
Shifting Perspectives 2

by Sharon Maria Bidwell, Fiona Glass, Emily Veinglory

Erotica/Romance

Aspen Mountain Press
www.aspenmountainpress.com
Copyright ©2008 by 2008
First published in 2008, 2008

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

CONTENTS

[The One That Got Away](#)
[Steal the Sky](#)
[The Swan Prince](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)

* * * *

Praise for Shifting Perspectives

...an unusual but well-balanced anthology with each author going for very different and interesting aspects of shape-shifting. Recommended
Jim, Rainbow Reviews
In this one we have a trio of very talented authors who will not disappoint you.
Elisa Rolle

WARNING

This E-book contains sexually graphic scenes and adult language. Store your E-books carefully where they cannot be accessed by underage readers.

Shifting Perspectives 2
Sharon Maria Bidwell

Fiona Glass
Emily Veinglory
Aspen Mountain Press

Shifting Perspectives 2

The One That Got Away Copyright © 2008 by Sharon Maria Bidwell

Steal the Sky Copyright © 2008 by Fiona Glass

The Swan Prince Copyright © 2008 by Emily Veinglory

This e-Book is a work of fiction. While references may be made to actual places or events, the names, characters, incidents, and locations within are from the author's imagination and are not a resemblance to actual living or dead persons, businesses, or events. Any similarity is coincidental.

Aspen Mountain Press

PO Box 473543

Aurora CO 80047

www.aspenmountainpress.com

First published by Aspen Mountain Press, October 2008

www.aspenmountainpress.com

This e-Book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction fines and/or imprisonment. The e-Book cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this e-Book can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the publisher.

ISBN: (13) 978-1-60168-148-5

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Sandra Hicks

Cover artist: Deana Jamroz

The One That Got Away

Sharon Maria Bidwell

William Wilson vowed he would only return to "The Lake" over his father's dead body. Now, that simple statement returned to haunt him. He'd regretted making it as he grew to live with the feeling of obligation to stay away. As the months dissolved into years, he *couldn't* return, even if he wanted to, seeing as he'd told everyone he never would until he had no other choice. He'd never said so to his father's face in quite those words and at least he could be thankful for that.

It wasn't the idea of seeing his father that kept him away but the pain of being young and gay in a quiet community that still thought gay meant you liked to skip through the fields on a sunny day. William "Billy" Wilson didn't want to be here now any more than he ever did. The cabin meant facing memories of too many years of uncertainty, of trying to come to terms with his sexuality in a small New England town. He'd never have found what he wanted in life if he'd stayed here. Not that he'd exactly found what he wanted traveling around the world but at least he could say that he'd been places.

"It went well," he whispered, referring to the funeral yet feeling foolish for directing the statement at a passing duck.

Oddly, his father's death coincided with a distinct restlessness in William's life. If he'd been a different shape and made of wood, he would have called himself a boat and set himself adrift on the lake, almost as his father's rowing vessel strived for freedom right now.

Tempted to let the craft sail off into the distance never to set sight on it again, he chose to accept how irresponsible, let alone foolish that was. The boat would likely drift around the edge of the lake, and would prove a nuisance to other residents. He tightened the mooring rope, which after a fair few days of neglect threatened to come loose. Besides, he had some eerie notion that the boat would return later that night carrying his father's ghost across the water like some specter conveying spirits across the Styx.

"You decided what you're gonna do with the property yet, Billy?"

Martha Price folded her arms across that considerable bosom of hers to stare down at him as he wandered back up from the small dock to the main cabin.

The cabin which hid amidst the, at present, multi-hued foliage on the shore of the lake, had been home for a long time. The boy grew into a man and the man proved to be one with a hankering to see the world. Still, despite what he'd said mostly in jest, he'd never pictured himself returning for anything other than his father's funeral.

"William," he muttered, only to see her raise an eyebrow. "Or Bill," he suggested.

"Left everything to you, he did, Billy," she said, ignoring his comment. To his father he'd always been Billy and likely, to everyone in town, if "Billy" was what his father called him, it was what the locals would call him. In their eyes, William was the father; Billy was the son. He let the argument slide.

"Spect you'd forgotten what the ol' place looked like."

Biting the inside of his cheek, Billy remained silent. The snide remark stung though. It wasn't as if he and his father hadn't kept in touch. They'd met up in town on the few occasions he'd had a reason to pass through, but he'd always declined the offer to stay at the cabin with an, "Ah, you know my take on that." He'd always taken a room in town if he needed a one-night stopover, as an excuse to get some work done.

Otherwise, he picked his father up to take on a weekend trip, preferably involving anything other than fishing. Cabin life just wasn't for him and he'd made no bones about how boring he found his father's fishing stories. His behavior stuck him as undeniably silly now; he was a grown man and something said in the heat of the moment had kept him away from this quiet part of New Hampshire for far too long.

"I don't know," he replied, sticking to her original question. "I could rent it out, I suppose."

Or sell it. He couldn't keep the thought out of his mind, even knowing that wasn't what his father would have wanted. He didn't think the place could be worth much. Chances were the building was worth less than the land. Someone would tear the cabin down and rebuild. The only sentimental value was in knowing how his father had loved the place. Billy's emotions remained ambiguous. He didn't hate the cabin or even the town. He simply associated the place with the awkwardness of youth, complicated by his sexuality. His father hadn't stipulated that he keep the place. He could do with the revenue to buy a

proper home elsewhere. He lived out of too many hotel rooms these days.

"Never thought of moving back?"

If she had asked if he'd thought about taking up fishing he couldn't have been more surprised. He struggled to appear nonchalant. "Trying to use me as a way to convince your children to come home?" Martha's children had left the nest to seek their fortune in the world, much as Billy had, and even about the same time.

He tried to make light of the question, but Martha was already shaking her head. "There are some that belong out there in the world and some that do better staying put. You might find this is where you belong."

"My work," Billy offered as way of an excuse.

"You're a writer. You can write anywhere."

Unfortunately, that was true. He could confess to himself, even if to no one else, that being able to work from anywhere in the world had been part of the attraction when he'd considered writing as a serious career. His location hardly mattered, especially since his books mostly comprised of other worlds. He had an award winning fantasy series to pay the bills and a few travel guides that had manifested due to his wandering nature. At first, his travels fed his wanderlust but, lately, he needed something more in his life.

Part of that reasoning was his decided lack of a relationship since....

Billy shook the thought off. He was here to settle his father's affairs. He shouldn't be thinking of men, past or ... Billy almost smirked. He couldn't see a happy ending in his future for even his father's death came at a time where it raged through his emotions as though it was some dark portent.

Two years carrying a bruised if not broken heart, Billy had decided he truly did need to consider his prospects. He'd decided to call his father to discuss future plans or lack of them, when he'd got the phone call saying that Martha had found William senior dead of a suspected heart attack on his front porch: the same porch she now stood on and from where she stared down at him. According to Martha, the only other place his father would have preferred to die would be in his boat. Billy agreed and so he had decided to scatter his father's ashes on the lake where he'd loved to fish. As for staying....

"There's not much for a man like me hereabouts," he tried to explain.

"Shirt-lifters get everywhere these days. You aren't gonna raise any eyebrows around here. Not in these times."

Billy barked out a laugh, which Martha ignored; knowing Martha the comment could be a slur or a mark of affection.

"Any one special?" she asked after studying him for several moments.

Billy shook his head.

No. There's no one.

Martha sniffed. "Well, make sure you stay awhile afore you make any hasty decisions."

"I will," he promised.

* * * *

His promise arose out of necessity. Whatever he decided to do with the place, he'd had the funeral to get through, and later today he could collect the ashes. Then whether he rented the place or sold it on, there was a pile of....

Billy sighed. The correct term was junk. His father shouldn't have owned so many clothes as he only ever bought what he needed. The trouble was, he'd never bothered to throw old stuff out. Likewise, he'd kept old newspapers, just in case he ever needed "a bit o' paper to light the fire with" or something to use for packing. Where his father ever thought he was going to that he would need newspaper for packing, Billy didn't know. There were enough newspapers in the house to start several bonfires and burn the place down. Billy shook his head, and then set to work, bagging the clothes, and tying up bundles of paper. He'd drop the paper off for recycling when he went into town. It occurred to him that it was rather ironic that he would leave here with paper and return with ash, his father having gone through a conflagration not unlike the one that would have tore through the cabin had these tabloids ever caught fire.

* * * *

On his drive back from town, Billy glanced down at the box resting in the passenger seat. He spoke to it, as though his father was right there, which in many ways he was. A belief in the afterlife was hardly required.

In the town where the locals called the lake that ran outside his cabin, "Wilson's Lake," it was impossible not to sense his father's presence. If the old men in town remembered the lake's original name, they weren't telling. He could look it up, no doubt, but he'd always heard it called "Wilson's Lake" so for Billy that was good enough. The name referred to the number of hours his father had spent on that lake, fishing.

He's left you more than the cabin.

Martha's declaration disturbed him. His father had left him the land, the cabin, and everything within, which included enough fishing gear to stock a small shop. Naturally enough, the old men in town had shown an active interest in what Billy intended to do with his father's fishing equipment.

"I haven't decided yet," Billy said aloud, just as he'd said earlier to those sitting on the Adirondack chairs outside of the general convenience store. Old man Porter looked as if it would take the rest of the town's residents to haul his ass out of that chair, but he'd declared he'd give Billy full value for the fishing reels.

"Full value, my ass," Billy commented. At his side, his father's ghost nodded sagely. "Some of those old reels are worth a fortune." He glanced down at the box containing his father's ashes. "I have to give you that, Dad. You sure knew how to look after your fishing gear, and you sure knew how to fish."

In that moment, Billy experienced the peculiar emotion of sorrow at having never shared his father's main passion.

"You never did catch that ol' fish, though."

Wilson's ruin, the locals called it. Billy smiled as he took the turning that would take the old truck down the track to the cabin. Whilst Billy grew up, not a summer went by when his father didn't spend half his time trying to catch the monster fish in the lake. Not many had seen it. His father was the only man who claimed to have caught it. William senior said that he'd thrown it back.

No one believed him, Billy included. Chances were his father had finally seen sense and given up the chase.

Billy parked the truck. He'd dumped the rubbish and some of his father's belongings from the cabin at appropriate places in town, including some clothes at the town's only charity shop. Then he'd gone on to buy more supplies. Tomorrow, he'd call his agent and then he'd take the day off. Maybe he'd do some reading out on the porch. He wouldn't do as he'd intended. Not yet. Now that he had his father's ashes, he experienced an odd reluctance to part with them.

* * * *

"Damn thing had to be a bass," Edward Mulligan said. "You want to use crayfish to catch a bass."

"Couldn't have been a bass," John Porter said. "Not big enough."

"They grow to about eighteen inches."

John Porter shook his head. "According to William the thing was longer than that. It had to be an Atlantic salmon."

"What the fuck would an Atlantic salmon be doing in our lake?" Edward stared out across the water as though looking for one to leap into view.

Billy sat between the two men, not exactly in the mood for their banter but highly amused by it. It had taken them two days to wander along to make another bid to "unburden Billy's hands of all that there fishing gear."

"Atlantic salmon grow up to three foot is all I'm saying. It fits."

Edward shook his head. "William would never have had a problem catching one of those. The damn things swallow a fly on reflex."

"Carp," Billy muttered.

"What?"

He could almost sense the watchful gazes of the two men on him. "A carp would be the right size, up to forty inches."

"Too plain," John Porter said, sniffing dismissively. "The pattern he described always made me think of a salt bass. Now those grow up to fifty inches."

"Yes, but they're salt water, not fresh." Billy struggled not to smirk. Evidently, he'd surprised the men with even this limited knowledge. John Porter knew very well there were no salt bass in Wilson's Lake. No doubt his purpose had been to string Billy along and then tell him he clearly knew nothing about fishing. The implication would have aided John's "good intentions" to prevent all that fishing equipment going to waste.

"A carp," Billy insisted. "There's plenty of weeds out there for them and the waters are slow and warm with a muddy bottom."

John Porter muttered something under his breath that Billy didn't quite catch. He was sure it had the words "warm" and "bottom" in the sentence though, and not in a complimentary way. Whatever he did with his father's fishing rods, they wouldn't be going to John Porter.

"Best bait for carp," Edward piped up, "is a ball of dough made from a little mixed flour with cornmeal, sweetened with just a little sugar and honey."

Billy blinked at the man. "Really?"

"Yes. Your father told me that. He caught many a carp that way. You know, I think you're right." A crazy sort of mad man's smile eased over Edward Mulligan's face. "Your father said he caught that big fish with something a little sweet. Maybe it was a carp."

"As much chance of that as the damn thing leaping out of the water into his goddamn boat, if you ask me. It's just a typical fisherman's story. The one that got away." John flung his hands wide to indicate size. "Besides, if he caught it, he would have said what type of fish it was," Porter sniffed in ridicule.

"Don't you recall," Billy countered, "that he said the species was no one's business but his? All I remember is that he said it was the biggest damn fish he'd ever seen in this lake."

"I won't speak ill of the dead," Porter said, indicating that he was going to do just that, "but your father had some bloody funny ideas. Always living in fantasy land."

Like father like son, though you didn't come out and say so. Aware he was grinning, Billy turned his head to look at John. The man gave him a funny look, and then turned away, shaking his head a little.

Billy didn't care what the likes of John Porter thought of him. Men like him were the real reason he'd wanted to move away. One thing John had done for him today was help Billy decide he was in the right frame of mind to do what he'd come here to do. The next day he was going to row out into the middle of the lake and say goodbye to his father.

* * * *

The next morning proved bright and clear. If someone had told Billy that the heavens smiled down on him, he would have believed them. Taking a small pack of sandwiches and the box containing his father's ashes, Billy strode down to the dock, climbed into the boat, set his belongings carefully in the base, untied the line, and then picked up the oars.

"One thing I always remember about fishing here with you, Dad. It sure was peaceful." There was no one around to hear him talking to himself and even if they did hear, no doubt they would just think there was William Wilson's son, mad as a loon, as crazy as his father was, fixated over searching for some damn fish.

"Only you weren't crazy," Billy said. "If you said there's a big fish in this lake and that you caught it once, well then I've decided to take you at your word." If he squinted and turned his head to the side, the play of light on the lake almost fooled Billy into believing another man sat in the boat with him.

Sighing, Billy put up the oars and let the boat drift. "I hated fishing and you knew it," Billy said clearly. "I damn well hated fishing so you'd let me tag along and read, but damn...." Billy shook his head, glancing at the box containing his father's remains. "What I wouldn't give for one more fishing trip with you now."

He stared out across the lake and let the water take him where it wanted. The drift was as gentle as his trip down memory lane. "I remember the first time you took me out. I was four. I pulled up ... God, I can't remember the name of that sodding fish but it was small. You acted as though I'd landed a whale. You let it go because I asked you to."

Billy looked off dreamily across the sparkling surface of the water. He might have been young but that day he and his father had learned that he was a different type of angler, one that would rather not catch fish at all unless it was for the table. If he had to fish then Billy preferred to eat what he caught.

He didn't like the idea of catch and release any more than his father did, though it was for different reasons. Billy didn't like tormenting anything for entertainment. Hunting or fishing

was fine if you needed to do it to eat. He'd hated his father's search for the "large fish" because he'd imagined it stuffed and mounted. He would have preferred his father catching and releasing it to that.

"Did you really catch it and let it go, Dad?" As unusual as that seemed, somehow Billy sensed the truth of it. He laughed. "I guess you thought he deserved to live after leading you a merry chase all these years."

Time passed. Billy sat in the boat, drifting gently, listening to the gentle splash of water, to the occasional cry of a bird. He watched insects skittering across the surface of the lake, and turned his head sharply now and then when his eyes caught the darting dark shape of something swimming nearby.

