassie.

"Well..." began Jim. Cassie did something and he suddenly found himself unable to stop talking. "I looked in the pouch. Thought it might be a herbal healing tea. I was desperate. I tasted it and dropped the pouch. I added some other teas to sort of fill it up. I stirred everything together so no one would know." Jim finished still confused as to what had happened.

"Get me the pouch," ordered Cassie. "Maybe..." She shook her head. Jim did as he was told. Cassie ground a small amount in her hand then tasted and smelled it. "It's been diluted maybe half strength maybe three quarters strength. Not good." She shook her head and then sat in a chair, thinking.

"This won't stop here," she said sadly. "The small bits of magic left over have been growing over the past month. It is only partially controlled. The original use was correct so it is still making you a mermaid as its strength grows. And its strength will continue to grow. The problem arises once it has achieved its original pattern. By tomorrow you will be a mermaid but the magic will still continue to change you."

"How?" asked Jim wishing he'd never found the pouch.

"I can't say. Wild magic. Maybe it will leave you alone after that and

fade but more likely it will continue to change more and more of you into a fish. If we don't control it, you will become a strange water-breathing monstrosity."

"How can you say that?" Jim balled his fists needing to hit Cassie or something else.

"We won't leave it alone. Tomorrow after you change back, you will put on the bikini. You will not drink any tea." She waved her hand and the pouch disappeared.

"But I'll be a mermaid forever," cried Tina. "You sure?"

"Yes. As sure as anything I've ever been. I must go but I shall return after I close up and tomorrow."

"Thank you," said Jim his anger carefully suppressed.

CHAPTER 7

Atlantis

They followed Cassie's instructions to the letter when Tina's flukes became feet in the grey dawn of the next morning.

"Will you still love me?" asked Tina as she reached for the bikini.

"Always, Tina. Always. My clumsiness and my silly fantasies got us into this."

* * * *

About two hours later, Cassie appeared as she had the night before. After an examination of Tina, she smiled.

"It's over. The wild magic is quelled."

"But now what?" asked Tina. "Can I still have children?"

"Your children will be merchildren. The problem is that as things stand Jim can't be their father."

"What?" growled Jim menacingly. He grabbed Cassie by the shoulders.

"Humans and Merfolk aren't the same kind. No children..." Jim swung at Cassie and hit empty air.

"I'll forgive that because of the situation. The next time, I may not." Cassie looked straight into Jim's eyes. Jim quickly subsided.

"But I ... we ... well," he stammered.

"You can have children but Jim will have to be a merman. He will have to put on the other swimsuit."

"But ... I would, sure but ... work and money and..." Jim was totally at a loss.

"Don't worry. I did some searching last night. The portal I use to come and go can be tuned to other places. One such place I call Atlantis. No one lives there except merfolk. It's peaceful and gentle. They're always in need of new immigrants but it's hard to get to."

"Where on Earth...?" began Jim.

"Not on Earth," replied Cassie. "Nowhere in this universe really."

"But..."

"It's that or it's stay here and explain how you are married to a mermaid."

"Uh ... oh." Jim paused a moment and then opened the drawer for the man's swimsuit.

When his change was complete, Cassie helped both Jim and Tina through the portal. They splashed into the water. Tina looked around.

"Two suns? A green sky? Cool."

PROOF

CHAPTER 1

Undercover

Gerry swam around the pool again. The seemingly endless daily grind of amusing the curiosity seekers was over once again. With any luck, the public would soon lose interest. Gerry sighed and swam over to the pool mirror and looked again at the reflection. The reflection was stunning, really very

stunning. Of course, it hadn't always been this way. Things had been entirely different only six months ago. That's when James O'Hara had called the surprise meeting in his office. At the time, Gerry had worked for Tina Corporation as a researcher for a little less than a year. Tina Norita, the reigning queen of the yellow journalistic network talk shows, had been fun to work for. Well, you really couldn't call the job working for Ms. Norita. Gerry had not even met the woman until that morning.

"Gerry," said James O'Hara. "You've been with us for a while now. We've both been impressed by your research skills."

"Thank-you, sir," Gerry stammered. Gerry knew this kind of comment well. Such comments were followed by an 'unfortunately' and a dismissal. Researchers, Gerry knew, were a dime-a-dozen, easy to find and even easier to replace. A lump rose in Gerry's throat.

"Don't worry," said Tina Norita from the corner. "This isn't a firing. In fact, I think you might find it a promotion, of sorts."

"A promotion?" Gerry's spirits rose.

"You've heard of 'New You'?" asked James.

"Who hasn't? It's all over the networks. Some pretty wild claims too." Gerry was beginning to wonder where all this would lead.

"Too many claims," said Tina. "Just the kind of target I'd like to sink. Be a real audience pull for ratings week in December."

"That's over half a year away," began James. "Our regular people are too well known. We'd like to put someone inside 'New You'. Get at their claims. Find the dirt, you know."

"I've never worked undercover that way before. I've never even done a script for the show. All I've done is dig up information from the information net, that's all."

"We have faith in you," said Tina. "First step is to get you in for a quick make-over. We want you to make contact with some of the other clients. You would use your computer skills to get at their client file."

"I -- I am honored," Gerry began. "I just -- "

"Good!" pronounced Tina. "Then it's settled. We'll give you the usual micro-recording equipment and you can start as soon as you are ready." She got up and started for the office door. She then turned to face Gerry.

"That's all, Gerry. You'll manage. Why don't you go talk to our makeup people? They'll help you decide what changes to ask for. We don't need anything too extreme. This is just a first contact. That's all. I'll call ahead to let them know you're coming and what's expected."

Gerry knew this was a dismissal and quickly left the office. Walking down the hall all kinds of musings came to mind. Still, it had seemed a promotion. He had graduated from the backroom to the exalted ranks of the undercover investigators. Gerry headed for the elevator and decided to see Helen in makeup. Gerry had talked to Helen as part of some research of a few months previous. Tina, of course, had made sure that everyone in the makeup department knew that Gerry was coming. Helen recommended several minor changes: nose shape changes, cheek bone enhancements, things like that. Armed with the information, Gerry took the maglev subway to the headquarters of 'New You' and presented himself at the information booth. An efficient guide took Gerry quickly up four floors and into the office of an esthetician.

After the introductions, a coffee and a doughnut and some small talk, Gerry described the changes Helen had suggested. The esthetician brought up a head and shoulders holographic projection of Gerry. Gerry was shocked. There was no holographic scanner anywhere visible. Jerry once again described the changes and the esthetician modified the projection. When the changes were complete and Jerry indicated they were acceptable, the esthetician pressed a large button on the monitor labeled 'SEND' and sat back.

* * * *

After a few minutes, a doctor in a lab coat entered the room.

"Gerry Williams?" he asked. "I'm Dr. Kikino. Welcome to 'New You'."

"Uh, hi," Gerry stammered.