He looked at his watch, aware he was stalling. "Well, I guess it's almost time," Billy said. "I think we'll sit and have a quiet lunch and then it'll be time to say goodbye." He truly didn't care if anyone heard him, not that it was likely. There appeared to be no one but him on the lake today. "No one here but us fishes," Billy said, laughing as he reached down for his packed lunch.

He was on his second sandwich when he noticed several dark shapes in the water surrounding the boat. "There really is no one here but us fishes," Billy murmured, picking several pieces of bread from the remains of his sandwiches and throwing the small white pebbles of dough into the water even knowing he shouldn't. People always fed bread to birds and other creatures, but it wasn't good for them. Bread wasn't the greatest thing for humans to eat come to think of it. Still, he fanned out the foil he'd wrapped his sandwiches in and scattered the crumbs over the lake. A few fish darted to take the bread. Most of the bread soaked up the water and sank.

"Sorry. All gone," Billy said, and the fish acted as though they had heard him, dashing off or down into the depths, their antics making him laugh. That was when he saw a large dark shape coming swiftly through the water, making a beeline for the boat.

"Hey, no wait!" Billy shouted, cursing his foolishness at feeding the fish. He didn't know why he was suddenly tense with alarm but the way that dark shape sped through the water, almost in a straight, determined line made him imagine a stray shark racing toward him. That was plain ridiculous and Billy would have laughed if he hadn't realized the shape was indeed a fish.

Was this the large fish that his father had spoken of? Quite forgetting his fear, Billy knelt in the bottom of the boat, one hand reaching out over the water. It vaguely occurred to him that something might erupt out of the water at any moment. He experienced the strange notion that a large fish could bite off his hand, and the even stranger sensation that this wasn't a fish at all.

He pictured a human hand emerging from the water, claspng him about the wrist, and dragging him down into the depths. Billy could only gape as the creature erupted from the lake.

The fish rose, all muscle and might, shooting six feet into the air. At the pinnacle of its skyward leap, the fish almost appeared to hover so that Billy saw it in a frozen moment in time where he took in all its glory.

It indeed had the appearance of a carp in shape but it was much larger than any carp Billy

had ever seen. The colour of its scales also differed. The sun glistened off the drops of water that splashed from the blue-backed fish's ascent creating a multitude of miniature rainbows. The rest of its scales gleamed with many pastel hues. Refracted light shimmered, blurring Billy's vision. By the time he realized tears of pure joy blurred his sight, the creature had begun its descent.

For one brief moment, Billy was sure that the fish was going to land in the bottom of his boat, almost as if that had been its intent. Then it gave a flip of its tail and plunged back into the water.

The sense of distress that overcame Billy was quite out of proportion with the loss of a fish. "Wait, come back," Billy whispered, wondering what made him speak. He jumped in surprise when the dark shape that had been speeding away, suddenly turned around, zipping back toward him in the same straight line and in exactly the same manner as the first time.

Once more, the creature gave an acrobatic leap into the air. Billy fell back laughing and whooping. He clapped his hands, almost rolling onto his back as he did so, the boat rocking dangerously as the fish arched out of the water.

"Dad!" Billy shouted. "You were telling the goddamn fucking truth! Yayyy!"

He punched a hand into the air. The fish performed that strange flip of its tail, almost as though it was responding to him and then fell back toward the water.

That was when everything Billy thought he knew about the world ceased to exist.

The fish ... *changed*.

The air surrounding the fish shimmered with the same kind of rainbow hues as adorned its skin. Then, just as it entered the water, a man's body formed out of the haze. Billy had just enough time to open his mouth in a shout when the man grasped the side of the boat. The strange being's weight tipped the boat and Billy was flying up and out of the small craft, then down, plunging toward a pair of dark blue eyes.

* * * *

The taste of lake water brought Billy to his senses as much as his heaving stomach. His body clenched as though his internal organs were trying to turn him inside out.

What the...?

For a moment, he couldn't remember who he was, let alone why he was spewing out some very tangy water. Besides the lake water, he tasted mud and something green among other peculiar flavors.

As his body calmed and he began to breathe rather than heave, Billy became aware of warm hands on his back and shoulders, rubbing. The top half of his body lay among the reeds at the embankment and his legs trailed in the shallow water. Flopping onto his back, the overhead sun blinded him, and then someone leaned over him, casting Billy into shadow. He blinked several more times before he made out any of the stranger's features.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I mistook you for someone else."

"Who?" Billy tried to formulate a sensible question but he was trying to remember what had happened. He'd been in the boat.... "Wh-where did you come from?"

"The lake."

The answer was too simple. It didn't address Billy's real question but he was still struggling to clear his mind. "Th-thank you," Billy murmured, certain this man had saved him from some sort of trauma. Obviously, he'd taken a dunk in the lake but as to the rest, his memory remained hazy.

"Usually someone else uses the boat so I swam away but then you spoke, called out to me." The man pushed back his dark hair in an almost self-conscious gesture. Sunlight glinted on the dark strands making them shimmer blue and then green, with just a touch of iridescence. "I didn't mean to tip you into the water."

Billy ignored the impulse to sit up. Water from the lake, or maybe the near death experience of drowning had given him visions.

Trust me to be different.

He couldn't have the same experience as everyone else reported having. Oh no. No long white tunnels of light or pearly gates for Billy Wilson, no sir. He had to let his imagination run wild with him and visualize...

Oh hell. It was coming back to him. "You're the fish."

Billy lay stunned for a moment, remembering. The fish shooting out of the water, and then hovering at the apex of its jump, so that for an instant the sunlight had made its scales sparkle with a rainbow of pastels. The back of the fish had been a blue-black, just like the color of this man's hair, just like his eyes. Billy stared up into those eyes and recognized them as the same eyes he'd gazed into when he plummeted toward the water. It occurred to him that he'd just thanked this man for saving him, when it was his fault he'd fallen into the water in the first place. He couldn't manage more than a disgruntled grunt, which the other man either failed to notice or ignored.

"You look and sound so familiar," the man said, tilting his head to one side quizzically. "You remind me of..." The words trailed away in obvious puzzlement.

"My father," Billy explained. A slight tightening of the man's brow indicated his confusion. "I'm told I look and sound an awful lot like my father." Billy sat up. He tried to ignore the fact that the other man was naked. He didn't need this complication in his life. Whether the man was a fish ... Billy shook his head and considered the idea that recent stresses had finally damaged his mental health. However you looked at the situation, whether the man was a fish or a human as crazy as Billy apparently was, the instant attraction that coursed through Billy's veins proved unwelcome. Unwelcome and ... Billy closed his eyes for a brief moment. His cock and heart throbbed in unison.

Opening his eyes, he couldn't help looking at the other man's face. Something about those features made him think of somewhere foreign. He didn't know why but an image of a long sandy beach, waving tropical foliage, and the burning heart of a volcano sprung to mind. Billy swallowed. It really had been a long time since he'd had sex and he fully accepted that this time his imagination was wholly to blame for the picture in his mind. Even so...

Beautiful. Quite beautiful. Definitely male, yet with a touch of the feminine. Lovely high cheekbones, wide eyes offset by dark brows and there's no way to ignore those full lips.

Billy caught himself licking his own lips. Sitting here he had gained an impression of a long, lean form, hovering close by. Billy recalled lying down and from the way the

stranger's body had fit alongside his, he guessed that they were roughly the same height. Maybe this man was even a little taller. *Just right*. Shaped to fit exactly, designed to slot together in a certain way.

Billy fought to draw out of his mental revelry. As delightful as his wandering thoughts were, here he sat by the side of the lake with a naked man. Suppose someone came along? The look of puzzlement on the stranger's face helped bring Billy to his senses. He needed to stand up. He had to get back to the cabin, and if the boat had sunk that meant walking, and...

"Oh shit! Dad's ashes."

The stranger gazed at him, making a slight shaking movement with his head, clearly baffled.

"A box, about this big." Billy indicated height and length with his hands. "It contains Dad's ashes." He stared out into the water. His father's remains were likely at the bottom of the lake by now and while he had intended to commit his father's ashes to the water, this wasn't quite the ceremony he'd anticipated. The ashes were sealed in a plastic bag within the box but even so, he'd never find them. The thought of his father's ashes just dumped into the lake like that, still in the box and without a loving word, drove even lustful thoughts from Billy's mind.

"I'll get it for you."

Before Billy could protest, the strange man turned and dived. He was a blur of pink skin that left Billy with the impression of lean muscle but no definite shape. Moreover, the enticing flash of a well-muscled buttock took up most of his cognitive thoughts. As disturbed over the possible loss of his father's ashes as he was, the lustful thoughts returned. The recollection of bestowing dark kisses filled his mind. The smell and taste of the forbidden washed through his senses.

Shifting to a crouch, Billy gazed into the water trying to catch sight of the man, but he was gone. Perhaps it had been a trick of the sunlight but a moment later, he could have sworn he saw a dark shape swimming away that resembled a fish.

* * * *

A hallucination.

It had to be. There was no other explanation.

Billy had sat on the side of the lake for a long while but when no one ... or thing—not even a fish—had ventured out of the water, he reached the conclusion that he'd suffered some near life-terminating accident.

Left with no other choice, Billy dragged himself to his feet and headed home. That meant a walk damn near a quarter of the circumference of the lake but the long trek to the cabin gave him a chance to dry out and to clear his head. It didn't matter who or what the man was. Billy wasn't ready for another involvement and that was even assuming the stranger swung that way. He'd felt the same kind of instant attraction for Spiros and see where that had got him.

Spiros. Billy spat in the dirt at the thought of that name. He'd not allowed the name to enter his head for so long, it came as a surprise to realize it didn't sting him quite as much as it once had. Served him right for falling for a suntanned Adonis on a Greek isle. Eight

months should count as a *relationship* in anyone's book. Eight months was decidedly serious.

Then he'd caught Spiros in bed with another man. Declining the offer that he should come and join them, Billy had booked himself on to the first available plane home and to the nearest clinic with a free appointment. He'd been careful since then but having trusted someone literally with his life had made him wary.

Truth was, he believed he'd been in love. Two years on, he'd slept with no one else and had become much more friendly with what his father would have called the five-fingered widow. He'd always considered the term rather disgusting, especially after his mother died, but if his father had found some joy alone, or in the smothering embrace of Martha Price, who was he to deny his old man? He'd always wondered if Martha's kindness extended beyond looking in on his father, cleaning some for him, cooking him a few meals. If there'd been any other perks the widow offered his father, Billy truly didn't want to know. Whatever floated their boats was fine between two consenting adults as far as he was concerned.

Once more he hauled in his itinerant thoughts. In truth he was just trying to ignore the fact that he believed he'd seen a man change from a fish into a man. Apparently, he was more affected by his father's death than he'd realized. Maybe he'd drunk too much lake water. Maybe he should see a doctor. Maybe....

He raised his head, dragging his gaze from the ground and up to the porch surrounding his father's property. Billy stopped walking, aware his heart pounded wildly. He bit back his cry when his gaze met those blue-black eyes.

"You'd gone ... by the time I got back. I'm sorry. It took some finding. Is this what you were looking for?"

Billy tried to concentrate on the words and not the sight of all that male nude loveliness. All that lean muscle and sculpted slim physique was undeniably beautiful. Billy averted his gaze.

Arms folded defensively across his chest, Billy took the steps up to the porch on shaky legs. He stared at the dark navy box that contained his father's remains. With a trembling hand, he reached out to it. Waterlogged, the hard cardboard gave a little under his touch but, overall, largely retained its shape. Carefully, he lifted the lid. The bag remained sealed. The contents appeared dry.

"I don't understand. What is this ... sand?"

Those dark blue eyes stared first at the box, and then lifted to take in Billy's face. For the first time since he'd emerged from the lake, Billy gave a passing thought to his appearance. He shouldn't care how he looked. It wasn't as if he was interested in this stranger. He should just dismiss his visitor, then go inside, change clothes, gather a few possessions, his father's ashes and high-tail it back to the nearest big city where it was harder to believe in the impossible. It didn't matter if this man found him attractive but that stare appeared to take in more than what one might perceive on the surface. That gaze brought forth a flush of excitement that made Billy shiver with longing. He wanted this stranger to like what he saw; he just didn't want to contemplate why. His thoughts washed away on the realization that this man ... or creature, whatever he was, hadn't understood

what Billy had meant when he referred to his father's ashes. He seized the moment as a distraction from his desire.

"My father..."

Damn. He couldn't believe how difficult this was to say. "My father died a short while ago. I ... we ... that is people either bury their dead or cremate them. We burn them to ash," he explained. The other man turned his head to gaze at the box. Oddly needing to justify something that was perfectly normal, Billy added, "That was what my father wanted. This is all that's left of him. I was going to scatter his ashes on the lake ... where he spent so much time and liked to ... fish." Billy's voice trailed away. He wasn't sure the subject of fishing was a good thing to mention.

"Fish?" The tone indicated bewilderment. Then something in the man's frown changed. "You mean catch fish? No. Your father stopped doing that a long time ago. After he—"

"Caught you?"

Concluding that sentence drew the other man's gaze back to Billy's face. As absurd as that statement sounded to his ears, he didn't consider it strange.

The other man failed to laugh. "I told your father he could still catch fish. Some fish eat other fish. It's the circle of life, but I think he feared catching me by accident. I told him it wasn't his bait that drew me to his boat but the stories he'd sit and tell while he sat there. I understand death. I just didn't understand..." A wave of the hand indicated the ash. "Those who live on the land have strange customs but good stories."

"Stories?"

"Yes. He would talk to the fish out of loneliness, I think."

The pang of having left home struck a cruel blow. "I remember the stories. He would tell them to me when I was a boy. It's partly what made me want to write."

"I know. I was young then as well. I have always listened. I saw you grow but then you went away and your father came out on his boat alone. He didn't tell stories for a long time, and then he started to just say the words even when he thought there was no one around to listen."

Somehow, that declaration made Billy's pain worse. "I should have visited him more often. I should have..." Billy ran his fingers through his hair. He didn't know what he should have done but he should have done *something*.

"What is this anguish?" A cool hand took hold of his wrist tugging his hand down. "Your father was proud of you. He explained to me that you were out there traveling and writing. I never understood the concept of books until he showed me yours. I knew how to read if I need to but most of my family dismisses books."

"You've read my work?"

"Yes. You have a vivid imagination that made your father proud, and he wasn't lonely when he had me to talk to."

"You?"

For the first time since Billy had set eyes on him, the stranger's face broke into a grin. "I told you. I loved his stories. He caught me shortly after you left home, shortly after he started telling the stories again. I came too close to the boat, puzzled by your absence and by why he stopped speaking. Then he drew me in by telling the stories again. Once

he realized what I was, I went to his boat often and he included stories about you. He told me what you were doing and where you were in the world, although some of it made little sense to me. My life has always been the lake. I should have realized who you were. I watched you as a boy and I've even seen your photos of you as a man. But when I change from fish to a man sometimes it takes time for my mind to leave one world and enter the other so I didn't recognize you immediately." That smile spread and something approving existed in it. "He told me I would like you."

"Like?" Blue and green flecks swirled in those eyes, sucking at him, drawing him in. That exquisite and rather exotic face loomed.

"Like. Care for. Desire."

Billy had just enough time to blink at the word "desire" when lips as cool as the man's fingertips latched onto his.

* * * *

Despite the coolness, heat existed in that kiss; it was simply heat of another kind. Billy swayed and hands latched onto his body dragging him in against that naked musculature. The man's grip was such that it allowed no escape, not that Billy wanted to escape.

He tried to think back to how many months had passed since he'd last encountered another man's tongue entwined with his and he lost the thought in the skip of his heart as he tasted something he would have likened to seaweed if it hadn't been sweet. Water. He tasted water, but not the still unmoving water that he'd accidentally drank at the lake's edge. This was a fresh mountain stream, thirst-quenching, life-giving.

Everything else ceased to exist except that sweet connection where they shared breath.

What am I doing?

Struggling against his own rising desire as much as this strange man and the rather insistent way he continued to clutch at him, Billy broke the kiss. "Wait a minute. You don't even know me."

"I'm sorry. I've waited for you to come home for so long." Those blue-black eyes sparkled. The lips drew back in a mischievous grin. "And I do know you." The other man took hold of Billy's hand and dragged him toward the front door of the cabin. Billy opened his mouth to protest, found himself distracted by the sight of sleek flexing muscles and a rather tight, bare, and delectable backside that he'd previously only glimpsed, and by then they were ducking into the cooler interior of the cabin.

"You need to shower."

Billy laughed. He couldn't help it. "That's one pick up line I've not heard in awhile." *Try forever.*

"Why would I need a pick up line when you're already mine?"

"Pardon?"

It was one thing someone you knew taking you for granted but someone you'd only just met doing so truly flummoxed him.

"Your father said I'd like you as much up close as I always have from afar. He also said that you could do with a firm hand now and then." Incredibly, the stranger wriggled his eyebrows.

"That's it. I'm definitely going mad."

"That's as may be but you still need to shower. You took a nasty dunk."

"You've not told me what to call you," Billy added, wishing he knew the guy's name.

"Fish don't truly have names." The stranger looked back over his shoulder. "Your father called me many things, the first being 'Jesus'."

"Jesus?"

"Well, he didn't call me that so much as that's what he shouted when he first saw me change." Amusement tugged at those appetizing lips. Billy grew warm thinking of those lips against his. "He wanted to call me Blue but it's not really a name. He tried Gill for a while. That was your father's humor for you. He could be serious where it counted, though."

They'd come to a halt at the small but serviceable bathroom. The way Gill moved spoke volumes; he'd clearly been inside the cabin before. Billy's vision narrowed down to those beautiful dark eyes as the other man moved in. Impatient fingers fiddled with Billy's clothing. Billy helped but he couldn't seem to remember how to undo buttons nor keep from trembling.

"I know I'm going too fast for you," that warm, knowing voice said. "The fact is I've waited so long for you to come home. Your father said you wouldn't return for a long time. I never believed him but time went by and you didn't come. I asked him to bring you home but he refused to do more than ask you now and then. He knew I wanted you."

Billy shook his head, shivering a little as he peeled off his garments. "This makes no sense."

Okay, so his father had been a little more insistent that Billy come home in recent years, but he'd not said a word about catching a fish that ... well, wasn't a fish. "What are you? You can't seriously be a fish."

"Of course not. There's more than one kind of shape-shifter in the world."

"Shape-*shifter*—You mean as in werewolves?"

"Werewolves, werecats, panweres. I admit, a fish isn't usual but it has its privileges. I love to swim."

"But what are you? A man or a fish? If shape-shifters exist and I'm not saying they do, aren't they human most of the time?"

"Usually. Sometimes one becomes too much of the other, the wilder part of yourself. That's what I chose to do ... until I met your father. He made me remember what it's like to be human." That dark gaze drifted over Billy's face, making him want to squirm. That gaze also made his heart rate increase. "You are beautiful, you know. You're what I've been waiting for."

"Waiting?" Nothing this strange man said made any sense.

"I've been waiting for someone like you. Your father said I would never be lonely with you. He said that you always made people feel as if they belonged. He was troubled that you would not share my affection, though."

Billy barked out a laugh in shock. "You can't be serious..." he started to say and then the other man touched him, that dark head of hair dived in to seal their lips together in another kiss, and he lost the thread of his thoughts. That tongue slid between his lips as muscular and twisting as an eel. He didn't intend to utter the moan that sprang unbidden

from the depths of his throat, but there was no concealing it.

Billy wrapped his arms around the other man. It had been so long since he'd experienced naked skin against his and apart from the fact that Gill, or whatever he wanted to call himself, had a slightly cooler body temperature, Billy was sold on the sensation of all that nakedness.

Shape-shifter or man, he sure knew what to do with his hands. Gill's touch was just the right kind of smooth and gave just the right kind of rough handling. Hands cupped Billy's backside, humping their mutual hard lengths together in a crude display that made Billy want to abandon what degree of self-reserve he had left. He was barely aware of the moment when they stepped to the side and stood under the spray of the shower.

The heated droplets felt good but nowhere as good as those hands running over him, playing, squeezing, teasing, at the same time cleansing him, not just of dirt from the lake but from months of celibacy.

To his surprise, which was a strange combination of delight and horror, Billy grabbed at this man. He wanted more of him. He wanted the one thing he shouldn't desire from a man he'd just met, but it had been so long, such a prolonged bout of self-denial.

Staggering back, Billy collided with the chilled tile shower stall but his flesh was so overheated he couldn't concentrate on anything but his growing need. Blinded by the rush of the water over his head, he closed his eyes to yet another kiss, this one letting the soft sluice of warm water enter his mouth along with Gill's tongue. He groaned aloud, wondering if he might drown, and oddly willing to acquiesce.

Billy was jerking the stranger's hard length, before he realized what he was doing. At the same time, he forced himself to admit that this man didn't feel like a stranger. What they were doing felt right and familiar, as though they were already lovers and had done this before. When a finger sought the entrance to his body he almost melted there and then. When Gill turned him around, the only part that went reluctantly was the part that didn't want to stop kissing. At the last moment common sense prevailed.

"Wait. We should use protection." He almost laughed. He hadn't carried any in a long while and the thought of digging around hunting to see if his father had anything hidden away was far from romantic. He doubted this water ... —serpent, sprite, spirit?—even knew what a condom was.

"You're talking of human diseases. I carry none."

"Yeah, sure."

"Billy." Gill leaned in pressing Billy's body into the now warm tile. "You saw me with your own eyes. I'm a fish. Sometimes, I'm a man. Right now I'm all male and in need of you. I would not do anything that was a risk to you."

There was a "Shut up" in that sentence somewhere. By the time Billy nodded his consent, Gill was busy kissing his neck, teeth nipping, then licking the water droplets that ran down the tender skin. In this position, Billy wasn't entirely under the water. He could breathe just fine. Gill had to be right under the spray. He guessed that was fine if you were a fish for most of your existence.

One finger, two ... was that three? It couldn't be, but it had been so long that he simply couldn't tell, and then he had an even larger concern pressing into his body. He tensed,

resisting, not because he didn't want this but because it had been so long. Speaking of long ... Ahhh. *Long and hard.*

Billy let out a sound even he couldn't interpret. Words broke through Gill's harsh breaths as he asked, "Am I hurting you?"

Even now, to think he sounded so concerned made Billy's heart twinge equally to the ache in his ass. He shook his head, when the truth was maybe a little, but it wasn't because of anything Gill was doing. It was simply because so much time had passed since he'd found anyone he wanted to penetrate him like this.

Then again, no one had ever enquired if they were hurting him before, physically or emotionally. If Billy were going to be entirely honest, he had to admit that he wasn't very good at topping but the delight that guys mostly wanted to take him had been a short-lived emotion in his life. They took and took, and seldom gave.

Gill appeared to be giving. His fingers played over Billy's skin, homing in on all the places that made Billy gasp and groan. A chuckle sounded in his ear when Gill apparently realized that kissing Billy behind the ears and licking the back of his neck sent Billy into spasms that shuddered all the way down his spine and quivered against the dick spearing him.

"You like?" Gill asked and the inquiry sounded sincere.

Unable to manage more than a nod, Billy considered the fact that he did like. Previously, this moment had always struck him as too invasive, as though he was allowing someone more than entrance into his body. One-night stands didn't do it for him. Maybe it did for other men and that was fine, but being a convenient orifice didn't give Billy's too easily-bruised self-respect any buoyancy. He wanted....

"Do you know when I fell in love with you?" Gill whispered into his ear.

Love?

Billy blinked, coming down a little from the soaring pleasure of stretched and filled flesh that made every nerve in his body aware of its existence.

"When you told your father not to kill something for the sake of killing it. When you told him you wanted to enjoy the lake in other ways."

"I was so young...." Billy hadn't intended to speak his wonderment aloud.

"Yes. So was I. I grew with you, and then you went away and the fish part of me tried to forget, but the male part...."

Billy shivered under an onslaught that now spoke of tenderness rather than lust. He quite liked that *male part* and was sure he could equally like the rest, once they finished and took time to get to know each other.

Almost as if he could read Billy's mind, Gill said, "I've loved you from afar, Billy. Will you take the time to see if you can love me?"

Something broke through all the enjoyment of the moment, something Gill had said earlier. *Your father said I would never be lonely with you.* He didn't know a thing about Gill and there was so much he wanted to know. Now was not the time to ask.

The rhythm Gill had set escalated and so did the pleasure. Gill made Billy feel wanted. His touch was so considerate, every twist of his hips an exercise in exploring Billy's likes and dislikes, and Gill was so apparently intent on giving as much pleasure as he took that

Billy could hardly think.

Still, sensible though irritating, thoughts flashed in his brain. Almost immediately, his mind provided the answers to his uncertainty. He didn't know what Gill was, not truly ... but he wanted to find out. He didn't know if he'd be so interested in Gill once their lust had subsided but it would be nice to find out. He might not find Gill so attractive once they finished. Ah hell, that was a lie. The man was delectable, a word that was fast becoming Billy's favorite.

"Fuck me hard," Billy said, and he meant it. Gill hesitated for the briefest moment and then took Billy at his word. Before, it had been a sort of awkward pleasure-pain as Gill thrust in. Then an answering sigh of delight mingled with relief as he pulled out. Now as his movements grew more furious the two sensations coalesced. The pleasure intensified. Billy's brain ceased to function beyond *harder, deeper, harder*, and vaguely clinging to the thought of how long he'd gone without this bliss, and then he was spilling not just out through his cock, but out through his skin, his nerves sparking, flesh tingling, bones melting. He wanted it never to end even though he thought he might just go insane from the sheer mind-shattering pleasure of the physical release.

What he didn't expect was to submit to emotions beyond the joy of orgasm when Gill slumped against him, whispering endearments, and clinging.

Billy bit back on a laugh when the thought occurred to him that he had no need to ask if had been good for the other man.

* * * *

Much later, Billy opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. He wasn't focusing on anything in particular, just running over the events of the evening in his mind or, more honestly, the number of times Gill had fucked him silly. He shifted as gently as possible so as not to wake the fish-man, even as he took a deep breath. The resulting ache, as pleasant as it was, and the sensation of Gill's weight where the man lay with his head on Billy's chest, made the dreamlike recollection come alive. Gill was real and he was here in the bed Billy hadn't slept in for a very long time. Even over the last few days, he'd been unable to rest easy, and he couldn't remember enjoying more than a light sleep for ages. Turning his head to glance at the clock revealed that he'd slept a good four hours solid. He wanted to put it down to physical exhaustion but he couldn't. Contentment was one thing he hadn't expected when he'd allowed Gill into his bed.

"Didn't I tire you out enough?" Gill asked.

Billy could all too easily discern the amusement in his lover's voice. He could almost see the accompanying smile. "You tired me out just fine," he said, breaking into a smile himself. "I just ... my head is buzzing."

Gill raised his head to look down at him. "Ah ... you have questions."

Yes, that was it precisely. Gill had said something about having a human as well as a fish family. Billy asked what he meant by that.

"There aren't as many of us as you might think," Gill replied. Billy couldn't help noticing that there was something cautious about the way he spoke. Those dark eyes held his attention. They were like the deepest well one could fall into. Some instinct told him that what Gill said was privileged information. Billy didn't want to betray that confidence but he

wasn't sure he was worthy of hearing such things. While he dearly wanted to hear Gill's story, the weight of that disclosure sunk into his heart. Gill's eyes shifted left and right, his gaze searching, waiting. This was the moment. Billy had to make a decision. When it came to the crunch, that choice wasn't as difficult as he believed.

"Tell me," Billy whispered. Gill appeared to let out a sigh, as though he'd been holding his breath.

"Shape-shifters exist," Gill said. "Most are born to it, some cursed, though whether it is a curse depends on your point of view. It varies. I've heard that wishing for it when one is drawn to the sea, or the moon, that this can change one's nature."

Billy couldn't help smiling. "No way am I going to believe that staring at the moon is going to turn someone into a wolf." His smile faded as Gill's steady gaze continued, unblinking.

"Yet you didn't believe in a fish who could change into a man before today. It's not the wishing. It's the desire."

"Is that how it was in your case?"

"No. I was born this way."

Billy laid a hand on Gill's chest, close to his heart before asking his next question. He wasn't sure if he or Gil needed the reassurance. Maybe both of them did. Gill sat there a moment, then lifted one hand while continuing to balance on the other. He pressed his free hand over Billy's. "You said you had a human family."

Gill shook his head. "I have family who were once fish but decided that they wished to live as humans."

"How? Why?"

"That's not easy to answer." Gill sat back. "As for the how as I understand it the first of us turned to humans, those who knew what we were for help. I've heard stories that once there were those that worshipped us. They helped us to hide if we wished to live on the land. They helped us to fit in, mix with their communities. They revered the ability that we could become another form if we wished, even if some chose not to do so."

"Is it that way for all shifters?"

"That I can't tell you. I only know of my kind, and I'm only reporting what my family have told me. I speak only of those of us I know who live on the shore. Some of them return to swim with us on occasion. Some never do. Sometimes those that live as fish choose to visit those who live on the land. As to the why, why does someone decide to do anything? It depends on what drives us, what we ... desire."

Billy closed his eyes and lay silent, his thoughts racing. When he opened his eyes again, Gill still sat there watching. He was watching Billy's every reaction.

Please don't let me do or say something in error.

Billy wasn't sure to whom he offered up the prayer but it was almost as though Gill heard him.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "You can ask me anything. I won't take offence. I don't expect you to understand everything about me, not in the first telling. That takes time."

Time. Billy's heart skipped and somehow, looking into Gill's eyes, he sensed that the shape shifter understood more of what he was going through than he'd ever understand about Gill. He wasn't afraid of a new relationship ... exactly. He'd just spent so long telling

himself that he wasn't ready, so if not now, when? Dust to dust, ashes to ashes; he'd be damned if he'd miss out on this wonderful opportunity to get to know this beautiful, unusual, and caring man.

Billy only realized he was smiling once more when Gill smiled back at him. Billy needed to ask what was going through Gill's mind, but he lacked the courage. To lead up to it he asked, "I suppose you've had certain restrictions to live by?"

"Certainly. I'm breaking the rules right now."

"You are?"

"Yes. Your father knew of me but that was an accident and he hadn't told you of my existence. More time than this should have passed between us before I reveal myself and I'm supposed to ask permission."

"More time?"

"Much more," Gill replied, positively grinning.

"Who do you ask for permission?"

"My parents initially. Then they go to the elder. Lucky for me, my father is both."

"Both?" Billy frowned. "Do you live extra long lives or something? Surely there's someone older than your father?"

Gill shook his head. "I told you, there aren't so many of us now and fewer live in the water every year. It's too easy to forget..." His voice trailed off for a moment only but the expression on his face was even more peculiar than his silence. "If one stays in animal form too long you can forget you have another nature. I've heard it's the same for those who take to the land. They forget how to change into fish, though they may always love the water."

"Have you ever thought of leaving the water? Permanently, I mean." Billy tried to sound casual and failed miserably.

"Yes, and no. I would like to swim with my brothers and sisters once in awhile. Family means everything."

Billy couldn't put off his burning question any longer. "So, do your ... kind ever decide to live on the shore because..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't finish the question.

"Because they've fallen in love? Yes, they do." Gill leaned over and was still smiling when he kissed Billy.