"Your request isn't as extreme as it may seem to you. In the past, you'd have to prepare for surgery. The results usually turn out tolerably well from plastic surgery once the bruising has healed. Plastic surgery has always seemed a rather extreme method to effect relatively minor changes, in my opinion."

Gerry swallowed hard. Since an unfortunate childhood accident and a less than personable attending physician, Gerry had been afraid of surgeons.

"Not surgery?" Gerry managed.

"Of course not!" bubbled Dr. Kikino. "'New You' uses the latest in genetic techniques to effect the change over the space of a few weeks. You literally will be rebuilt so that your face will be in your genes, so to speak. No pain, whatever."

"What?" was Gerry's somewhat lame reply.

"Genetically effected surgery. No knives, stitches, bandages. Just a short stay in our clinic and your new face is done."

"When?" Gerry found the pace dizzying.

"We can start any time you wish," Dr. Kikino handed Gerry an electronic tablet that was displaying a form. Gerry signed the form. An aide appeared and led Gerry to a different part of the clinic.

* * * *

True to their word, 'New You' did effect the changes painlessly and quickly. The process started with a full biometric scan from head-to-toe. A few hours later a beautiful and efficient nurse came in and gave Gerry a quick injection with a gas gun. Gerry made numerous contacts with other clients and discovered their treatments were going equally painlessly. Three days later, he was once again in Dr. Kikino's office for a final meeting. Since all had gone well, Gerry was soon back on the street. Gerry decided to report in to James immediately.

CHAPTER 2

War Room

James quickly rescheduled a meeting to see Gerry. He invited Gerry to sit.

"Look's good," he said.

"They seem to be legit," Gerry announced. "They did exactly what they claimed, exactly as they claimed."

"Hmmm. Not good," James mused. Gerry looked puzzled. "Tina will be furious. She had such high hopes that this place was a fraud. What's worse, she's already got the expos scheduled."

"Now what?" asked Gerry.

"Don't know yet. Let's see what Tina says."

* * * *

What Tina said was unprintable in any media. Once she'd calmed a bit, she called a general meeting.

"Ideas?" she said sweetly. Her team knew that particular tone masked a mean streak. There was a brief pause before her chief assistant, Lenora, cleared her throat.

"Do you suppose the changes to Gerry were just too minor?"

Tina raised one eyebrow, inviting Lenora to continue.

She paused, cleared her throat again and tried a different tack. "After all, those kinds of cosmetic changes are done every day using conventional techniques."

"And?" was Tina's caustic response.

"What about something more drastic?" asked Fred, the production controller, taking Lenora's cue.

"Like?" asked Tina in the same tone. She was now looking directly at Fred who began to squirm a little under her gaze.

"I don't really know. Something extreme. Something that conventional surgery couldn't do."

"Keep going," was Tina's response. Her body language said she was

interested. Her eyes told a different story. She'd hang them all if they didn't deliver what she wanted. She'd replaced several members of the team as little as three months previously. The repercussions of that meeting still hadn't quite settled. Everyone who had survived the purge was still more than a little nervous.

"After all, they claim to be able to make any change. Not just simple cosmetic changes," Fred finished his thought quickly. In the silence that followed, Tina's gaze panned the rest of the conference room.

"How about a sex change?" asked Vanessa, the chief researcher.

"What's so great about a sex change?" snapped Tina. "Sexual reassignment surgery is commonplace. After all, it was first done in the 1950s."

"True," said Vanessa. "But current techniques are just cosmetic. 'New You' says they can make you into anything your heart desires. Even a man into a woman or vice versa."

"Yes," bubbled Fred. He'd figured out where Vanessa was going. "Proof is what's needed ... and when they're done, he'd -- or rather she'd -- better be able to have a child."

"Um," Tina said. "That's a start. Problems?" It was clear that the idea had caught her interest but equally clear that it wasn't enough.

"Not good enough," said Bobby-Jo, the video tech. "All of the modern electronic aids to the photographic world would make it hard prove that they didn't do what they claimed?"

"I don't quite understand?" Fred cocked his head. He plainly couldn't see anything wrong with the sex change idea and was wondering why Bobby-Jo was causing difficulties.

"We send in a man. They send out a woman. Is it the same individual? Or just a well briefed plant. How would we prove that they'd done a switch? If they'd done their homework well enough, we might not find out until it was too late. Really a bad scene as far as ratings go. Especially if they release how they duped us to another network to air a few days later."

"Well, we could id our man somehow. How about fingerprints or DNA? Those things have been used for decades to catch criminals."

"Won't work," responded George from across the table. "If they really do modify the DNA as Gerry says they claim, everything changes. Fingerprints and DNA aren't quite as solid as they once were. They could claim that any changes were a result of the process. We're not scientists enough to prove otherwise."

"An implant?" asked Fred.

"A definite possibility unless they're suspicious. In which case, they'd be scanning on all the bands for transmissions and simply move the implant to their 'product'," James responded.

"No, simple sexual reassignment isn't enough, anyway," Tina pronounced.

"Too easily faked if they have enough time. I'm sure they'll want as much time as they can get if they're not able to do anything more than minor alterations. How long does a normal reassignment take?"

"Over a year if you consider psychotherapy and hormone treatments," responded Vanessa checking her computer.

"So they'd ask for as much time as we'd allow. They might try to push it back past ratings week. Even if we managed to push them and get a shorter time, they'd take most of the five months that remain." Tina panned the room again. "This isn't enough..." Her voice trailed off.

"What then?" asked Lenora puzzled. As far as she could see, Tina was expecting something beyond the ordinary. "Are you proposing that they create something completely impossible?"

"That's it exactly," Tina beamed. "Something truly and completely impossible."

"Like what?" asked Fred. Where was Tina going on this one? He usually had a pretty good idea but this one was baffling him entirely.

"Perhaps some kind of mythological creature," Vanessa said calmly.

"Something that surgery and costumes can't create."

"Like what?" asked James cynically. "A mermaid?"

"Mermaids have been around since the early 1900s in costume," responded Vanessa. "There was even a short clip of a magician changing a woman into a mermaid. Kludgy but pretty good for 1905, I think it was. 'New You' would just have to buy some time and send out a woman in costume."

"But we'd be able to detect a costume," said James. "Rubber and other synthetics won't let them create something that scans as skin. Remember we'd have their product, so to speak. Even if they could create a costume that fools the scanners, no volunteer would be able to wear a costume for days on end without some problems. We could make sure by having the product, as it were, stay in costume for several weeks prior to taping. But I don't think it would work. How would we get the audience to believe that the mermaid was a fake? With all the movie mermaids available on the net, no one would believe we weren't just trying to pull a switch ourselves. I think we need something else. Something that can't be faked at all."

"No," said Tina slowly. "A mermaid is exactly what we need. But not a mermaid that's just a woman in some ridiculous rubber costume. Our mermaid would have to have a complete tail that bends in places where no woman could. It would need a shape that would be too narrow to allow her a place to hide her legs as well."

"But what of the electronic aids? I could do that with the 3D animator in a few hours. We would find it difficult to prove that they didn't just animate someone," responded Bobby-Jo.

"We'd have their mermaid, of course. The tail on the international networks," said Tina. "It'd be a live broadcast. Of course, 'New You' can't make the mermaid so we'll just have our volunteer discussing the bogus claim. Maybe even start the volunteer in costume and change halfway through. A smash!"

"Our contract would specify something that couldn't be done with a costume at all," responded Lenora. "If they can't do it, they'd simply refuse."

"That's just as damning in this game," said Fred. "You claim you can do anything and then not deliver ... well, it's just game over."

"A mermaid? -- I think I have an idea," said Vanessa. She keyed a request into her console and a holographic image of a mermaid from one of the fantasy art archives appeared over the center of the meeting table.

"This mermaid has a fish tail. It bends in curves from side-to-side. People don't work that way, people have thigh bones, knees and things like that."

"And all the little side fins," beamed Tina. "They'd have to work, too. I suppose gills are too much to ask for?"

Vanessa keyed a request into the computer. "It's odd," she said. "Very few of the fantasy pictures have gills. Still, it really doesn't much matter whether we specify gills or not as they can't make a mermaid anyway."

"Indeed not! It's perfect!" Tina was obviously pleased.

"Who?" asked James.

"Someone who has already been through their processing once. Only this time, we go in with a camera crew and put them on the spot."

"Who?" asked James again with some trepidation. Gerry was a good friend and he could guess where Tina was leading.

"Your researcher Gerry. I'll set up the meeting for an hour."

CHAPTER 3

Attack

"Gerry," said Tina calmly. "Your preliminary recon of 'New You' was excellent. Now we go for the throat. You and a camera team are going to pay another visit to 'New You' and put them on the spot. When they back down on what we have in mind, we've got them."

Gerry looked at Tina and James across the table. "Refuse to do what?"

was the anxious reply.

"Make you into a mermaid," came Tina's triumphant response.

"Whoa!" was all Gerry could think of to say. "You mean like fins and a tail. That kind of mermaid?"

"Of course," was Tina's rejoinder. "What other kind is there?"

"But I don't want to be a mermaid!"

"They can't make a mermaid. Don't be ridiculous. All they can do is minor cosmetic surgery. They may have some new techniques that reduce the bruising but that's all. No one has even heard of this Dr. Kikino before he opened 'New You'."

"But -- but"

"I realize that you'll need a little time to think this over," Tina said sweetly. "We'll adjourn for twenty minutes. Here's my access card. Go down to the station canteen and order yourself a meal or something."

Tina let herself out and Gerry plodded from the room. Gerry had heard of Tina's sweet voice from others on the staff. Others had been replaced when a Tina request had been refused. But a mermaid? Of course they couldn't make such a thing but what if they did? A mermaid for the rest of one's life wasn't exactly conducive to making a living. There had to be some way out of this. Perhaps, if the stakes were raised, Tina might back down. At the worst, Gerry would be fired. That outcome was guaranteed should Gerry's answer be a 'no'. Tina, after all, could easily find someone else. Now how high should the stakes be raised without pushing Tina into a firing?

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, on the dot, the three of them were once more in James' office.

"Well?" asked Tina, still using the sweet voice she used when she was attempting to be reasonable.

"I know you can fire me any time you want," began Gerry. "But look at it from my viewpoint? What if they do make me into a mermaid?"

"They can't! That's impossible!" was Tina's confident reply.

"Well," began Gerry again. "I'd like some insurance. If I'm stuck as a mermaid for the rest of my life, I'd like to not have to worry about making a living. I'd like a house which I could live in -- even with a tail. That kind of thing. It's hard to get a position anywhere with a fish tail."

"Okay, okay" said an exasperated Tina. "We'll fix you up with a mansion with a large pool. I'll have a trust account set up which is big enough to pay a staff and keep the place running. But only if you end up with a tail."

"I agree," said Gerry knowing that Tina had just called his bluff. "If I end up with a tail." Gerry hoped that 'New You' couldn't deliver.

Later that afternoon, a busy lawyer entered Gerry's cubicle with an electronic form. Gerry quickly signed the form hoping that everything would turn out well.

* * * *

The next morning, Tina, Gerry and a camera team barged into 'New You'.

"Dr. Kikino," snapped Tina. The secretary behind the desk, stunned at seeing Tina and the camera crew, dropped the receiver. He stuttered then recovered. He apologized to the person on the phone, put them on hold and then dialed Dr. Kikino's office. Only a few minutes later, Dr. Kikino himself entered the foyer.

"To what do I owe this visit?" asked Dr. Kikino somewhat taken aback.

"Your company claims that you can make a person into anything they desire. I doubt that claim."

"It is quite true," Dr. Kikino began. "We have a 100% success rate."

"We have a commission for you then. Shall we retire to your office or do you want us to present our commission here, in public, in the foyer?" Tina was at her nastiest and the camera holodisks were recording it all.

"My office, of course," said Dr. Kikino leading the way to the elevators.

Instead of his office, however, Dr. Kikino led them to a meeting room.

"I thought your camera people would be a little crowded in my office. Now, what commission do you have in mind?"

"I want your statement for the record first. You are able to make any change a person desires in their body."

"Yes," said Dr. Kikino. "Any change they desire. With -- "

"Excellent," she glanced over her shoulder at her camera crew who signaled it had been recorded. "You will make Gerry, here, into a mermaid. This mermaid." She keyed the projection of the mermaid Vanessa had pulled from the archive.

Dr. Kikino's stunned look was exactly the response Tina had been aiming for.

"A mer-mermaid?" he asked. Then taking a deep breath, he calmly asked. "Surely you mean a merman? Your assistant is male, after all."

"I said mermaid, I meant mermaid!" Tina was smiling. She was sure she had him and for the national networks, too. Gerry, too, looked at Tina in disbelief. He'd assumed merman as well.

"May I have a word with your assistant? Alone?" asked Dr. Kikino.

"No," Tina smiled thinly.

"You've been in here before?"

"Uh yes, I was in a few weeks back."

"Are you sure about this? This mermaid thing?"

"They say you can't do it. My job is on the line."

Dr. Kikino paused thinking. "I want a small concession from you, Ms. Norita, as well. Otherwise, I will not proceed. You may make all the allegations you like but they are merely so much vapor against the increasing number of satisfied clients. I, too, can use the networks."

"What concession?" asked Tina, her eyes narrowed.

"Some member of your staff must stay with Gerry during the entire transformation. I want no allegations that my staff have made off with him. Second, you will broadcast the transformation and the results of the transformation regardless of how it turns out."

"Of course," Tina smiled. Her expression announced her belief that Dr. Kikino couldn't make a man into a mermaid any more than she could grow another head.