* * * *

Billy read over the letter that his father had left him for the umpteenth time. It began: *By now, you may have met a strange acquaintance of mine. I hope you and he...*

Billy laughed. *Thanks, Dad. You could have warned me.* Clearly, his father had actually thought about Billy meeting Gill soon because, in his words, they would be stronger together than apart. His father had explained that he'd simply not known how to explain to his son about a shape-shifting fish. Okay, Billy could understand that. His father had also thought Billy would be outraged to have his father play matchmaker.

"I probably would have been, Dad." He pictured Gill's smiling face lying beside him in bed earlier, as the night gave way to dawn. "More fool me."

He'd asked Gill about his relationship to his father over breakfast. At first, he'd resented hearing all the things that his father had talked about with Gill, of how like a son the shape-

shifter had become. Gill chopped wood for the fire in exchange for some of William Sr.'s homemade apple pie, though he knew not to come around when Martha was in the house. There were those that wouldn't understand an older man liking the company of a younger one, a statement that had puzzled Gill but Billy understood very well. At other times, despite the age difference, the two men had taken gentle hikes in the local hills. "If we meet anyone I can always tell them you're here in case I keel over," William had joked, not knowing how soon his time would be up. They swapped stories, and sat quietly reading books ... often those written by Billy. They'd discuss his books, thrash out the possible influences, what motivated his characters, a thought that both thrilled and shocked.

"What kind of conclusions did my father come up with?"

Gill's reply drove Billy to silence. His old man was gone. Fate was cruel for only now did he realize how much his father understood him. His father understood his characters, the worlds he created. He truly did have his father's blessing to go out into the world. He'd never resented a thing Billy had chosen to do.

"I love you, Dad," Billy whispered to the empty room, thankful that his father had known that.

"And you would be?"

Oh hell. Billy blinked rapidly trying to dispel his tears as recognized John Porter's gruff voice, the sound carrying in from outside through the open front door. Gill was out there. Trust John Porter just to turn up unannounced. It wouldn't do for the likes of Porter to catch a grown man crying. At least he hadn't caught them ... well, doing what they'd been doing outside just yesterday. There'd been the shower, then in front of the lake, then last night in bed when they'd finally had a chance to talk.

This morning he'd not been up to much more than a cuddle. After breakfast, he'd come across his father's letter. Trust John Porter to break the peace. Billy almost tripped over his own feet trying to get out to the porch. He and ... Gill—he had to come up with a better name than that for the man—had spent the last few hours getting to know each other. Gill had come to the cabin quite often, but never when there was anyone but Billy's father around. He even had a few clothes here.

Clothing hadn't occurred to Billy until he saw Gill dressed but naturally his father wouldn't have wanted a naked man walking around the place. The fact that Gill owned clothes was a tad disappointing, although it was probably just as well; if they spent all their time together naked, they'd never get over their lust and see if they had anything else on which to base a relationship.

Relationship ... What a profound word. A relationship required communication and not just of the physical sort, so they conversed. Still, it came as a shock to him that his father had formed a friendship with Gill. As they talked, Billy came to realize that Gill did indeed know much about him. As much as it pained Billy a little to know that Gill had taken on the role of a son in his absence, he found it comforting that between Martha's fussing and Gill's visits, his father hadn't been as alone as he'd previously thought.

Billy just made it to the porch in time to see Gill reach the bottom step. Gill thrust out a hand to John Porter, and as John took the time to hitch up his pants, he blinked in

surprise. He took the proffered hand, though, as Gill introduced himself as...
"Paul Lake." Gill tipped his head backward indicating the cabin. "Friend of Billy's."
"Friend, eh?"

Gill—presently using the name Paul—turned his head. Those dark blue, amazing eyes turned up to Billy's face. "Close friend," Paul said.

"If you've come about the fishing equipment," Billy said, noting John's expression turn to a dark scowl, "I'm afraid you're too late. I've arranged for most of them to go to a dealer." While this was true, he'd signed nothing yet. Remembering that he had reason to keep the cabin now, Billy added, "I could let you have a couple of rods. Edward can have something as well if he likes."

Apparently, he'd said the right thing as the man's expression lightened and John Porter clearly quite forgot to worry about who Billy chose to entertain in his home. They exchanged a few words and Billy promised to sort out a couple of nice pieces of equipment in a few days. He stood by Paul's side watching as John drove off.

"Paul Lake?" he finally enquired.

"Best I could come up with on the spur of the moment. I thought they were the same thing, sort of. I couldn't think of a surname and Gill Lake sounded too much of a joke."

Lake. Paul. Pool? Apparently, he shared the same humour as Billy's father.

Billy laughed.

"Close friend, huh?"

Gill turned his head, a smile tugging at his mouth. He leaned in. "You can't get much closer," he whispered into Billy's ear and sending his breath down Billy's neck, making him gasp, "than inside you."

Billy shivered from the combination of pleasure of and promise. He pulled away enough to say, "For this to work we've got a lot of things to talk about."

"I know."

"We'll have to make plans."

Gill had expressed his desire to travel a little, but said he wanted to come home. By home, Billy deduced Gill meant the lake, and so he had decided to keep the cabin.

"We have to...." Billy began.

Gill's twinkling gaze silenced him. Gill reached up and stroked Billy's hair. Fingers delved in, stroking around the side of his neck to grasp Billy at his nape. Even that brush of fingers over his neck sent desire slamming down through Billy's body. He swelled in all the right places.

"We have to kiss." Gill finished the sentence for him.

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. Then we have to undress." Gill punctuated the sentence with little flaming kisses.

"Undress?"

"Yes. We get naked."

"What can we do naked?" Billy let Gill tease him into asking.

"We make love, of course."

Not fuck, or hump, do the horizontal dance, or a thousand other ways to say the same thing, but make love. Billy couldn't help giggling.

"What's funny about making love?" Gill sounded perplexed.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. It's serious business, it is, making love." Billy allowed Gill to drag him into the bedroom. "I just can't help thinking how I've caught the long sought after fish." He stared into Gill's questioning and bewildered eyes. "I caught the one that got away."

Gill groaned at the bad joke and a few seconds later, he made a similar sound, for Billy was doing everything he could to make Gill moan in other ways.

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Steal the Sky

Fiona Glass

Avery perched on the window sill his wings half unfurled waiting for Charlie to walk in. He sighed, tucked his wings neatly again over his back, and turned to face his lover with the closest he could get to a penitent look.

"Where are you off to this time?" Charlie asked, then grinned. "As if I expected you to answer. As if pigeons could talk!"

Avery gave a half shrug, cocked his head to one side and winked. Then he stretched out his wings and leapt off the sill into instant, soaring flight. Oh, but that felt good! To feel the wind under his belly again, to sail into the sky with scarcely an effort, scarcely a flap of his wings. To feel the rush of air in his face, and smell the weather, and see the earth laid out beneath him like a living, breathing map, dotted with trees and fields and the small houses of men, and the grey ribbons of their roads.

Inhaling deeply, he flapped harder, and hurtled toward a nearby copse of trees where the wild pigeons roosted. As usual the other birds scattered when he landed noisily among them. They jumped to branches further away and shook their feathers out to show they hadn't been frightened, merely surprised.

Avery would have grinned if his beak had been shaped the right way. Instead, he concentrated on grooming himself, layering the feathers on his chest so they all lay the same way, and pecking a tick off one wing. Then he eyed a female pigeon further along his branch, and sidled toward her. Turning her back and stalking away, she telegraphed her lack of interest, and if he was honest, neither was he. He had all the love he needed from Charlie when he was in his human form. Chasing the birds was just his way of having fun.

He didn't stay out long. Charlie worried so much when he flew off; Avery sometimes wondered if his lover had ever forgiven him for taking his feathers back last year. He'd tried explaining—not shifting for long periods hurt, that he felt naked without his feathers after a while, and that he simply missed the joy of flight. Although Charlie accepted his explanations, Avery still wasn't sure he really understood.

He made sure he was well inside the bedroom before shifting back to human form. Once last year he'd forgotten and stayed too close to the sill, and gone arse over tip into the bushes below. That had given Charlie a scare, and to be honest it had scared him, too. Falling off high buildings wasn't his idea of fun.

Grunting, he concentrated hard on the business of turning back. First, picture the human

form, then flow into it a little at a time, until he had all his feeling from the tips of his toes to the hairs on his head. With a deep breath he blinked, and the metamorphosis was complete.

He tidied up the fallen feathers, considered sweeping them under the bed, then took pity on Charlie's housekeeping and put them on a shelf instead. At least he didn't need to lock them away any more. Charlie might not fully understand his need to fly, but he'd promised never to take the feathers again. Avery had been with his lover long enough now to trust him.

Next he found some clothes, combed his hair (which always seemed to get ruffled when he flew), and went off in search of food.

"Are you eating again?" said Charlie, coming into the kitchen a few minutes later to find him deep in a bowl of porridge. "You never stop. Beats me why you don't get fat."

Avery licked the warm milky liquid off his spoon, then smiled. "It takes a lot of energy to shift, and I need to keep my strength up. Come here."

"Why?" Charlie eyed him with the deepest suspicion, well used by now to his particular brand of mischief.

"Because I haven't seen you for an hour. Because I want to say hello. Because ... just because."

He reached a hand out and snagged Charlie's belt, tugging hard so that Charlie had no choice but to move close. The hand moved on, wrapping round Charlie's waist and down to stroke one slender thigh.

One of the things Avery liked most about the human form was having hands. They could do so many things—holding, picking up, stroking, and best of all, the giving and receipt of pleasure.

The material of Charlie's jeans was warm to the touch and soft where it had worn, and the muscles of Charlie's thigh were taut beneath the denim. Avery gave a little contented puff of air, not quite a sigh, not quite a coo. Charlie was so nice to look at and hold. That dark, spiky hair, the pale skin, the big blue eyes, so different from Avery's own, that could shift from misery to delight in an instant.

Just now they held a dreamy look that Avery knew only too well. He glanced down, and sure enough there was a definite bulge at Charlie's crotch, pushing the zipper out. Avery grinned. "Need some help with that?"

He walked his fingers the length of the zip, pressing gently to trap the hardening flesh below. Soon he would unfasten Charlie's flies and bring his cock out where he could get at it properly. He loved Charlie's cock. Loved holding it and feeling it fill and turn to iron in his hands; loved the taste of it; loved having it in his mouth and pushing the soft, loose folds of skin up and down with his lips.

Charlie grunted and sat down on the bare wooden boards of the kitchen table with a bump. Avery chucked his porridge spoon aside and used his other hand to draw Charlie's head down to his own, before aiming a kiss at his nose. At the last second Charlie swayed forward and the kiss landed on his lips, deepening as their mouths clung and their tongues danced a duel.

"Mmm ... bedroom," Charlie said at last, easing himself away.

Avery, though, had other ideas. "Do it here," he whispered. "There's no one to see. Go on. Take off your clothes. Or at least let me unfasten your pants and touch you."

"We-ll, we shouldn't really—what if one of the neighbours looks through the window?"

"Let them."

"Avery! Stop it."

"Why? You obviously like it."

Sure enough Charlie moaned and began to remove his clothes. What started as a slow strip soon became a dash as both became aroused; shirts and socks flew off in various directions and Avery tugged Charlie's pants half way down his legs. "That's better," he said. "Now I can see what I'm doing."

Settling himself between Charlie's slender thighs he opened his mouth and licked the shaft of Charlie's cock from base to tip, then sat back to watch the effect. Straight away the flesh stiffened and poked out more. He took that as a good sign and licked again, before opening his mouth a little wider and taking the whole head in.

"Uhhh," said Charlie.

Avery hardly noticed. His whole attention was on the feast before him: a feast of plump firm flesh that he could suck and stroke and tongue to his heart's content. He closed his eyes, wiggled his lips down over his teeth, and set to work.

For once, Charlie was the mischievous one. Avery felt the faintest of brushes along one arm and opened his eyes to find Charlie had unearthed a feather from somewhere and was running it along his skin. It was one of the small, soft, white ones from his breast, and the sensation was completely maddening. "Hey! You can't tickle me with one of my own feathers!" he said, trying to knock Charlie's hand away.

Charlie just grinned. "Why not? You do it to me often enough."

"That's different."

He didn't want to play—he wanted Charlie to fuck him, fast and hard. Although he was smaller than Charlie he managed to catch him by surprise and wrestled him down on the table with his arms either side of Charlie's head. Now his lover couldn't move, couldn't reach him with that damned feather, or do anything much except writhe.

"Do me. Now," he breathed, bending right over Charlie's face, so close that their lips almost touched.

"You bet," Charlie mumbled back, and with a sudden spring, launched the pair of them off the table and down onto the rug by the hearth.

Once there, he rolled Avery onto his stomach and pulled his legs apart, before placing a wet finger against his ring. The finger felt warm and oddly sticky, and Avery wondered what his lover had used.

"You're never using that porridge," he said, after a moment's thought. "That's disgusting."

Charlie chuckled. "Disgusting or not, it does the trick. Warm and slippery—just what we need. Coming at you ... right now."

Sure enough, the finger vanished, to be replaced by something altogether larger. Avery squirmed as Charlie thrust slowly but steadily inside him, pushing backward to impale as much of himself as he could. His lover felt huge inside him and Avery was impatient for more—impatient to feel the rasp of the glans through his hole and the foreskin against

that sweet, sweet spot deep inside himself. "Come on, harder," he said through clenched teeth, feeling the sweat pool on his back.

"Calm down, I'm going as ... fast as I ... can," Charlie panted, thrusting again.

This time his cock sank deeper inside and struck Avery right where he wanted. "Oh yeah, so good," he crooned, and twisted and surged to extend the contact.

Avery felt Charlie withdraw just a little and moaned as the contact was lost, then howled as Charlie spitted him again. Avery's balls tightened; any minute now and he'd be lost "Gonna come," he warned his lover, and this time when Charlie thrust he squeezed all his muscles tight and gripped the invading cock like a feather in a fist.

"Sweet Jesus," Charlie breathed

Avery clamped again. Charlie's thrusts were contained in Avery's vice-like grip so that all Charlie could do was rock back and forth. It concentrated all the feeling on Avery's sweet spot, over and over, the pressure enough to burn.

"Aaaaah!" he yelled, bucked once, and came. As his muscles clamped, and then relaxed, Charlie shot his load deep inside. He welcomed the sudden warm surge, loving the way it made them feel so connected, as though he could no longer tell where he ended and Charlie began. For a moment, he wished they could stay like this always, but then his mischievous side kicked in and his lips quirked in a smile at the pictures his thoughts conjured up.

Too soon, Charlie withdrew, and they were back to being two again.

Afterward they lay entwined on the colourful hearth rug in front of the old-fashioned range. Avery rested his cheek on Charlie's chest and sighed. He was so lucky—he had a lovely home and a partner who loved him dearly, and who he loved in return. He had the freedom to come and go as he pleased; now that Charlie understood him better he let him shift whenever he felt the need.

And yet ... if he was honest with himself, there were times when he was bored. Sitting around at home all day was all very well, but the short flights he allowed himself never really satisfied his urge. He was a racing pigeon when all said and done, bred to fly vast distances in the shortest possible time. Now he never got the chance.

"Charlie...." he said in his most wheedling voice, raising himself on one elbow and tickling his lover's face with a stray feather that came to hand.

"Um? Yeah. Whaddya want?" Charlie obviously recognised the tone of old.

It was now or never. Avery took a deep breath, and blew some of it out against Charlie's cheek. "I want to fly in a race."

Charlie sat up so fast he banged his head against Avery's nose. "You *what*? Oh, sorry, love, are you all right?"

He fussed over Avery for a while, until his eyes stopped watering and the few spots of blood had been staunched, and Avery hoped he might have forgotten his statement in the panic. But even as he wiped his eyes one last time, (on Charlie's shirt sleeve), he heard Charlie grunt and say, "Did I just hear you right? You want to race? With other birds, you mean?"