"Fine, I'll send for my lawyers and you can do the same. While the legal beasties are hashing out the contract, I'll get to work designing the transformation for your mermaid. Fortunately, I already have a complete bioscan of Gerry."

CHAPTER 4

Changes

Six hours later, Dr. Kikino and Tina signed their electronic contracts. Dr. Kikino, Tina, a now terrified Gerry and a two man camera crew entered the elevator for one of the clinics' wards.

"You understand," began Dr. Kikino. "I can't have a change of this magnitude taking place in the regular wards. We have a small fitness pool for the staff and there's a small ward on the same floor."

"Pool?" stammered Gerry.

"You will require water to survive after a while. Mermaids are aquatic, after all."

"You're serious? Aren't you?" asked Gerry.

"Very serious. I'm going to give you one chance to back out, Gerry. You remember our talk during your first treatment?"

"Y-Yes," Gerry managed. "I think so."

"We will be make rather major adjustments to your DNA. You will be undergoing a genetic sex change as well as a species change. When we are finished you won't be human any more."

"Enough!" snapped Tina. "You can't weasel out of the contract by scaring off Gerry. I'll just find someone else."

"Ms. Norita!" Dr. Kikino drew himself to his full height and stared her

full in the face. "Once Gerry becomes a mermaid, he -- or rather she -- will be stuck that way for the rest of her life. Do you understand? There is no turning back. Once a change of this magnitude has been performed, his original DNA will be lost. Completely and totally lost. Even 'New You' won't be able to return him to his original form. All we might be able to do is return him to some kind of humanity. I have no doubt he'd be sterile after the second transformation as well what with all of the tampering we'd have done to his genetic structure. If you still want me to perform this -- this -- " Dr. Kikino paused at a loss for words and just shook his head.

"If you can do it," Tina smiled again. "Which I doubt."

Dr. Kikino merely shrugged his shoulders and shook his head slowly.

* * * *

They were soon in the small ward. There were beds for Gerry and, in a separate room, for the camera crew. Gerry noticed the doors leading to the swimming pool and swallowed hard. Gerry was beginning to doubt Tina's assurance that becoming a mermaid was impossible. Of course, it was too late to back out now. Too much legal water had passed under the bridge for anyone to consider backing out now.

"Well," said Dr. Kikino pulling up a chair to face Gerry. Tina and the camera crew were behind his back. Tina was steaming at being left out of the conversation. "We have two choices for this change. You are sure, really sure, you want to be a mermaid?"

"Neither you nor he has any choice," was Tina's response. Gerry just nodded.

"Very well, then. We can do this in two ways. We could make you a woman first. Have you get used to being a woman and then change the you that has become a woman into a mermaid. Psychologically, that would be kinder in my opinion. Or, we could do it all at once."

"How long?" Tina snapped the question.

"The two stage process would take a little over twenty months. The single stage process about five months."

"The broadcast is in December. One step," ordered Tina.

"All at once," said Gerry slowly. "I don't think I could stand two complete changes like that."

Dr. Kikino merely nodded and pulled a pair of gas injection guns from his bag. He looked at the labeling and returned one to the bag. He cocked his head, wordlessly asking again if Gerry really wanted to become a mermaid. Gerry just looked sick and nodded. Dr. Kikino pressed the injector against Gerry's thigh and pressed the trigger. The sound of the injector seemed unbelievably loud to Gerry. He just sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

* * * *

Gerry didn't remember all of the next five months very clearly. He was on muscle-relaxants, pain-killers and sedatives for much of the time. Gerry remembered quite clearly only a few events. The first month of his transformation was etched deeply in his memory. His waist thinned dramatically and his hips broadened. Within the first week, his voice had shifted from its usual baritone to a rich contralto. His skin became softer and smoother as a fat layer developed beneath it. The biggest changes were to his breasts. By the second week, his had grown larger than those owned by most women. They were large enough that he was becoming uncomfortable during normal activities. Dr. Kikino tried to reassure Gerry that, once he was aquatic, the water would support his body and he'd be far more comfortable. This reassurance was not exactly what Gerry wanted to hear and he ran from Dr. Kikino's office. Later one of the nurses, Millie, brought in a tape measure and measured Gerry. She returned an hour later with a brassiere and showed Gerry how to get into it. The added support was welcome and Gerry thanked her.

His outward appearance was more female than male by the middle of the third week. He remembered Tina dropping by to visit and remembered also that he wished she'd never come back. All she did was gloat over the fact that all

that seemed to be changing was his sex -- as if that weren't enough. The nurses, who knew of his situation, felt sorry for him. Although they couldn't do anything more than keep him company and talk to him, they helped him learn those things that every woman learns in her teen years. He learned about makeup and under-garments. On one very memorable day, the nurses brought in various dresses and gowns for him. Gerry, who was at first was very self-conscious at the idea of cross-dressing, realized that the transformation was making him a woman and decided to make the best of it. His body had the right shape even if his face and mind hadn't quite caught up with all of the changes. He wondered where the nurses had managed to obtain such obviously expensive clothing. He suspected Dr. Kikino had borrowed or purchased them.

* * * *

By the middle of the second month, Gerry found he was developing a tail. At first it wasn't very long and it didn't even have scales. Tina, of course, wanted the tail on the record as proof of Dr. Kikino's failure.

"The mermaid we ordered has scales," was her pronouncement. As the tail grew, it did develop scales -- fine silvery scales.

Another very memorable event occurred during the second month. Gerry found himself a woman instead of a man. His penis, which had remained normal in size and function up to that time, had been rapidly and unexpectedly absorbed into his body over the span of only a few days. For the better part of two days, Gerry was neither male nor female but very soon a slit appeared which developed into a vagina in a more or less normal location. The development of the tail was distorting things, though. It was nearly a meter long now and had pushed Gerry's anus and vagina to the front of her body. She was starting to develop a ridge of rays from just below her vagina for the full length of the tail. She also noticed the growth of a large ridge of rays at her back and small fins near her hips. A quick gynecological examination by one of the 'New You' physicians told Gerry she had a womb as well.

* * * *

It was during the third month that Gerry had her most terrifying experience. Gerry awoke with blood all over her legs and tail. She frantically signaled for medical help. Dr. Kikino himself answered the call. A few minutes after Dr. Kikino arrived, so did Tina Norita.

"It's perfectly normal, Gerry," he said calmly. "Once a month, women have a menstrual flow. It's part of the process that allows them to have babies." He smiled and held Gerry's hand.

"Babies? Men can't have -- " began Gerry. "I'm not a man any more, am I?"

Dr. Kikino merely smiled and shook his head. He ordered additional sessions with the psychological staff to help Gerry through this part of the transformation. Dr. Kikino knew that Gerry was going through a very difficult transition. Tina had rushed over when she heard that Gerry was bleeding all over the place. She had ordered the camera crews to record the whole event. Upon hearing that the bleeding was expected, she just snorted, turned on her heel and left. A pair of nurses lifted Gerry from the bed and onto a gurney. The nurses, with the camera crew in tow, helped Gerry to a bathtub to clean up. Dr. Kikino found his dislike for Tina Norita was deepening into a real disgust.

The rest of that month and the one that followed were little more than blurs of pain for Gerry. Gerry found that his legs were weakening and walking was becoming increasingly difficult. Dr. Kikino, when informed, did a quick examination confirming the more complete one his nurses had performed earlier. He then nodded and ordered physiotherapy. Gerry was expecting physiotherapy for her weakened legs. She was startled to discover that the treatment was for her fish tail and fins. Over time, Gerry lost the use of her legs and slowly acquired some mobility of her tail and fins. It was slow going and extremely painful for the most part. Gerry despaired of ever being able to move the thing and told Dr. Kikino as much. His reassurance, as much as anything else, gave her the strength to carry on.

* * * *

By the end of November, Gerry's legs had virtually disappeared. Her tail was nearly three times the length of her upper body and she was able to swim reasonably well with it. She had one more period in October but it hadn't been as much of a shock the second time. By then, the nurses had shown her how to use a tampon. Her final shock came with only two weeks left before the taping. She was still on physiotherapy and on pain-killers for much of the time. She hadn't paid very much attention to her tail. She became very worried shortly after waking one morning. Gerry discovered that she had a tiny slit surrounded by scales instead of her vagina and a second slit farther down her tail instead of an anus. Dr. Kikino reassured her that she wouldn't close up entirely and that her slits were normal for a mermaid. Gerry remembered thinking something about whatever normal for a mermaid really was.

* * * *

By the day of the taping, Gerry was the complete mermaid. Her looks were almost identical to that of the fantasy mermaid selected by Vanessa as the model for Gerry's transformation. She remembered that the taping had gone very well despite the fact that Tina had stormed from the taping room and ordered one of her alternates to take the interview. The program had extremely high ratings -- far higher than Tina would have been able to achieve had Dr. Kikino failed. Gerry was given the keys to her home the next day. A busy lawyer assured her that a trust account had been set up to cover expenses. Gerry had always wanted to be independently wealthy. When he'd been a he, he hadn't counted on this kind of change to get it.

* * * *

Gerry looked again at her reflection in the mirror. She was beautiful. There was no doubt about it. From the bridge of her classic nose to her sensuous lips, her face was perfect. Her skin was soft and smooth. The ideal envied by women and possessed by super-models everywhere. Her green eyes set off her long blonde hair perfectly. She took out her brush and began, once again, to brush the tangles swimming seemed to create regardless of the hair style she chose to wear. As she floated in the pool and brushed her hair, she saw again the reflection of the top of her breasts in the water. The bikini top was uncomfortable. For today, at least, there would be no further incursions by the public. Gerry reached around her back and undid the bikini top. The top slid into the water. Gerry paused. It would be easier to prevent the bikini top from sinking to the bottom than retrieve it later. It would to wet her hair again to retrieve it. She snagged it as it slowly sank and tossed it casually onto the pool deck. Her breasts now floated on the surface the water. They were large, voluptuous and perfectly formed. The kind of breasts that were supposed to drive men wild. Her body narrowed into a tiny waist. Of course, when she thought about it, it had better. That was what the Tina Corporation had paid for. Gerry pulled herself from the water. Sitting on the water's edge she looked over her body again. From head to hips, she was every man's dream -- a regular super-model. Once more, she ran her hands down her breasts for the pleasure the feeling evoked. She let her hand continue to where her skin was replaced by the smooth scales of her tail.

"Being a mermaid wasn't all bad," she mused. "Not really bad at all."

Only two questions nagged her: Why had Tina Norita wanted Dr. Kikino's failure so intensely and where would she find a mate?

OPEN A CHANNEL

CHAPTER 1

Part of the Furniture

"This way, Mr. Osawa," Julia heard as the door opened. She looked up from her work only long enough to register the presence of yet another potential investor.

"I'm sure you'll find that Trans-Dimensional is an excellent investment opportunity."

"And what is it, exactly, that you do?"

"We've discovered that there are myriads of other universes parallel to our own. We're creating the technology to explore and eventually exploit the resources of these universes," answered Mr. Norsmith.

"Exploit? In what way?"

"Resources at first. As many are rich in critically short resources here on Earth, our primary goal will be to seek those rich universes and set up mining concerns."

"Ah," Mr. Osawa nodded slightly. "This is where my own mining company comes in."

"Indeed so. I hope to set up a very profitable partnership. TDP sets up the gateway and your company exploits the..."

"Is it wise to talk in front of...?" He indicated Julia with a slight jerk of his head. Before anyone could answer, a strange glow permeated the room leaving everyone tingling.

"Julia? Our senior office manager is completely trustworthy. Think of her as just part of the furniture."

Julia smiled. 'Part of the Furniture' indeed! She'd remember that the next time he had a rush job that just had to be done before anything else. Julia felt a strange dizziness pass over her. When it had passed, she found her work was farther away than it had been moments before.

Time for a lunch break, she'd been at this particular task too long. She pushed herself away from her desk by rolling her chair back from the desk. What she discovered then, terrified her. In some strange way, she'd become part of the her chair. Her blue office chair was now the bright red of her dress. It even had a frill around the seat -- all that remained of her dress. Her legs were still there, she could feel them and use them to move about. The legs of the chair were still there, too, though. They got in the way when she moved her legs. But worse, far worse, was what had happened on the chair's back. For she herself was now that back. Her breasts, strangely enlarged, formed the headrest. Her dress had had no sleeves but now her skin had become fabric halfway up to her elbows. She shrieked and her shriek brought both men and one of the scientists from the back room running.

Something had already been imported from one of the other universes. Something that took casual comments and made them terrifyingly real.

"T'lingina lost."

"Talk must."

"Find parent-master other."

"Message!"

CHAPTER 2

Lithe

'Where was that coach now?' wondered Jerold Smythe. 'How could his daughter -- probably the best gymnast in the whole valley -- make it to the Olympics if the only coach was late?' He heard, rather than saw, the decrepit vehicle as it turned up the lane. 'About time!' was his angry thought.

For his part, coach Williams was equally annoyed with parents who insisted that a re-test was required. Shillian, the Smythe only child, was a good gymnast but not hardly world class. For her part, she'd do anything to please her overbearing father. Still, perhaps there was more here than just a minor interest. No sense coloring his professional judgment with the disgust he felt for those parents who pushed their children too hard and too far.

"Good day," growled Mr. Smythe. "You said noon and it's very nearly one O'clock now."

"Minor problems with my vehicle," he held up a hand to quell Mr. Smythe's comments. "Let's get on with the test. You have, of course, had the equipment measured?"