"Yes. I used to do it all the time, before I met you. I miss it sometimes—the challenge, the competitive spirit, the striving to get home before anyone else. I don't want to enter every

race, but it would be fun to do one now and again.”

“We-ll, I don't know. There's so much that could go wrong. What if you run into a hawk, or there's a storm and you're blown off course?”

Charlie had that worried frown stitched across the top of his nose and Avery hastened to kiss it away. “I could run into a hawk at any time, even in your back garden. There's no extra danger just because it's a race. If anything there's safety in numbers, and hawks usually go for the weakest birds. And if the weather's stormy I won't go. But just once, Charlie. Please?”

“I'm not sure. When were you thinking of going?”

“Now. Well, not right this minute now, but as soon as possible. My wings are itching, Charlie. I know you're getting the birds ready for a race this weekend. Couldn't I tag along?” It was asking a lot, but he didn't ask for much from his lover—just bed and board and fairly frequent sex. He hoped Charlie appreciated that.

“I don't know. It's a long race—we're driving all the way to the north of Scotland to release them.”

“Distance doesn't really matter, you know. As long as I can feel magnetic north I'll find my way.”

“Will once be enough, though? Or will you start asking to go on every race if I let you do this one?”

“No, not every one. Maybe one a year at the most. Please, Charlie. It's important to me.”

Charlie thought for a moment, the furrow back across his brow. Avery longed to kiss it away again, but realised his lover needed time on his own to think. He drew back slightly and watched the various emotions chase themselves across Charlie's face—fear, indecision, and finally a rueful acceptance. At that point, he knew he'd won.

“All right,” Charlie said with a small smile. “But promise me two things. One, if the weather's bad you'll put it off till next time. And two, if anything, anything *at all*, goes wrong, you get yourself back down to the ground, shift, and phone me.”

“I promise,” said Avery meekly, but inside he brimming with excitement and joy.

* * * *

The day of the race dawned chilly but clear, with hardly a cloud in the sky. They'd driven up to northern Scotland overnight, the pigeons bedded comfortably in their straw-lined pallets and Avery in the passenger seat. He might want to race like a pigeon, but given the choice between squatting in a box or sitting up here watching the scenery spool past ... well, it was no choice at all. At this time of year it was light until 11 P.M. so far north, and the road wound between mountains and wild tracts of heath and bog, with only the occasional cluster of cottages to relieve the wilderness.

He offered to drive at one point when he thought Charlie was looking tired, but it wasn't something he'd had much practice at. After he'd driven on the wrong side of the road twice in ten minutes and nearly mown down a motorbike, Charlie ordered him to pull over and wrested the wheel from his grasp. “Sorry,” he said, curling up again in the passenger seat. “I'm not very good at that. Why drive when you can fly?”

Charlie just grinned.

They arrived at their destination shortly after dawn, which was the best time to let the

pigeons go. It gave the birds the whole day to fly back to their loft before it got too dark for them to see, and it meant they had the benefit of the strongest daytime sun to guide them on their flight.

Avery scrambled down stiffly from the cab and helped Charlie unload the pallets filled with sleepy, cooing birds. Other racers were arriving at the release site—a broad strip of beach just off the northeast coast. It looked as though it was deserted for most of the year, but this morning a steady stream of trucks and cars were rolling in and parking up on the edge of the sand. Racers wandered round catching up with each other and swapping notes, a catering van arrived serving coffee and hot bacon rolls, and the scene took on a festive note.

Charlie wandered off to report to the race officials and Avery took the opportunity to look for somewhere sheltered to shift. He could hardly do it out here in the middle of the meeting with so many people looking on. Someone would see, someone would accuse them of cheating, or someone would have a heart attack. There wasn't much shelter on the beach, so in the end he ducked down behind the truck and muttered a quick prayer to the bird-god that nobody would notice.

Shaking his feathers out of the roll of fabric he'd transported them in, he formed them into his familiar cloak and draped it over his shoulders and down his arms, before shedding his clothes, closing his eyes, and forcing his whole being into the new form. Then he half-hopped, half-fluttered round to the other side of the truck and perched on top of one of the boxes, stuck his head under one wing and went to sleep.

He roused again when Charlie came back, and allowed his lover to pop him into an empty box. Once inside he nestled into the straw and settled down to wait, conserving his energy for the explosive surge he would need at the start of the race. Around him the other birds did the same, sensing the tension to come, and there was barely a rustle or a coo.

A flurry of movement outside heralded the start of the race. Officials came and checked a random bird or two for signs of illness or drugs. Charlie reappeared, cup of tea in hand, and checked all the pigeons himself. Charlie was always careful with his birds, treating them as well as any pet, and perhaps better than his friends. It was one of the reasons Avery had first chosen him last year.

Finally the preparations were over, the paperwork signed, and the starting official came over to stand by the boxes, stopwatch in hand. Adrenaline coursed through Avery's veins; excitement sharpened his every sense. He smelled the salt of Charlie's sweat and felt the heat of the sun on his back even through the wooden lid of the box. Peeping through the wire mesh side he saw Charlie mouth 'good luck' at him and Avery winked.

Just in time.

There was a series of bangs as Charlie unlocked the boxes one by one and flung back their lids. There was a smaller, less noticeable click as the starting official set his watch. There was a sudden clatter of wings as the birds headed for freedom and the sky.

As Avery spiralled upward he heard a ragged shout behind him: "Good luck!"

He looked back to see Charlie, already receding into a small dot, his face turned skyward and one hand waving. Avery wished he could wave back, but satisfied himself with a small wing-dip, and then he set his beak toward the sun and flew.

Near the clouds the air was cold and he needed to flap extra hard to stop his muscles from locking up. Already he was speeding away from the release site, knowing instinctively which way was south, and therefore home. The iron in his brain might only be a tiny atom or two but it told him automatically where north was, without him having to think, armed with that knowledge he could find his way home from almost anywhere.

Far below, he could still make out the beach. Charlie had disappeared—a dot among other dots—but Avery knew his lover would be packing up for home. First, Charlie would load the empty boxes back into the truck, then he would fortify himself for the long drive with coffee and food. He'd already driven through the night; Avery worried sometimes about the long periods his lover went without sleep.

The pigeons would reach their loft hours before Charlie got back—it wouldn't hurt him to stop somewhere and have a nap. But he always put his birds' needs first, hurrying home as quickly as he could to count them and check them over and make sure they had water and grain.

Now Avery was high enough to see the tops of the highest clouds. He stopped climbing, checked his bearings one last time, and set his head toward home. Around him he sensed some of the other birds; they'd scattered when they were released, but all were following a similar path. A few yards away he could see Patch, head down and wings outstretched, hurtling through the air and over there, toward the sea was Grey.

Avery stretched as well. It felt good to race again—better than he'd ever expected. Exhilarating was the word he would use if he was in human form. The cold air rushing over his body, the sense of urgency, the perfect knowledge of where he was and where he needed to be—

Except ... except something wasn't right. There was an odd, unseen, half-felt surge in the air, a tingling along his back and through his head, a sense that he could no longer feel. He shook his head to clear the surge away, but it persisted and followed him, even when he tried to fly out of its muddling grasp. He felt dizzy suddenly, the part of his brain that anchored him to the earth falling away into numbness and thin air.

Panic replaced the excitement of only a moment before.

Where was he? Which way was north? Why couldn't he sense it any more, when he'd always known where it was from the day he first hatched?

He tacked back and forth for a while, hoping his sense returned, but all he felt was disorientation and growing concern. A couple of the other birds skittered past, exuding panic from every pore, and it was clear they'd been caught in the whatever-it-was as well.

Avery called to them and they came to him, flocking in the way birds will when startled or confused. Safety in numbers, Avery had told Charlie only the other day, but there didn't seem to be much benefit today. There were simply more of them to get lost.

After a few more minutes, he gave up trying to rediscover north and set a course by the sun instead. It was less accurate, since the sun moved during the day and followed a different path across the heavens depending on what time of year it was. But in the absence of his true direction-sense, it would have to do. With Patch and Grey on his tail, he gained some height, found an air current that would save him some of the work, and headed for what he hoped was south.

Several hours later, tired, thirsty and chilled to the bone, Avery was no nearer to finding home. He should have ditched the race, set himself on the ground and phoned Charlie for help long since, but he still had Patch and Grey in tow and didn't want to leave them floundering—or scare them into disappearing by shape-shifting right in front of their startled eyes. Besides, they'd left the open, uninhabited lands behind and were flying over farmland and housing and parks. Chances were if he tried to shift down there, someone would spot him and phone the police.

He kept going, flapping as slowly as he could to conserve his dwindling levels of energy. Risk or no risk, he knew he needed to land soon and feed, or he'd be too weak to change himself back—and then he'd be really stuck.

He dropped a couple of thousand feet until he was skimming the rooftops. Down here there were fewer thermals and currents to help him carry the load, but at least he could see the terrain and look out for somewhere to get himself to ground. At first there was little in the way of shelter—he was flying over a vast industrial estate, with warehouses and car parks and chimneys, and far too many people about. Finally, though, just as his strength was giving out, he came to an area of larger houses with gardens filled with shrubs and trees, and even an occasional shed.

"Look! Down there!" he called in pigeon speak to the other birds, but there was no reply. He thought Grey and Patch had followed him when he dived but there was no sign of them, and only silence when he cooed. He hoped they were together and safe, but he had no energy left to go and look for them. Limping now on tired and battered wings, he spotted a shed that was some distance away from its house, and had a window open at the back.

It wasn't home, it didn't even smell like a pigeon loft, but it would be dark and quiet, and once he'd shifted he could nip over the fences, steal some clothes from a washing line somewhere and call Charlie for help.

He swooped down on the shed and landed with an awkward thump on the roof. A quick glance round told him it was safe; nobody had seen or heard him—nor would they take much note of a single pigeon even if they had.

Now for the shift. If he'd left the change for a moment longer he wouldn't have had the strength to complete the process. Shuffling himself into position he aimed for the open window, already thinking himself into human form. With the last vestiges of his energy and concentration he slipped through the narrow space, shedding his feathers into their cloak as he went.

The window was high up in the wall, and he half tumbled, half jumped down to the floor, knocking a can of paint off a shelf as he fell. It landed with a clatter and the lid came off, splashing bright red paint around his legs and feet—a pool of scarlet that seeped across the floor like lifeblood.

"Fuck!" Avery aimed a kick at the can, but it rolled out of reach and continued to dribble its tell-tale contents in a sullen trail. Avery peered at his legs, liberally daubed with paint. Now he'd never be able to creep away unseen—this stuff was practically bright enough to glow in the dark.

He swore again and reached for his feather cloak, but it was nowhere to be seen. That was odd. Had it got caught up round the window, or drifted to the floor when he fell? In the dim light in the shed he peered about, hoping to see a pile of soft pile of grey-white feathers or even the cloak itself, but there was nothing. Not a single feather danced in the air or lay gently on the shelves or floor. Avery had a vague memory of something catching or tearing as he clattered through the window, and he clambered onto the topmost shelf to peer outside.

Sure enough, the feathers were there, still caught up in their cloak, dangling from a nail. He managed to squeeze one arm out through the window's tiny gap, but no matter how he stretched and grasped, they remained tantalisingly out of reach.

"Fuck!" he said again, this time in a yell of sheer frustration. Maybe he could find a stick or garden tool in the shed, and reach the cloak with that? He scrambled off the shelves, shivering in the shed's chill air, and cast about for something long and thin.

Suddenly, he snapped his fingers and laughed. "You daft idiot!" he said to himself. "You don't need to wobble about on shelves and reach the feathers from in here. Just open the door, walk round and pick them up!"

But when he tried the handle it wouldn't budge. Squinting through a crack he saw it was bolted and padlocked on the outside.

Avery sank to the floor, avoiding the paint, and cried. He was alone in a strange place with no clothes, no food, and no way of calling for help. His feathers were stuck outside and without them he couldn't shift back, and in human form he was too big to get out of the shed. If the people who owned the house found him in here he'd probably be arrested, assuming he lived that long. He was cold, he was thirsty and starving, and very, very tired, and he missed Charlie like an amputated wing.

"You idiot," he whispered to himself again. "You wanted to show off, to win that race and have Charlie and everyone else make a big fuss of you. Now you might never see him, or the sky, again."

* * * *

Avery had been stuck in the shed for hours, and it was getting dark. He didn't know what time it was, since his watch was with his clothes in Charlie's truck, but his stomach told him it was way past dinner time. His lover would be frantically wondering where he was. He'd considered banging on the shed door and yelling for help, but the thought of trying to explain how he'd got inside a stranger's shed, through a door that was locked on the outside, was just too much. At the moment, until hunger won out over embarrassment, he'd rather sit here and starve.

A small rustle sounded in the shadowy depths and he raised his head. It was probably just a spider, or something else he'd disturbed falling off the shelf. After a moment, though, he made out a pair of beady black eyes staring at him through the gloom, and realised he was looking at a mouse. A small, black mouse with a pink nose, tiny pink feet and a long pink tail.

"Hello," he said, then grinned in spite of his problems. He was in a worse state than he thought if he was talking to a mouse; now he knew how Charlie felt, trying to chat to him once he'd shifted to pigeon form.

From its high shelf, the mouse wrinkled its nose at him, almost as though it was saying hello back. Then it stood on its hind legs and sniffed the air, perhaps to check if Avery was friend or foe.

He was glad he'd shifted into human form. Pigeons didn't eat mice as far as he knew, but one whiff of 'bird' and the mouse would have vanished into whatever crevice it had appeared from, and Avery was so fed up that even a mouse was better company than himself.

"I'm hungry," he said, half to the mouse and half to himself. "Pity you can't bring me a bowl of porridge or a nice big plate of fries."

The mouse wrinkled its nose again, then turned and scampered off. Avery sighed. It was the only bit of life he'd seen since Patch and Grey, and now it had gone as well. He'd better face it. The night was going to be long and very lonely.

A few minutes later he heard the scrabble of tiny claws, and when he looked up the mouse was back, lugging something almost as big as itself in its mouth.

"What have you got there?" said Avery, more from boredom than any real interest. "It doesn't look much like fries."

The mouse didn't reply, but trotted across the work bench and dropped its load as close to Avery as it could get. Avery peered, but his nose told him what the thing was before his eyes deciphered its shape in the growing gloom. A strawberry, presumably stolen from a nearby strawberry patch.

"Why, thank you!" Avery said. He popped the whole strawberry into his mouth and chewed; sweet, juicy and delicious. Avery wished he had a whole bowlful more just like it, because one on its own wasn't doing much to stifle his hunger pangs. "I don't suppose..." he began, but before he could even finish the sentence the mouse had turned tail again—literally—and whisked out of the shed, returning with another strawberry in its mouth.

"Well, bugger me with a fish fork," said Avery. "You can understand me!" He was half way through chewing the second strawberry when he realised that if the mouse could understand him, it had probably also understood his request to be bugged. "Er, that is, it's just a figure of speech, you know," he added hastily, before the mouse could go off in search of a fish fork. "These are very nice strawberries, by the way. Kind of you to bring them."

The mouse winked.

At least, that's what it looked like to Avery, who by this stage was wondering if he was completely sane. Whoever heard of men—or even pigeons—talking to mice? Maybe it was just coincidence and the mouse wasn't really listening to him at all. That would make much more sense.

The mouse promptly spoiled this illusion by bringing him another strawberry. It put the berry down on the edge of the work bench, but this time Avery didn't pick it straight up. Instead he looked the mouse in the eye, as near as he could given the difference in their sizes, and said, "You can understand me, can't you? Either you understand English, or you're reading my mind. Don't tell me you're another shape shifter? Who do you change into? Errol Flynn?"

But the mouse just rose up on its hind legs again, before nudging the strawberry toward

Avery with its nose.