"Yes," humphed Mr. Smythe. "Of course." He turned to Shillian, who had changed into her costume when she heard the old car turn up the lane. "Show him what you can do. Your best performance!" He ordered. Shillian walked to

the balance beam and began her routine.

"Lithe, isn't she?" demanded Mr. Smythe. Mr. Williams, having seen many gymnasts in his thirty years since his own Olympic days, merely grunted.

"Well?" snapped Mr. Smythe at the end of the routine. "Is she in?"

"If she's able I'd like to see her on the bars. One gymnastic event doesn't make one an Olympian."

Mr. Smythe waved his hand towards the uneven bars. Although tired, Shillian walked over and went through her routine. She slipped only once but it was minor. "She in yet?" demanded Mr. Smythe again. "What will it take?"

"First she will take a half hour rest and then do her floor exercise. I'll decide at that time."

"She can do it -- "

"She will take a break and then do the final exercise."

"But -- "

"Or I leave now. I will not tolerate injuring an athlete because they aren't allowed proper rest. Is that clear?"

"Uh. But ... very well."

Shillian smiled her thanks at the coach. She was tired. She sprawled out on the grass and stretched herself. All too soon the rest break was over. Taking up her ribbon, she walked to the center of the lawn and waited for her father to start the music. The music, a special CD her father had created for her routine, began and she began.

"She's smooth," stated Mr. Smythe. "Very smooth," he repeated. The coach watched without comment. Something caught his eye from across the field. There was a strange glow over Trans-Dimensional, Inc. Momentarily he paused and then, once more attempting to get some comment from the coach, he went on.

"She moves like a supple little snake," he punched Mr. Williams. Both men's attention were drawn back to Shillian and her routine by her scream which quickly became a long drawn out hiss.

For Shillian now moved exactly like a supple snake. Arms and legs were both gone. She had become elongated, 15 meters perhaps more in length. From oversized yellow slit eyes, her terror stared back at both men. There would be no Olympics gymnastics for Shillian nor her father -- who continued to stare at the creature his daughter had become.

"No response."

"Parent-master not Ghi talk."

"Other must!"

CHAPTER 3

Quiet as a Mouse

The two men quietly entered the house.

"Where's your lovely young wife, Jamie?" asked the older of the two.

"I suspect she's around. Hardly ever leaves home since the accident."

"You sure she won't mind?"

"She needs to entertain more. She used to enjoy it so much but..."

"Yes, the accident. Still I don't hear her about. Maybe she's gone for a walk or something?"

"Likely upstairs sleeping or out in the garden. She enjoys growing things, you know."

"I've an idea. I'm a bit of a chef when my wife let's me. She's on conference, your wife's not about ... how's about we surprise her. I'll cook, you set things out on the table?"

"Anything you say, Mr. Tarawan"

"Call me Bill, for Heaven's sake. Can't have my new V.P. sound so weak. 'Bill'"

"Yes, Mr.... Bill. That would be a nice surprise."

* * * *

The two men quickly and quietly (assuming Jamie was indeed upstairs asleep) set about their task. Bill was, in fact, quite the chef and soon had a five course meal simmering, searing and otherwise in preparation in the

kitchen. An hour and a half went by with little said.

"You know, Tim. I don't believe she's upstairs. I can't believe anyone would sleep through the wondrous smells we're creating. Why don't you check. I'll watch things here."

Tim dashed upstairs to discover a rumpled bed but no Jamie. He returned to the kitchen with a wrinkled brow.

"Not there?" asked Bill. "You said she was a gardener. Why don't you call her in. Everything's ready here."

Tim walked to the back door, walked onto the deck and scanned the garden. There was no sign of her anywhere. Tim began a more thorough search, walking the back part of their acreage. He found her, as expected, in the small herb garden.

"Hi, Jamie. I'm home early. The boss has come for dinner ... he's making it."

"Timmy! How could you? That's my job. He'll think terribly of you."

"His idea. Wants to see how his new V.P. lives."

"I've got to get back. To entertain..."

"Everything's done. He sent me out to find you. Dinner's ready. If I hadn't known you'd be here, I'd never have found you. A right quiet little mouse you are..." His voice caught in mid-sentence as a cluster of strangely glowing crystals surrounded Jamie and she began to change before his eyes.

"Talk ... Back home ... T'lingina ... Lost," she mumbled before dropping to all fours.

"Weak now."

"Sky dark, not glow."

"Talk must."

"Parent-master find must."

CHAPTER 4

Pony

"I want a pony! I want a pony! I want a pony!" shrieked Linda's bratty step-sister. It was her birthday and she wanted something. And was letting the universe know it, too. Things were so much easier when she and Mom had been alone. What did Mom see in that Bill and his brat of a kid?

"There's no money for a pony," she heard her Mom say from the kitchen. "I'm sorry. But what you got is all you'll get."

"Dad'll get me a pony. When he comes home, he'll get me a pony. I'll see that he will ... and you too."

"There isn't money for a pony. We're stretching the budget as is. You can't have a pony and that's final."

"Can, too," Kitra screeched. "Or ... or ... I'll hold my breath, I will!" She couldn't hold her breath long enough to close her mouth much less to actually do herself damage. Linda wished Kitra would grow up a little.

"If Dad hadn't married you, we'd have plenty of money. You're blowing it on junk and clothes to get Linda married off. I wish that Dad had not married you, I wish that you'd both drop dead, I wish that I had a pony." This last bit was said at auctioneer speed all on one breath. Linda, too, wished Mom hadn't remarried. Kitra was a pain ... a real pain. The first new clothes she'd had in months and Kitra was begrudging them her. Married off, indeed. She snorted.

"That old maid of yours is too plain to get married. And buying her anything is a total waste of money. I deserve a pony, I should get a pony. Instead she gets new clothes. She's so ugly, she'd make a good pony. She should be a pony ... at least she'd be useful."

Linda was about to start walking to the kitchen when she was surrounded by a small cloud of glowing sparks. She felt strange a moment and then walked down to the kitchen. Her feet made strange sounds on the wood floor but Linda put it down to the old house.

She pushed open the door and walked into the kitchen. She'd intended to stop the argument somehow, to mediate. The results were somewhat larger than

she expected. Her mother put her hand over her mouth in a silent scream. Kitra's response was totally different.

"Cool! Where's my saddle?"

"Not home"

"Weak -- no sky food"

"Parent-master must find."

CHAPTER 5

Horsing Around

It had been a marvelous evening. Trina and her new husband Chuckie had played games in bed, read to each other and, of course, made love. They'd fallen asleep in each others arms. Trina had been the first to awaken. She'd always been a light sleeper and there was a real sparkle in the sunlight this morning. And she wanted more fun with Chuckie.

She nuzzled his cheek only to be told to go back to sleep -- it wasn't noon yet. Chuckie, you see, was a heavy sleeper. He preferred early bedtimes and late mornings. Trina, though, wasn't about to take a mumbled "Go back to sleep" as a definitive answer.

She began by kissing Chuckie's exposed arm starting at his fingers. He treated this as one might a large insect. Trina received a hard ringing slap for her trouble. She wasn't about to let things go that easily, though. She pulled a feather from her pillow and began to tickle Chuckie's cheek. He slapped another "mosquito". When he realized it was her, he popped the pillow over his head and proceeded to go back to sleep.

Small tickles weren't having the effect Trina wanted. Although she herself wasn't ticklish, she knew he was. Starting along his sides, she started her tickles. He squirmed and twisted but he had more ticklish spots than he could protect from a determined wife.

"Will you stop horsing around!" he demanded at length "before I..." Her shriek brought him fully awake. Turning over in bed, his eyes widened as he beheld Trina's altered form. Horsing around was exactly what she would be doing from now on. And he had no idea as to what to do next.

"Home, must find."

"Need sky-food."

"Talk must."

CHAPTER 6

Too Much Sun

Bill, as he left for work, looked out into the backyard. As expected, there was his wife Trish, sunning again. She seemed to do nothing else now that they'd given up their apartment in the city for their new beachfront home. He smiled. She'd even staked out a favorite rock.

"Don't burn too badly," he called to her as he headed for the front driveway and their car.

"I won't," she smiled back raising her bottle of sun tan lotion and a misting bottle.

Trish had always enjoyed the sun. She couldn't get enough of it. Of sure she heard it would wrinkle her up like a prune someday. Maybe even cause skin cancer. But that only happened to other people. Her timer chimed and she rolled over to present a different surface to the warming rays of the sun.

When he returned 10 hours later, Bill was startled to find that Trish was still on the rock.

"You spend the whole day there?" he called.

"Don't be silly," she replied. "The sun's too hot in the middle of the day. Besides how could I get anything done around here if I spent all my time in the sun?"

"I doubt you could spend any more time in the sun if you were a lizard and absolutely had to," he grinned.

There was a strange sparkling glow in the air that surrounded his wife. Bill didn't see it because he'd already entered the house to start supper.

When he finished the light meal, he walked out their basement walkout to call Trish.

"Trish, sup..." was as far as he got. His wife would definitely be able to spend more time in the sun now.

* * * *

"Other sky-food uses."

"Not right, sky-food."

"Home must."

CHAPTER 7

Pretty as a Peacock

Crystal was waiting. This was her first big date! And with an older boy, too. He said they'd be going dancing and to a movie and everything!

The waiting was a killer ... as waiting so often is. A full two hours before he was to pick her up, Crystal had started her preparations. Sure her older sister said to let him wait but what did she know? She hadn't a date in months maybe. At least none Crystal knew about. After trying on a dozen outfits, she settled on a blue dress. Her father smiled a funny half-smile. When she pressed for what was wrong, he just shook his head.

"Nothing," he said quietly. "Just my memories of a younger time."

Crystal didn't have time to enquire and decided to get out of the heat of the house. The breeze of her passage through the air as she swung back-and-forth was pleasant. She imagined all the wonderful times ahead in the evening.

* * * *

She was suddenly brought awake by a strange collection of glowing crystals around her. They seemed to be trying to say something but she couldn't quite make it out.

"T-ha-ark," they announced again. What could it mean? Crystal stopped swinging as the doorbell rang. "Suh-aye," they whispered again. Crystal didn't have time for whispering fireflies. Her date was here.

"She's outside on the swing," she heard her father announce. "Pretty as a peacock!" He completed proudly.

Crystal watched as the fireflies became brighter and brighter. She felt strange, very strange. Maybe she was ill? Not on her first date surely. When she caught a glimpse of her arm though, she realized something decidedly odd was happening. She was sprouting feathers! This couldn't be happening to her, not on her first date! Looking down she discovered a long flowing iridescent green tail and birds feet and claws.

"Help!" she tried to shout. All that came out was a bird-like croaking sound.

* * * *

"Ta-a-lk" whispered the fireflies again.

CHAPTER 8

Silly

"You said it was my turn to get supper," Kenny protested as he disentangled himself from his new wife. They'd spent the day in their apartment playing around, joking with each other (and, yes, there'd been plenty of other 'pastimes' as well). He quickly donned a housecoat and strode into the kitchen to prepare one of his favorite dishes "Sausage and Cheese Omelets".

His young wife, Mary-Jean lay for a moment staring at the vacant space where he'd been only moments before. Spying a long feather stuck in one of her hats, she got up quietly. Perhaps the games weren't quite over yet. On tiptoe, she quietly made her way to the back of the intent chef standing by their stove. Kenny, intent on showing that he too could cook, didn't hear her approach. Quietly she tickled him with the end of the feather. At first, he did nothing but brush away the "fly". Then he realized this fly was far too persistent.

Turning suddenly he caught her about the waist. "Caught you!" He led her in a romping dance with no music. An insistent pop drew his attention to the stove. Running to the omelet, now ruined on the skillet, he smiled "Oh you silly sausage! I've burned our breakfast!"

CHAPTER 9

Too Slow

"Ms. Hiicha," one of the technicians beckoned her to his console.

"We've a problem."

"What kind of problem?" she snapped.

The morning had been a complete disaster. The demonstration for that mining company big-wig had been a fiasco. Julia, at the front desk, was now part of her desk furniture in some unfathomable way. She was still alive, of course, and in no immediate danger. But the deal had collapsed before it had even gotten to the samples they'd so carefully extracted from the other world. And now there were these strange reports of other people changed in impossible way.

"The portal," he waved in the direction of their gateway. "The residuals aren't dissipating."

After each time a portal was used, there was a slight latent energy that remained. It was a signature from the other universe they'd tapped into. It had always dissipated in a few hours.

"How strong?" she frowned.

"Still as strong as when we shut it down, give or take a little. Something's feeding the residuals from this side or, maybe, the other."

"Find out!" she shook her head. Why did she always have to tell them what to do. "If it's this side, we can stop it and close the portal completely. Otherwise, we'll have to re-open." She stomped back to her office and slammed the door. The technician shrugged and called a huddle with his colleagues.

A few minutes later, he burst into her office. Plainly, something unexpected was going on. "Now what?"

"The residuals, they're growing!"

Now that was impossible! There was no way the portal could re-open without energy from this side.

"Full containment!" she ordered. He ran from her office and began to adjust the controls by the portal. Containment would put the gateway, its controlling equipment and the spherical chamber that housed them slightly out of phase with the universe. It would prevent anything from getting out of the immediate vicinity of the gateway until it could be studied.

"Containment initiation in 10 -- 9 -- " began an obviously synthetic voice.

Panting from running from the room, the technician slumped into a chair. He'd made it with only a second to spare. Had he not made it, he'd have been trapped inside containment as well and been beyond rescue until they determined the nature of the emergency.