Avery sighed and ate the strawberry absent-mindedly, then wiped the juice off his lip with one finger and gave it to the mouse to lick. The tongue was tiny and warm, but surprisingly rough, and tickled like fury.

Now I know how Charlie feels when I plague him with one of my feathers, he thought. *No wonder he squirms so much*. He grinned to himself, oddly comforted by the picture of his lover writhing under his touch. If only Charlie were here, instead of this mouse. If only the mouse were bigger, and able to do something really useful like unlock the shed, or at least fetch him the key.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers, sending the mouse leaping for safety in the shadows. "Sorry." He needed it to come back and help him again. "I didn't mean to startle you. I've just had an idea."

Cautiously a nose poked out from behind a flowerpot, then the rest of the mouse trotted back. It sat down on its haunches with an alert look on its face, as if to say 'okay, I'm listening'.

"Feathers," said Avery. "Are you strong enough to carry my feathers? They got left outside and I need them in here so I can change again. If you can find them and bring them to me I'll be so grateful I'll...."

Just how did you repay a mouse? He'd have to think of something before he left.

The mouse ran along the bench, then ran back and stared at Avery as though waiting for something.

"What's wrong? You must know what feathers are. Those long white pointy things that birds have."

The mouse flinched at the word 'birds', but stayed where it was, a quizzical look on its tiny face.

Avery concentrated hard, hoping to read its mind or at least get some indication of what it wanted, but without success. What else could he tell it? Feathers ... outside ... "Oh, hang on, you want to know where to look. The last I saw of them they were hanging on a nail outside the window. Maybe they're still there."

The mouse darted off and leaving Avery in the dark. To while away the time he tried to imagine just how the tiny creature was tuning in to his thoughts. It didn't seem to be a shape shifter—or at least, it hadn't revealed itself when he asked—and for an animal to understand English was well-nigh impossible.

Maybe, just maybe it was picking up on his pigeon thoughts instead. Birds, like other animals, communicated not by language but by concept—"thirsty", 'tired', 'need sex now', and a myriad similar thoughts. It made it much easier for one species to understand another, without the need for words.

There was a rustle and suddenly the mouse was back, and Avery laughed out loud. Not from humour—although the little thing did look rather comical—but from sheer relief, because instead of strawberries it was dragging one of his feathers in its mouth. The feather was twice as long as the mouse and kept getting under its feet, but it persevered, finally dropping its mouthful at Avery's side.

"Yes! Perfect!" said Avery, and for the first time in many hours began to hope that he

would get out of here alive, and with his dignity intact.

It took the mouse most of the rest of the night to bring Avery the rest of his cloak. The poor little thing carted it in, one feather at a time, and kept having to pause for a rest, since every trip meant running along the bench, down whatever hole it had scrambled through, along the side of shed wall, and all the way back. By the time it was down to the last few small white breast feathers, Avery was itching to change, all too aware of the lessening darkness inside the shed.

Dawn was on the way, and dawn brought its own dangers when people stirred and came outdoors. He needed to shift and be miles away from this place by then.

At last, the final feather was in place and he formed the cloak and draped it over his shoulders. Then he turned to the mouse, which watched from its grandstand on the work bench with an inquisitive look in its beady black eyes. "Thank you, little friend. I couldn't have done it without your help. I just wish there was some way I could show you how grateful I really am."

The mouse wrinkled its nose, and raised itself on one paw with the other in the air. It looked exactly as if it was waving goodbye, and Avery grinned. "Yes, goodbye to you, too. You'd better go now, if you don't want me to frighten you. I'm going to change soon."

With a whisk of its long pink tail the mouse turned and scurried off, and Avery began to shift. He breathed deep, sending a renewed surge of energy deep into the feathery cloak and feeling it mould itself to his body and limbs, and cling to his skin. Suddenly he wasn't a naked man with red paint on his legs; he was a small feathery bird with red paint on *its* legs.

He looked down at the scarlet splashes and sighed—but at least he was nearly free. All he needed to do now was flutter up to the window, like so, perch on the top frame for a while to check there were no predators about, then launch himself off and head for the vast open spaces of the sky.

He was only just in time. Already there was a faint line of apricot in the east, heralding the rising sun, and all around him birds were waking and singing their welcome to the new day. As Avery rose into the air he wondered briefly if his sense of direction would still be confused, but the instant he got above the roof tops he felt magnetic north, exactly where it was supposed to be. He gave a small 'coo' of relief and set his compass for home.

* * * *

Circling over the familiar landmarks of Charlie's roof and pigeon loft, Avery never felt quite so relieved to be home. His sense of direction, and his strength, had lasted throughout his flight, and he'd turned out to be only a few miles away in a neighbouring town, which was probably just as well, since he was exhausted and wanted nothing more than a drink, a long hot soak in the bath, and an even longer sleep.

As he prepared to swoop down to the roof, the loft door opened and Charlie came out. From this height he looked oddly short and squat. Avery saw he had his head bent and something cradled in his hands. Pigeons were notoriously short-sighted birds, but Avery squinted and thought he could make out a beak and feet.

That didn't bode very well. Why would Charlie be carrying a bird out of the loft, unless something awful had happened?

He fluttered first to a nearby tree, and then to the roof of the loft, and from there he squinted again. This time he saw it was indeed a bird, and even recognised which one—Patch, the oldest of the flock. His body was a small soft feathery lump in Charlie's hands and his neck drooped; even from this far away Avery could tell he was dead. He gave a squawk of surprise, and Charlie looked up. Unshed tears gleamed in his eyes, and one had tracked its way down his face, leaving a silver trail. Something melted in Avery's heart.

He hopped down to the ground and shifted back to human form right before Charlie's eyes, something he'd never done before. Then, before Charlie could so much as squeak, he'd enveloped his lover, squashed pigeon and all, in a massive hug. After a minute or two he noticed faint scrabbling movements and realised Charlie couldn't breathe. "Sorry," he said, and pulled back just enough to stop his lover turning blue. "I got a bit carried away there. It's been a bad couple of days, and seeing you crying just.... Well."

"I know," said Charlie. I found Patch and Grey this morning—they must have come in overnight. Grey's in a bad way but Patch must have out-flown his own strength and he died in my hands just now. And when you didn't come back I thought you were dead, too." His voice broke on the word 'dead' and Avery stroked his hair. "Don't. I'm fine. Honestly. I'm a bit weak and could do with a good meal, but you're not getting rid of me that easily." "Thank God," said Charlie. He sniffed loudly, wiped his eyes on one sleeve, and looked at Avery properly for the first time. Then he went pale. "Is that *blood*?"

Following the line of his lover's shocked gaze, Avery realised first that he was stark naked, and secondly that he still bore splashes of scarlet paint on his legs. "No, just paint," he said with a grin. "Look, come indoors and I'll explain. It's been a long night."

"Tell me about it," said Charlie. His voice still wavered, but he managed a watery smile of his own. "I'll just put Patch in a box, to stop the foxes getting at him. Poor little scrap."

Avery knew Charlie kept a box with a heavy lid outside the kitchen door, for just such occasions as this. Because he looked after his birds so well he didn't have to use it very often, but it was still painful watching the lid close on the small limp bundle of feathers within. Knowing how upset Charlie was, Avery took his hand and squeezed it, before leading the way indoors.

"That's better," Avery said some time later, with a sigh of mixed contentment and relief. He'd found an old dressing-gown of Charlie's and stuck that on, had a wash, drunk about six glasses of water straight off, and worked his way through an entire packet of cornflakes. He was just about feeling human again. *Or as human as a pigeon shape shifter could*, he amended with a laugh.

He shoved his chair back and planted both legs on the table, then grinned as Charlie went puce trying *not* to look up the skirts of his dressing gown. "Later," he told his lover firmly. "There's more than enough time for that. I expect you want to know what happened, first."

He began by explaining about the shed, the mouse and the paint, because that was the easy part. But when he got on to describing what had started the whole episode off, he slowed and finally ground to a halt. "I don't really know what it was," he said after a long pause. "It just felt as though something, somewhere, had gone horribly wrong. North

simply wasn't *there* any more—that's the only way I can describe it."

"I think I know what it was," said Charlie, and there was an odd, grim twist to his lips. "Bloody Phil Mackenzie. He's a rival pigeon racer and he's always been ready to try anything that would give him an advantage, whether it was within the rules of the sport or not. Usually it's little things like giving his pigeons less food before a race so they're lighter. A couple of years ago there was a big fuss about drugs, but the authorities never managed to prove it because the birds had burned the stuff out of their systems by the time they'd flown back. But now he's gone too far. He used an E.M. pulse."

"A what?" Avery had been drawing patterns in the milk with his spoon, but at that he glanced up.

"Electro-magnetic pulse. It's a device that puts out a sudden surge of electro-magnetic waves. Or something. You can get them off the internet now, apparently. I'm not sure I understand it myself, really, except that it overloads the birds' sense of magnetic north and screws up their directional systems."

"It did that, all right. Where was he? I didn't see anything?"

"No, you wouldn't have. The bastard hid in the sand dunes on the edge of the release site and targeted eight out of the twelve flocks that were flying. A few of us got suspicious when we saw our birds flapping about in a blind panic, and we organised a search party. We found him, reported him to the officials, and the last four flocks got away. Well, three actually, since one was his and they disqualified it. But for all the others that had already gone, it was too late. I phoned Mike Thomson this morning—he's lost three of his birds, and he'd heard about someone else who lost five. I've been lucky, really—although I don't suppose poor Patch would say so."

Charlie's lip quivered, and Avery's heart melted all over again. He unhooked his legs from the table, pushed his chair all the way back, and went to perch on Charlie's lap. His lover was warm and smelled of shampoo and bird feathers—a comforting combination as far as Avery was concerned.

He ruffled Charlie's hair, wrapped an arm round his shoulders, and gave him another hug. "At least you know Patch had a good life," he said at last. "Well fed, comfortable, looked after by someone who cares. And he wasn't exactly a spring chicken."

"I know," Charlie said mournfully. "I just really hate losing any of my birds. I could strangle Mackenzie."

"What will happen to him? Will he get into trouble?"

"Well, he'll never race pigeons again, the race officials will see to that. But it wasn't a criminal offence so other than being ostracised he'll get away with the whole thing."

"Really? We'll see about that."

Now that he was home, and fed, and had the prospect of a good long rest, Avery's usual mischief had returned. "I wonder how he'd like being over-run with mice? I could probably arrange that, with a little help from a friend."

"You wouldn't?" said Charlie, then added ruefully, "You would, wouldn't you?"

"It's a thought," said Avery. He yawned suddenly, wide enough to reveal his tonsils. "I'm knackered."

"I'm not surprised." Charlie grinned. "You've flown all the way from Scotland, and been out

gallivanting with mice half the night. It's a wonder you're not dead on your feet." He kissed Avery suddenly, hard and almost clumsily on the lips. "I'm glad you're back."

"So'm I," said Avery.

"At least for now," Charlie added. "I, er, expect you'll want to take part in another race soon, since that one went so wrong. There's one due in about six weeks...."

But Avery shook his head. "Oh, no, you're not getting me into a race again for a very long time. I've learned my lesson. I've got everything I need right here at home and I'm not doing anything to risk that. I've never said this before, but I love you, Charlie."

"Love you too," said Charlie, pushing at Avery and trying to stand up.

Charlie looked pleased enough to burst, but like most men, clearly had problems admitting it. "Does this mean you're finally going to bed? Come on, then, shift yourself and I'll help you up the stairs. I might join you under the covers. I was so upset last night, I didn't get much sleep either."

"Who said anything about sleep?" said Avery with a leer, while Charlie started undressing him, but in the end he was fast out before Charlie had even finished undressing him.

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Swan Prince

Emily Veinglory

Chapter One

Rudy sighed again and lifted the smudged ink of the employment section up to his slightly short-sighted eyes. It was late afternoon and he wanted to make at least a token effort to find dignified employment, before Sandy came home from his shift working security at a downtown office building. Having a job interview lined up might sweeten Sandy up for....

But fate conspired against Rudy as he finally focused his eyes on the print. The phone rang. He set the paper aside and went over to answer it. Given that the apartment was Sandy's, really, and the phone was in his name, Rudy wondered if he should even pick up. But not for long. Sandy had no answering machine so Rudy might be able to make himself marginally useful by taking a message.

Well, truth be told, he was just curious. This was the first time he had heard the landline ring the whole time he had been staying here. *I bet curiosity isn't good for a rat, either.*

"Yello."

"This is a friend of Sandy's?"

The quizzical woman's voice on the other end of the line had a slight Japanese accent. *Well this is awkward.* Rudy knew that Sandy was refusing to talk to his mother, although he didn't know the exact nature of the estrangement. Given the choice, Rudy would have liked to have a good long talk with the lady, about how she managed to give birth to the Swan Prince of legend without ever mentioning that heritage to the boy ... assuming, of course, that she knew about it herself.

"I suppose you could say that," Rudy belatedly replied. "If this is Sandy's mom I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think it is a good idea for us to be chatting."

"You must be considerate of his wishes, I know," she replied. "And as much as I would like

to talk to Sandy's ... good friend, just to know him better I must try and let my son know of something more urgent. He makes it so difficult. But you must warn Sandy that his father is..."

There was rustling sound on the other end of the line and call cut off. Rudy stood, staring at the old-fashioned plastic receiver as if that would make the tinny dial tone any more informative. He set it back down on the phone wondering if she would call back.

Had she put down the phone herself, or been interrupted?

If she had to hang up because of her heavy-handed spouse, then star-59-ing could just land her in a lot of trouble. If it was just an accidental disconnection she would call back on her own. Reasonably speaking, what could he do based on so little?

But Rudy felt uneasy. It might be his were-rat heritage, but Rudy generally had a good nose for trouble and it was sure twitching now.

Rudy reasoned a little more unobtrusive research was hardly unreasonable. As an orphan himself, the 'in-laws' were the closest thing he was going to have to family. It was only fair he know a little more about them. Sandy's full legal name of Matthew John Turner was easily discoverable from the bills and other paperwork stored in this desk drawer. From there it was easy to Google his father, Matthew George Turner, CEO of Folsom Enterprises.

Turner was a white haired, lumpy-faced American businessman pretty much like any other, besides having particularly beady and sunken eyes. He was shown in some pictures with a "Mrs. Turner" who did not ever seem to be accorded her own name. In each of these pictures the slim, early-middle-aged but still noticeably attractive Japanese woman with downcast eyes seemed palpably nervous next to her husband. The body language alone was enough to make Rudy grimace. A young Japanese trophy wife was one thing, but he wondered where a half-Japanese only child fit into the family picture.

Rudy heard a key rattle in the lock, and smoothly deleted the cache before closing the laptop. He was most of the way to the door before Sandy came in. Sandy had on the blue uniform of Sensei security, and he managed to make the cheap fabric and utilitarian cut of the pants and jacket look sexy as hell. His white office shirt had one button undone, a concession to comfort that Rudy knew he only made on the way home, after working hours were over. Somehow that square inch of exposed skin was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Rudy sweep Sandy up in his arms and spun him into the room. Sandy was perfect in proportions, in all his parts, but a few inches under average height just as Rudy was a few inches over. He was perfect; lithe and dour, young and bitter, magical and skeptical. A bundle of contradictions a man could spend a lifetime trying to untangle.

At least Rudy was hoping to get the chance.... *Oh, yes, it's love. So sue me.*

"Am I going to have to Taser you?" Sandy said as he struggled loose. "At least let me get into the apartment before you start."

He wasn't really annoyed. Sandy just had a funny way about him. From Rudy's point of view it was all part of his charm. "Can I help it that you're irresistible?"

"My irresistible self has been on my feet all day." Sandy nevertheless took the time to take off his uniform jacket and hang it in the closet in the bedroom. Then take off his pants and

shirt.