"Containment initiated," the computer voice announced. Jean Hiicha watched as the room shimmered. Light could get out, of course, as well as radio but it suffered distortion. The containment area looked like it was being seen through the heat shimmer above a roadway in summer.

"Recorders?" she asked.

"All operational and running," came the reply. Then a pause.

"Something's coming through," his voice sounded confused.

"Secure the building," Jean snapped. She heard the klaxon sound and heard the steel pins seal the doors to the portal control area. "What is it?"

"Unknown."

"Find out, dammit."

"I'm trying. It's not solid enough to get good readings."

Jean hurried to a monitor in time to see a cloud of sparks force its way through the portal. Behind it, the portal remained open to the strange

glowing universe they'd accidentally opened instead of the one they wanted for the demonstration that morning. The cluster quickly filled the gateway sphere and recoiled when it touched the discontinuity of containment. There it paused, the gateway still open.

"Containment is holding," she said with relief. "What is it?"

"No idea," came the infuriating response.

"Find out!" She leaned over the monitor, trying desperately to see clearly through the shimmer of containment. 'What was that thing? Not of this universe, that much was certain. Related to whatever had come through this morning?' she asked herself. 'Possibly,' she decided. Frowning at the image on the monitor, she rubbed her forehead. She would end up with wrinkles from this for sure.

"Containment pressure increasing," the computer announced.

"Now what?" Jean frowned again. Containment pressure was the strength of the discontinuity. It had only one strength, that determined by the relative displacement of the containment room from the universe at large. They'd installed the discontinuity sensors when they first experimented with gateways to measure how strong the containment was. They'd never been able to obtain more than the one containment level. Plainly, the whatever-it-was in containment could affect the discontinuity.

"Evacuation alarm!" she ordered.

They all knew that meant everyone in the company would exit the facility as quickly as possible -- everyone except themselves. They were trapped in the control room with a creature from someplace else.

"Containment pressure dropping," the computer announced. The technician at the console gave a sigh of relief. The shimmering cloud of points inside containment coalesced against the camera nearly obscuring the view inside the chamber. "Containment pressure at 75%," the computer announced.

"Get more power on in there!" Jean screamed.

"It's at full now. There's only the one setting, you know," his calm voice was vastly irritating. The image on the monitor became denser and denser until the chamber and its contents were totally hidden. 'What is it doing?' Jean asked herself.

There was a burst of static from the speaker and a collection of glowing crystals appeared over the console. The technician was quickly enveloped by them and stood, frozen, unable to move. Jean took an involuntary step backward. The crystals shimmered and pulsed for a few minutes and then retreated back to the console and vanished. The technician crumbled.

Another technician dashed to the emergency locker and got the first aide kit. She checked him over and then announced "There's nothing really wrong with him. Except he's unconscious." Jean nodded.

A strange hissing sounded from the monitor showing the containment chamber. The creature had retreated from the camera except for a few crystals still floating nearby. The swirling seemed less random, somehow. It was bunching in some places and thinning elsewhere. In fascination, Jean realized what was happening.

T'LINGINA I

TAKEN T'LINGINA

GET I MUST

'What was it trying to say?' Jean puzzled.

T'LINGINA I

T'LINGINA SEEK I

Whatever it wanted, Jean still couldn't ascertain.

PARENT-MASTER I

CHILD-TALKER SEEK

COLD WALL GONE

'It plainly wants something,' Jean mused. "What does it want?" she asked out loud.

"Its baby," muttered the technician still lying on the floor.

"What baby?" she demanded but the technician had fallen asleep again.

'This is too weird for me,' decided Jean slumping into a chair.

"The one from this morning?" asked someone behind her.

'Of course!' thought Jean. "We haven't got it though. How can we give it its baby if we don't have the blasted thing."

T'LINGINA SEEK

T'LINGINA CALL

RETURN I

"Yes, yes," she groused. "We know you miss it but we don't have it here."

COLD WALL STOP

CALL I

RETURN I

LEAVE I

CLOSE HOLE

"What the devil was 'cold wall'?" Jean puzzled aloud.

"The containment maybe?" asked the voice again. Jean whirled to demand that whoever it was shut up. Her epithet died quickly when she discovered it was her boss.

"What does it want then?" she asked somewhat abashed.

"Could it call the other thing from this morning back, do you suppose?"

"Who knows. Maybe, I just have no idea."

"Does it want containment dropped then?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't advise it. If one tiny piece of that thing is causing the chaos we've been hearing about all day, I sure wouldn't release a mass that size."

"What else could it mean? It seems to be asking to call its child home to me."

"You can't know that."

T'LINGINA LOST

T'LINGINA SCARED

T'LINGINA TALK MUST

"I wonder what the child does for talking?" asked Robert Norsmith, the boss.

"How should I know?" snapped Jean.

"Is there a monitor in there? One it can see -- or whatever it does?"

"The readout set on the gateway computer."

"Can we put something on that monitor?"

"Yes, they're networked. What?" Robert signaled to the technician.

"Put this up: 'Child talk how?' Make it all capitals, too."

CHILD CHANGE

"I wonder," mused Jean. "Maybe it talks by changing the shape of something. Like picture drawings but in three dimensions."

"I believe you are right. So do we let it loose or not?"

"No!" came Jean's immediate response. "It'll try to talk to us. We'll end up like Julia, or worse."

"We have to try something."

"Containment dropping. Pressure at 35% and falling," the computer announced.

"We haven't much choice, do we?" Robert asked. "It'll get out on its own in a few minutes and then what? Maybe if we help it, it won't do anything too extreme." He made a quick slash across his throat. "Cut it now!" he ordered.

The technician hesitated a moment then hit the cutoff switch. The swirl of crystals in the containment didn't expand in the slightest. A small piece detached itself and flew at high speed from the monitor and through the closed window. All were surprised when it passed through the glass without damaging itself or the pane. There was a pause of some minutes until a pair of crystal clusters returned. One was obviously weaker, its glow subdued.

CHILD I

ZERO TALKERS YOUR

LEAVE I
CLOSE HOLE I

The cloud of crystals in the containment room began to thin. Unnoticed by anyone, a small cluster of crystals from the cloud detached itself and zoomed through the wall straight at Jean. It then returned to the parent body that soon evacuated the chamber.

"Residuals dissipating," announced the technician who'd regained consciousness and had pulled himself into a chair by the monitor. "Residuals gone."

Jean tried to respond but could only make a strange coughing sound. Her throat seem dry and she was having trouble breathing. She looked up at everyone who seemed strangely taller and waved to catch their attention. Robert was the first to respond.

"My God! Get a gurney!" he shouted. They lifted Jean onto the gurney. "Cut the evacuation alarm. We've got to get her to the recreation pool."

Jean's vision faded in and out as they rushed her to the pool. Without a moment's thought, they pushed Jean, gurney and all, into the pool. Her breathing eased as she sank to the bottom of the pool.

"It left one last message," one of the staff stated. "On the monitor."
TOO SLOW

THE END

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