Rudy resisted the urge to interrupt him again at that point. Rudy ~~was~~ capable of taking a hint, after all. Sandy reemerged from the bedroom dressed in sweats and a T-shirt. Not exactly a muscle shirt either, like any handsome young queer might wear, but something big and square that hung off him like a tent. He either didn't know how hot he was or he didn't care. Either way it was okay with Rudy because if Sandy was the type to go out and show himself off, Rudy would be beating back the competition with a stick.

And it was far from clear that Sandy returned his feeling with quite the same fervor. With a young man this undemonstrative it was damned hard to tell.

Sandy saw the newspaper lying on the coffee table. He relaxed a bit and sat down on the sofa, leaning over to look at the employment ads. "Looking for work?"

"If I must." Rudy said over-dramatically as he settled down next to Sandy. "I *have* money you know, enough to cover me for years."

"A person needs an occupation." That was Sandy all over, very foursquare in his outlook.

"Mine could be you." Rudy had been watching Sanding intently, waiting for the moment Sandy glanced over. It seemed like Sandy didn't trust the sincerity of Rudy's feelings, his commitment—but he didn't exactly come out and question them either. *My beautiful Sandy, the epitome of ambivalence.*

Rudy was damned if he knew just what was needed to get off probation and into the kind of relationship where he could share the full truth of what he thought lay ahead of them, prince and rat demon together. But at least the concession of even looking for work seemed to have warmed Sandy up a bit.

Sandy did not look up from the paper. "House husband to a minimum wage security guard?" he said defensively.

"And why not?"

"I doubt you'd want to be some kind of helpmate for me even if you knew how. Besides, it doesn't make sense."

"Sense isn't what I am thinking about making."

Rudy reached over and put his hand on Sandy's shoulder, gave a squeeze then slid his fingers over the back of Sandy's neck. Whenever they first touched there was a sensation of connection; the exact nature of the sensation changed each time. Sometimes like a spark of static, sometimes just like the feeling of coming home, sometimes defying words entirely. Sandy felt it too, leaning into Rudy's touch, but had never said anything about it.

"If you were looking after me," Sandy said with a sigh. "Wouldn't the laundry be done and dinner be on the table?" But his manner of voice had changed entirely and Rudy knew he was teasing even though his tone was serious.

"I'll order take-out." Rudy grabbed Sandy and scooped him up, lifting him right into the air. Sandy actually laughed, almost a first. "See, I don't think you'd ever be my little homemaker." He actually seemed relieved.

Rudy was a good deal taller than Sandy but not really any stronger. So as he headed for the bedroom his gait wasn't exactly steady. Sandy ducked his head to avoid being brained by the doorframe. Rudy staggered before dumping Sandy rather unceremoniously on the bed, and Rudy tumbled down on top of him. "I think I pulled

something.”

“And here I thought that was my job.”

Quite a fit of levity from Sandy. Perhaps he was finally coming around.

It was dark in the bedroom with the lights off and the blinds closed. Sandy reached down and grabbed him rather perfunctorily. But Rudy wasn't complaining. He couldn't even if he wanted to. Sandy's touch sucked the air from his lungs. There was a feeling of connection again, deep, ancient connection that brought tears to his eyes. Every glib comment vanished from his mind in awe of it. This was where he was meant to be, this was the man he would do anything for. Anything. *This is meant to be.*

As a gift of his animal nature he saw Sandy's face even in the dim light. And as Sandy lay on his back Rudy tried to draw out every ounce of pleasure he could with his hands and mouth. He pulled those ugly clothes right off again and tossed them aside. The young man palpably relaxed, even felt softer beneath his fingertips. Finally he pressed into Sandy's body and the connection closed like a perfect circuit. Energy flowed up into his body making his sense so sharp it was almost painful. Sandy gasped and clung onto him. They should be glowing. Surely Sandy must realize this was more than natural; this was magical. Sure he must realize this was only the beginning?

But just as Rudy felt they were ready to break through into something, to become to each other what fate and magic had long intended he came with a frustrated cry and descended back into the muted tones and touch dulled with the gloves of normal mortal perception. He made love to Sandy more tenderly; drew out his lover's climax slow like taffy.

They lay together in the darkness; exhausted, silent. A moment of togetherness, of ignorance, of willful waiting.

Perhaps Sandy also knew something was coming; the future was bearing down on them. Rudy wondered whether Sandy was afraid, and whether fear would be wise with so much before them that was either uncanny or unknown. Rudy could not choose to be anything other than the fated *yokai* servant of the true Prince.

But could a man choose not to be the Prince?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

The alarm clock went off the next morning with a single, long, shrill beep. Sandy got up immediately, as usual. Rudy resisted the urge to try to hold onto him. Sandy wasn't the 'five more minutes' type. He had to be off to be a good little minimum wage worker. *Humble, but oh so uncompromising.*

Maybe that was how he was trying to not be like his father who looked to be the grandiose and domineering sort. Anyway, it was time to get up and go to work and that was what Sandy was going to do.

The call yesterday from Sandy's Mom still niggled at the back of Rudy's mind. "Do you every worry about what your father might be up to?"

"...And why don't you tell me about why you stole the onri I was guarding, and why a strange Japanese man seemed to be set on abducting you," Sandy replied defensively.

Rudy sat bolt upright in the bed. "Yes, let's do that. I'll even start. It certainly hasn't been me that's been holding back on talking all about that. Allow me to summarize, even. I can turn into a score of sentient rats, as you know, and I've been trying to find out why. It has something to do with ancient Japanese mythology. Probably, not coincidentally, a Japanese gentleman apparently proficient in martial and occult arts once tried to seize my person—"

"Good God, but you choose your moments, Rudy. We can't go through all that now. My father, if you must know, is a bigot, a tyrant and a brute. But he has never been interested in me before, and I don't see why he would start now." Sandy was dressed already, slipping on his shoes from where they waited on the seat of a wooden chair sitting at the foot of the bed. "We can talk about the rest of it tonight," he conceded, but with obvious reluctance.

Nevertheless there were some truths that needed to be faced. "Okay, if you're really up for it. I'll even have dinner ready this time."

"Those savings of yours will last longer if we don't order so much take out," Sandy said. He leaned over for a hasty kiss that mostly missed its target and glanced off his cheek.

"Trust me. I have, of late, developed a taste for home cooking. Just you be careful, all right?"

Sandy gave that rare, crooked smile of his. "Oh the irony," he said. He was ready to leave but something made him pause. "Are you all right, Rudy? It's not like you to be so tense, let alone about the two of us having a chat after work." He rested his hand on Rudy's arm.

"I don't want to lose you."

"Finding out you turn into rats didn't do it. What do you think could?"

"It's only the beginning, Sandy."

Sandy looked down at him, no bland, automatic reassurances in his mouth. He just nodded, and left.

Rudy was still musing on that enigmatic response, sinking back into a half-sleeping daze, when he dimly heard someone coming back into the apartment. He assumed that it was Sandy.

But that didn't make a lot of sense. Sandy was the organized sort, and hardly impulsive. He wouldn't need to come back for anything and he wouldn't come back just for the.... He saw a flash of someone else entirely, and then it went black.

* * * *

"So, Hansen. *This* is the rat demon?"

"The *yokai*, yes."

The second speaker pulled a needle from Rudy's arm. He was the Japanese man that had once tried to kidnap him from Rudy's apartment.

The first man was Matthew George Turner himself, rather heavier and paler than he had appeared in his online photographs. Rudy's head lolled rather than turned to see he was strapped down on something that looked sinisterly like an operating table.

"He looks like a Jew," Turner said drawing a cautious step closer.

"Does he." The other man was not interested enough to even make that sound like a rhetorical question. "He hasn't been claimed. That will make things easier. Very unwise of

your son."

"Then what is my son doing with him?"

"I don't think you really wish to know. Nor does it matter. The *yokai* is drawn to his destined charge, but he may be indentured to another master if certain rites are observed."

"Let's just get this done, Hansen. I'll have my demon, you'll have your cash and we'll both be happy to never meet again." The elder Turner was not long on charm, clearly.

It was strange how this Hansen met Rudy's eyes with a subtle kind of disdainful look—as if he had not great respect for Mr. Turner. Rudy wondered what his own face was giving away. Did he look scared enough to pass for someone who had no idea what a rat demon was? Even though they didn't seem to be buying it, better he at least try to pretend.... "I don't mean to be impolite, but what the hell do you people think you are doing! Are you fucking crazy or what? Let me out of here or I'll have the cops on your ass!" He shook the buckled restraints but found they did not give more than a millimeter. He craned his neck, and saw he was in a large room. Rudy focused on trying to look like he was totally confused about what was going on. Given that he had apparently been drugged and abducted the panic was not entirely faked, he just needed to let it show. "Who the hell are you guys? Let me out of this fucked up thing. This is some kind of mistake! You want money? A ransom or whatever. I'll pay, I swear!"

Meanwhile, he noticed he was in the very centre of the room, and it was large enough to host a small ball. In fact, the parquet floor and chandeliers suggested that was just what it was for. There were no windows though, just walls broken by decorative molding and a couple of mirrors. He couldn't even see a door.

On the whole the two men didn't react very much to his ranting. They were both turned his way and Turner shuffled a little closer, looking him over like a less than satisfactory buffet. "He certainly doesn't look like a demon in the making."

"I am *quite* sure," Hansen replied. "He will have all the powers of the *yokai*, once he is claimed."

"You are sure once the ritual is complete he will be loyal?"

"I did not promise that he would be loyal. He will be obedient. There is a difference." A glint, it seemed, of Hansen's real feelings for his employer.

Rudy's mind raced as he tried to decide what to do. Press on with his act? Or what? His options were pretty damned limited and Sandy's Dad was certainly living down to the little his son had said about him.

"We will do it tonight," Turner said. "If it is as you say."

"Hey, man," Rudy said. "It's a date; I mean how could I refuse?" He shook his manacled hands to emphasize the point. "But perhaps you could let me know what kind of an event you are planning so I know whether I need to bring a corsage?"

Neither of the men so much as looked his way when they left the room. Rudy tried to pull the fear back in. Once they had gone, he tried to float over his nerves, like when he was on a job. Only this time he didn't need to break in, he needed to break out and his options were pretty damned limited.

What scared him most was that his most obvious trick should work, but if these people

knew he was a *yokai* surely they would do something to prevent it? He had the power to transform his body into a pack of large brown rats. In that form he should easily slip the restraints. But natural caution made him pause. Being out in the open in the middle of the room made him even more nervous. Being alone.

He peered around and saw nothing, the room was empty. No obvious cameras, although with miniaturization that didn't really mean anything. He closed his eyes and listened. Nothing. But that didn't mean much. He waited. There was something not quite right about the air movement in the room, like it was coming from floor level not ducts up in the ceiling like in most similar old places.

It was implacably obvious he only had two options. To do nothing or shape change and hope for the best. He took a deep breath and summoned the change. As the first rats hit the ground their whiskers bristled as they gasped. By the time they realized their mistake the other rats had already leapt for the floor. The soporific effect of oxygen deprivation spread along the psychic bond they all shared.

Within a few minutes his two captors's reentered the room. "It is not that I disbelieved you," Turner said casually. "But a wise man once said, 'trust but verify.'"

"I would not anticipate or expect any such trust," Hansen replied.

At their feet the scruffy brown rats lay in a pile, quite unconscious. Their small bodies effected quickly by the heavy, scentless gasses hanging close to the floor. Hansen held his breath as he bent to recover them one by one and placed them back on the bed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Rudy had returned to his human form while unconscious. He awoke strapped back in place on the hard cot with something heavy on his chest. He was dressed in some kind of garment, like a dressing gown but made of some stiff, starched material. Silk, maybe. He peered groggily at his chest where a cold, hard object lay on top of the robe and weighing against his chest. Whatever it the thing was, he felt its influence seeping and circulating though his body, keeping him in human form. Doubly bound, a feeling of abject helplessness washed coldly through him.

Something was wrong; well, something *else* was wrong. He moved his left arm. It was positioned as if bound down to the table but only a stump was tucked into the manacle.

This had happened just once before to Rudy—that he had reformed with one of the rats missing, this same one as it happened—the smallest rat, which in his human form made up his left hand. It was gone and the long-sleeved robe he wore had been arranged to conceal that fact.

Rudy blinked and looked away. Whatever that meant he probably should not draw attention to it. That damned man, Hansen, was in the room. He was also dressed in some kind of robe but where Rudy's costume was gold, his was black. Although Rudy could simply pull his stump out of the restraints it was hardly do him any good, as it had no fingers on that arm to open the other restraints with.

Hansen was his one possible way out of here. Groggy, Rudy struggled to break free of his unnatural dull, calmness to try and do something, anything, to escape.

"So what's in all this for you?" Rudy asked, his voice slurred by a dry mouth and dull mind. "Money," Hansen replied politely. "Nor should you complain. This is your destiny. You will have great power and you will fill the role intended for you."

"He is not the one," Rudy whispered.

"He will be now."

"You think that man is the Prince? The *Swan* Prince?" Rudy strained forward but he felt so weak he couldn't even keep his neck craned up enough to see the man and the preparations he was making. But he saw the tiniest flicker of doubt in the other man's eyes.

Ultimately Hansen just repeated, "He will be now."

Rudy's unnatural exhaustion deepened. Tugging weakly at the restraint on his other hand and feet, he doubted he could even stand up if he managed somehow to break loose, let alone run away. He had no feeling for what time it was, or even what day. If Sandy had come home, what would he think? That Rudy the irresponsible thief had just run off without him?

Life leaked out of him like water from a cracked vessel. There was chanting; he didn't remember when it had started. It was darker than before and there was a smell, like smoke and flowers. *Maybe I am leaving Sandy after all. I hope he knows, somehow that it was not my choice.*

He tried to reach out with his mind to find the missing part of him but that function of his mind simply didn't respond. What did that mean? Maybe the rat was too far away, or the stone amulet on his chest blocked his thoughts? Or perhaps it had even been killed. That thought left him cold, that he might never be whole again.

Then the elder Turner appeared looking ridiculous and self-conscious in a golden ceremonial dress that seemed like a richer, scarlet-embroidered version of what Rudy wore. Rudy struggled to keep his flickering eyelids open. He lost track of time as the words droned on, interlacing and overlaying each other in a way that should have been impossible with just one voice. Turner stood looking down at him. His fleshy face glistened with sweat and his thin mouth was clamped shut. He touched the back of Rudy's shackled hand and a spark leapt between them.

It took hold in Rudy burning with incredible pain like a hot poker shoved straight into his entrails. His sight dimmed as if there was a bright light coming from behind him, as if there was a bright light coming from him.

Turner dragged off his robe, standing completely naked. Then he jerked, his eyes rolled up and without a sound he pitched forward onto the ground. Sandy stood behind him, the narrow, and coiled wired of the Taser punched onto his father's back.

"I don't know what my father was planning to do," Sandy said. "But I am pretty sure we'll all be happier if he doesn't." He sounded confident, but he looked scared as hell with his finger pressed white against the handle of the Taser.

Hansen turned to Sandy, arms raised and clearly ready to attack. The door burst in and several men burst in each raising a side arm at Sandy. He raised a cell phone in his other hand.

"911 on speed dial, Father," he said. "Let's agree that Rudy and I just walk out of here,

rather than you depending on your influence to beat a ... well, kidnapping charge at the very least."

Turner staggered to his feet, a cursing, and confused, enraged heap of flabby flesh.

"It is done, anyway," Hansen said.

"Then I could tell him to stay."

"Not yet, it will be longer this way. But it is already inevitable. He must succumb to the torpor first. Then will come the change."

Sandy edged over to the table and fumbled, one-handed, with the nearest hand shackle. Rudy managed to sit up and free his feet. Everyone else in the room waited for Turner's verdict as Sandy jammed another cartridge into his bulky Taser. Turner was occupied trying to pull back on the ridiculous robe. By the time he was done Rudy was free, sliding off the table onto weakened legs.

He felt different, lighter, and almost hollow. He dragged off the robe, the touch of that heavy cloth on his skin felt like poison and he knew he had to get it off him. Underneath he was naked but he wasn't bashful; if he had to walk out of here right into the Macy's parade it wouldn't stop him. Turner's lackeys would not waver for long and their boss's exaggerated modesty was giving them the only chance for escape they might be offered.

Rudy laid one arm over Sandy's shoulders in the hope it would help keep him upright and headed for the door. They made it to the door, and through, then into the foyer. They made it out of the house and onto the sharp gravel of the parking area out front.

Mrs. Turner stepped out from behind the potted topiary.

"Mom!" Sandy exclaimed.

She hushed him as she approached them.

Fear had been Rudy's strength, but the relief of escape sucked the strength out of Rudy and his knees buckled. He knelt on the sharp stones, Sandy by his side. Sandy's mother passed him a key on a small fob.

All she actually said was, "That one." Rudy saw a movement at the edge of his blurring vision, presumably she pointed to one of the many Turner cars. "Hurry. There is still a chance."

As Rudy tumbled into the passenger seat he couldn't help but mumble. "I think it's long past time you had a proper conversation with your Mom, Sandy."

* * * *

"The Swan Prince," Sandy said, in about the same tone of voice he might use to say 'the Disney princess' or 'the bogey man'.

"The *Swan Prince*," Rudy repeated, again, "Is the master of the rat demon. When the power of the magus family line proceeds to the first new vessel of the next generation another demon is created. I assume there is meant to be a less haphazard way of bringing the two together. But I found out what I was, I found you..."

"But how..."

"I just know!" Rudy was officially beginning to lose it.

Sandy had taken a room at the downtown hotel and brought down the white terrycloth robe to the car. Rudy tried to look confident riding up in the elevator, just like any run of the mill one-handed man wearing nothing but a robe. He curled up on the bed, Sandy stood

acing the room.

"Don't you?" Rudy asked. Even to his own ears his voice sounded thin, like some querulous stranger. "Don't you feel ... something?"

He sighed. Maybe not. Maybe the drive was in him to find his intended master. But the magic would hardly place any restrictive imperative on his own descendents. Perhaps Sandy didn't feel anything at all.

"Well, anyway. Don't you need to ... I mean you are missing one. Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Your Pop seemed to have a lot armed men with twitched attitudes. I was afraid you might insist on having a little rat hunt around the family manse and get yourse ... get us both killed."

Sandy scowled, but all he said was, "Is that what is making you sick. The lost rat?"

"I told you what is making me sick."

He could feel no connection to the missing rat. But a connection to something else entirely moved beneath him, like waves beneath the bow of a great boat. It was drawing him away and he knew no way to fight it. Strange sensations ran over his body. Sparks that showed as bright flashes inside his eyes, his senses dimming and sharpening, a feeling like floating, fevers and chills. The hollow feeling was now replaced by a growing warm heaviness, the weakness replaced by a beguiling languid sloth. All he wanted to do was sleep, lean his head down on the pile of white pillows laid out so invitingly.

"Rudy?" Sandy knelt on the floor beside the bed, leaning forward. "Shouldn't we find it before you fall asleep? I just ... I remember how you ran halfway across the city to get back the rat that got separated from you during the burglary of the exhibit."

Rudy dimly recalled his panic that day. He'd never had one of the rats so far away from him, he'd never gone back to human form without one before. But he didn't feel the panic he had then. He didn't really feel anything but fatigue. His eyes drooped closed.

He felt Sandy reach over and grasp his arm. "Rudy, Rudy, open your eyes. We have to figure out what to do here."

He sounded scared and Rudy tried to care about that, too. But something was numb, maybe even dying inside him, and he couldn't respond. Rudy lay still, eyes closed, sinking slowly down into syrupy darkness.

Sandy reached over to brush back that ragged fringe that always fell over Rudy's face. Rudy knew the untidy hair irritated Sandy, although—as usual—he'd never quite come out and said anything about it. He knew Sandy was kneeling there looking at him, with a beautiful pensive expression on his face.

"Rudy," Sandy said, quietly, one more time. Some time passed, unmarked. In his disoriented state Rudy could never even guess how long the silence stretched. Then there was a faint rustle and movement as Sandy stood. "It's all right, Rudy," Sandy said. He spoke quietly as if he did not think Rudy could actually hear him. "I'll get that rat. Once you're whole again it will be all right. I'll look after you."

Rudy wanted to sit up, to reach out and stop Sandy from going back to that house. He intended to move, to open his eyes, to speak. But he didn't. He was drowning in his own loss of will—he couldn't tell if he was sedated, paralyzed or even already asleep and only

dreaming. He was slipping further and further down. He just heard the hotel door opening and was fully unconscious by the time Sandy closed it behind him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

The rat woke from its deep slumber feeling sated and content. A slight current of air brushed over its trembling vibrissae and smoothed its thick, dark brown fur. He uncurred and stretched out, falling slightly to one side. Looking down he saw his left forelimb ended bluntly at the elbow joint.

Vexing.

Most unsatisfactory. He reared up onto his haunches and inspected the offending limb. There was definitely meant to be a clawed paw there, he could almost feel the phantom flexing of its digits. But sitting upright on the raised, cushioned platform he adjusted to the absence unsentimentally. There was, after all, a more pressing problem.

Where is the prince?

The faint glow from the *yokai's* body illuminated the empty room. The missing paw was no great inconvenience. After all he could move through the air with the power of thought, balanced by this long, naked tail. The rat demon drifted gently to the floor beside the window. With another thought the aggravating cloth window-covering burst into flame and burned to ash in a few moments.

The dark view dotted with lights was pleasing. A truly magnificent domain, the prince would rule it in glory.

The rat demon would protect the prince, obey the prince, and serve the prince. He suffered only from not knowing what the prince wanted him to do. Or where the prince was, exactly.

Something in the room made a piercing; truly irritating sound and large plastic button on the ceiling flashed with a red light. The rat demon was tired of this nest anyway. The glass before him melted like warm sugar as he passed through into the night.

It was only very faint, but the feeling was there. Rising up into the air, so high that the sinuous, windblown clouds obscured the buildings below. A faint thread tugged and the rat demon quested to follow its almost imperceptible guidance. He glided through the air like a fish in a river. He didn't like the openness, but it was dark and the clouds around him were like sheltering reeds. On and on over the tendril of light, the roads between the buildings were lower here, and darker.

Close, very close.

Down through the currents of air he drifted, down toward the scattered lights until each was occluded first by the building end then by the trees of garden area close to the house in which the prince awaited. The rat demon was happy to go to where the prince waited, it was his duty to serve at the prince's pleasure.

It was awkward to walk in a three-legged gait. His rat-form was not intended for this size, as magnificent as it might appear. The demon thought vaguely of his other form. He could not quite picture it, but knew it was within his power to be of the same kind as the prince. That might be easier to walk upright, rather than expend even a little of his energy half

floating in the tepid evening air, but it was not fitting, not for his first obeisance. The doors were open. The room inside was small and so not becoming a prince. But it was richly appointed and the prince was standing there. A well-fed man with that unmistakable air of command as befitted his station. The prince turned, froze a moment. In his eyes was a mixture of recognition awe and horror as befitted even a prince when he first laid eyes on a demon. But then he smiled.

There were some minions in the room. *Unimportant.* Yet, the rat demon could not fail to notice the bound figure on the floor, male. Standing over him, a woman who was holding some kind of large clutch purse to her chest. The blood made for a pause, she was of the line. She was of the blood.

Irrelevant, she is not the prince.

The prince spoke. "You will obey me."

It was not a question.

The rat demon merely bowed its head, a blink of the eyes to signal his inevitable consent. He could speak, but the words from the muzzle of this form were not well formed. It did not like to speak so inelegantly, out of pride. Out of the same pride he held back his incomplete limb, so its imperfection would not be so easily seen.

"You command the elements," the prince said.

"Fire," the demon replied as commanded. "Earth. Air. Not water, or metal. Lesser spirits do my calling."

"You can bring me wealth."

"Precious gems of the earth, anything owned by another man, wisdoms lost to time."

"You can kill."

"Anything that can die."

The prince smiled, an expression that spread over his face slowly. "You may begin with my so-called son here. Such power would have been wasted on him. He would never have been able to master it."

He indicated, with a lazy wave of his hand, the bound figure on the ground, a young man of small stature who gaped up at him.

"No!" the woman said. She stood over the young man.

"What do you think I care about your opinion, Kimiko?" the prince said. "I needed a son of the line, to attract this monster here. And now it is done I have no further use for either of you. *Yokai*," he said. "Get rid of them both."

The demon moved forward. His finger sized incisors would make fast work of their fragile bodies. The woman reached into her bag and pulled out something. A small rat, its fur slightly matted.

The demon stopped, confused by a wash of inexplicable feelings and memories. He took one more uncertain step and she flung the creature at him. The rat flew through the air with its paws spread out and tail rigid, but as it neared him it dissolved into a cloud of pinpricks of colored light. The rat demon reared up as the lost part melded into his body....

Sandy!

Rudy stumbled forward suddenly awkward in the large rodent body, all its limbs now intact. Sandy's mother tried to stand in his way but he pushed her carefully aside. His

sharp teeth sheered through some of the tape binding Sandy. Sandy broke loose, the tape tearing apart. He struggled to his feet. Turner reached into the drawer of his large leather-topped desk. He drew out some kind of dark, blocky pistol, swinging it up toward them. Rudy wavered; memories formed a shifting mosaic in his mind. His memories and those of the demon since it woke, and echoes of the memories of generations of his kind. But more than anything he felt the loss of the imperative, the command that had been coming from the elder Turner. He might not have the direct bloodline but he had the confidence, the command if a true prince and it was connected by magic to the very centre of Rudy's being.

Mr. Rudy seemed to sense his indecision. "Kill them both now," he said quietly. "Together we can have anything we want."

Rudy felt his demon-self surge forward and almost swamp his human will. He swung his head toward Sandy and bristled, channeling Turner's rage.

Sandy grabbed his mother by the shoulders and dragged her back. Sandy stood, his shirt torn, baring his chest. Rudy was close enough that the short vibrissae of this muzzle touched Sandy's skin. It was still in him to strike. He was a creature of obedience and only one person had stepped forward to command him. He felt the pulse of Sandy's blood beneath the skin and scented his sweat, and his fear.

"Rudy. Don't."

Sandy's voice wasn't strong, what he asked was unclear and unempathic to the demon instincts. They were instincts to be led, to obey. They required not a lover, but a master.

"Sandy," his mother added. "You must be stronger. You must have the will of a prince."

"Will? The boy doesn't have a will," his father sneered.

"Because you did your best to beat it out of me."

"Oh, stop whining." Turner cocked his pistol and aimed it, straight at Sandy's head. "You were never my son. I let your mother and you take my name, my money, because of this. Only for your sake would she have me, although have me she did. And only for this power would I have her. I have waited a long time for it, years after the age the prince is supposed to call the demon. I can only hope this monster is not as poor a demon as you are a prince..." His gun tracked over to Mrs. Turner. "...Or you a wife."

"Stop him!" Sandy shouted.

The small, unenchanted part of him that Mrs. Turner had kept apart responded, the imperative cutting clean as a razor through all doubt. He leapt toward Turner, teeth gaping. Turner staggered backward, swinging the muzzle and the gun flared white, blared with deafening noise.

The impact struck Rudy like a buffet of a storm wind. Sparks of light flew out from his fur and ignited the curtain and books, and sizzled on the wool carpet. The shock of it threw Rudy back into human form as he collapsed onto the floor. He tried to get to his feet and lunge for the gun as Turner lowered it from the recoil and wavered, just for a moment undecided about what to do next. Who was the most immediate threat?

Rudy's legs buckled under him as flames roared over the loose papers on the desk and rippled up the currents to lick the ceiling. The rat demon was swept from his mind leaving

it as naked and vulnerable as his body.

Looking down at his chest he saw it was unblemished, there was no bullet wound to be seen. The force of the change had discharged the gun's energy.

Turner lunged forward and grabbed Rudy by the arm with one hand and tried to yank him to his feet while keeping the pistol trained on his wife and son. "It looks like my plan is going of a little prematurely," he said, backing toward the door to the garden. "But going off all the same."

Rudy was disoriented, light headed from many kinds of shock but the dark pistol came into focus, as he staggered, rebounding off the corner of the desk that was now fully aflame. Bright light, dark smoke and the choking stink of burning paper swirled around the room and out the door in an erratic column. He lunged and grabbed Turner's arm, dragging the man down.

"Get your Mom out of here, now!" He tumbled on the ground and grappled with Turner whose rasping breath could be heard over the crackly fire that flowed over the papered walls. The thick black smoke rolled over the carpet and eddied as they fought, an ugly, awkward grappling battle. Rudy managed to get two fingers through the trigger guard. He wrenched the weapon away and it flew out of his hand and across the room.

Rudy glanced over to the door into the garden. He saw Sandy as a vague figure through the billows of smoke. He was on the verge of coming back for Rudy but his mother grabbed his arm, holding him back. Turner crawled for the gun and managed to grab the hilt; he was lying on his back, curling up and aiming the weapon at Rudy.

As Rudy crawled toward Turner again, he felt his body suck in the raw power of the flames around him, for a moment the flame guttered down low and the demon power rushed back into him. The rodent form was comfortable on all fours, moving forward swiftly. The fire did not frighten him; the body of a *yokai* could not burn.

Turner leveled the gun at him, but in the rushing euphoria of his powerful demon aspect Rudy barely comprehended what a gun was. He doubted, now, that this toy could hurt him. The fire fed over and through him, making him drunk with its elemental joy but also connecting him again to the bond which flickered uncertainty about Turner.

But Turner did not even try to command him. The old man clenched his finger upon the trigger.

As Rudy settled into his demon form the fire rushed back in full force, more fierce than before. In one frozen moment, the flames rushed over Turner, burning his clothes. It sucked into his lungs, overwhelming and extinguishing his life. Rudy looked down at his body, already motionless and smelling like cooking, and then burning, meat. The gun had fallen to the blackened carpet and it jumped and distorted as first one, then another bullet exploded. The fire rushed over and through the body. The prince was gone, his purpose was gone.

The body of the *yokai* was wreathed and filled with fire. His grip on this form was slipping again but in the void Turner had left the *yokai* felt empty, purposeless. It felt no desire to move away from the man's remains as the fire began to render and destroy them.

"Rudy, come out, come to me!"

My Prince?

"Come to me, come to me now." Sandy stretched out a hand. His mother could be heard whispering, but the words were lost beneath the cackling of the fire. His voice became harder, more commanding. "*Yokai*, come to me. Now!"

Rudy, *yokai* and man combined, walked out of the fire just as the house surrendered its form, collapsing inward with a series of loud pops and cracks. Sandy and his mother stepped back, away from the house and away from Rudy in the form of a giant rat, his eyes and fur literally burning with green-tinged flames.

The fire guttered, the form dropped away, and Rudy dropped, naked, soot covered, and streaked with burns, his hair singed into melted clumps.

"My prince?" he asked in a weak voice as he collapsed onto his knees on the dark, damp grass.

Sandy held him so tight it hurt, by Rudy did not flinch.

"If I must," Sandy replied.

And Rudy knew he did not mean to sound so reluctant. It was just his way.

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thank you for your purchase of *Shifting Perspectives 2* by Sharon Maria Bidwell, Emily Veinglory and Fiona Glass. As you might suspect, this is a second collection of shapeshifter stories. Stop by www.AspenMountainPress.com and take a look at other stories by these talented authors.

Visit www.aspenmountainpress.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.