

EVOLUTIONARIES

My newest set of feathers itched where they were growing in along the back of my neck but I couldn't worry over it just then. Hidden, I hoped, under a canopy of low branches, I didn't move, didn't breathe, as the beasts I'd heard moments before rushed past my hiding spot. Their heavy hooves beat out a thunderous roar as their feet pounded against the ground. Hooves meant herbivores, probably, though I wasn't about to reveal myself to find out for sure. At that size they could still trample me in their stampede, or gore me if they had horns, or, I don't know, crush me with their giant udders. Nothing was guaranteed to be safe in this jungle. I was going to die here, I knew, half way around the world, all because of Amy and how delicious she looked in her new scales.

"Touch them," she had said, lifting her curly blond hair to show off pearl-sized emerald-green scales running down her neck until they disappeared under her gray cashmere sweater. We were roommates, stuck together by random number generation, our junior year at Columbia. I had hated her from the moment we met. She was perky and woke up early to do yoga and didn't seem to study at all. I survived nightly cramming sessions on espresso shots dropped into coffee (red-eyes, we called them) and huge multivitamins, and I resented her ability to be effortlessly perfect while I struggled to maintain a B average. I was seriously considering asking to be transferred out after only a month when I'd caught a glimpse of her emerging from the shower. She hadn't bothered to shut the door, probably because I'd been out, and I don't think she heard me come into the room since the sound would have been dampened by the falling water. The shower shut off and she stepped out with a bounce, before I had time to put down my books or avert my eyes or... Sunlight streaming in through the bathroom window illuminated the droplets of water glistening on her skin and dripping down over her perfect breasts and oh god.

She had smiled when she saw me looking.

I didn't ask for a new roommate.

“Here, Bobby,” she said the day she showed me her scales. We stood in the middle of the room and I was trying to clear my head and then she was grabbing my hand. I had been staring, I just know it, caught between her new body modification and my memory of her previously-perfect skin. “Touch them,” she said. I did, feeling the slick strangeness of it under my fingertips, warm and soft when I’d expected them to be cold. I pictured them going all the way down her back, pictured her bent over in front of me, my hands on her hips as I –

“Do you want to see?” she asked.

I jumped, pulling my hand back. Amy hadn’t ever directly said she was interested in me but she hadn’t been shy about letting me see her naked either, and more than once since the first time.

She smiled. “There are all kinds of options.” Whatever look crossed my face must have betrayed my confusion because she laughed, light and musical, and dragged me over to her terminal. “Look,” she said, logging into some med tech’s sales site. “You can get scales too, if you want, or spikes.” She glanced up at me, studying my face. “Hmm. I don’t think I want you all spiky. Maybe feathers?” She didn’t wait for a response before entering some parameters into the search engine and coming up with an assortment of avian mods. “Red would look very sexy against your hair, since it’s so black, but green would bring out your eyes and...” She paused and smiled again, shyly. “Green would match my scales. We could match, Bobby, like a real pair, not just roommates.”

I never stood a chance.

Feathers require two procedures, done during the same office visit. You can be awake for either, or both, if you’re curious as to how it’s done, but I chose the knock-out option and drifted off to a drug-induced sleep with Amy holding my hand. I woke up slowly in a too-bright room, brought my hand up to shield my eyes and nearly pulled the IV out.

“Oh, don’t do that!” Amy hurried over to close the blinds. “That’s better,” she said as the room darkened. “How are you feeling?”

“Is there any water?” I asked, my voice scratchy. She nodded, curls bobbing cutely, and poured a little rose-pink plastic jug of water into a rose-pink plastic cup. “Thanks,” I added as I took a sip. It was warm and tasted metallic.

“Amy, there’s something wrong with the water.”

“Oh, no, that’s a side effect,” she said. “You’ll be tasting metal in everything for a few days until you adjust to the mods. It’s called *dysgeusia*, which sounds kind of pretty, I think.”

“What is it?”

“Your brain’s got to get used to being wired differently, what with the gene splicing and the starter implants.” She smiled, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. I guess it was now, our generation’s version of the tattoos my parents and grandparents had. I reached up, carefully, with my free hand and felt the back of my skull. Mixed in with my hair were feathers.

“Do you want to see?” she asked. I nodded, and she rummaged through her bag to find a jewel-encrusted case. Opened, it was a double mirror. She held it up in a couple of different places before she found the right spot to let me see behind my head.

The feathers were bright green, nearly the same hue as Amy’s scales.

“They look iridescent,” I said, approving.

“They are,” she told me. “Isn’t that amazing?”

I agreed that it was but looking at myself just then, I wasn’t sure it was really me I saw.

Kids at school didn’t seem to recognize me either, or they suddenly confused me for someone else. Not a specific person, but someone much more interesting than I ever had been before. People I didn’t know waved to me between classes, and girls giggled as I walked by. For once, I didn’t think that was a bad thing. The feathers ran from right above my forehead, along my skull like a mohawk mixed in with my real hair, and they were stuck in the back of my neck, pointing downward the way a bird’s do. Bright green, fading into smaller feathers along my spine and then finally something like down which stopped just below my shoulder blades. After a few weeks the itching stopped and the feathers felt natural enough, but one morning I discovered buds forming on the back of my wrists.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Amy cried happily when I showed her.

“That isn’t supposed to happen,” I said. “I didn’t get implants there.”

“Well, the implants were just to give you guide feathers. They’ll fall out and be replaced by the new ones your body is making. But for you to be sprouting feathers in new places, that’s really special!” She grabbed my hands, turning them over and back again to check that I was mutating in only the one

spot (so far). “I’m so jealous, Bobby. I only have scales where I got the skin graft.”

She pouted a little then and I knew she meant what she was saying. I wanted to argue, tell her I was going back to the clinic to get this stupid mod taken out of me, but she was still holding my wrists in her hands.

Her fingers were warm.

I reached for her. I don’t even know what I was doing. I gently put my hand on the back of her neck, sliding my fingers down her scales. She sighed a little, happily I think, and looked up at me. Her eyes were greener than I remembered.

I thought she was going to kiss me but instead she said, “I think it’s time I take you to meet Adam.”

We found Adam Kindschy holding court in a 5<sup>th</sup> floor quad room in the Laney building. I mean exactly that – he was sitting in a chair in the middle and everyone else was cross-legged on the floor, or lounging on bean bags. There weren’t even any other chairs in the room. The doors on either side that I knew led to bedrooms were closed, but it I could hear noises from each them. Grunts and chirps.

“What are we doing here?” I asked Amy angrily, but she left me standing in the doorway while she bounced over to Adam. I stopped looking at her butt long enough to see Adam smirking at me.

“Amy, baby,” he said. “You bring a *pet*?” She fell to her knees in front of him, and I almost left right then.

I wanted to leave, anyway.

“No, Adam, this is Bobby. I told you about him,” she replied. Adam reached out and casually entwined his fingers in her hair, pulling her closer. Looking up at me, he stuck his tongue out and licked the scales just behind her ear. My hands clenched into fists before I could stop myself. Amy, her eyes closed, leaning against him, didn’t notice, but Adam did.

“Hmm. Maybe not a pet,” he said, letting her go. “What’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this, Bobby?” The others, five girls and one hulking jock guy, turned to look at me.

“What kind of place is this, Adam?” I asked. The feathers on the back of my neck rose up.

“Fair question. Why don’t you get out of my doorway and come in here long enough to find out?”

Letting the door shut behind me, I sat down at the back of the group, putting everyone else between me and Adam. Amy looked uncertain for a moment but stayed where she was. Adam explained that they were all altered in some way, but instead of doing it for a statement or for art, they’d modded their bodies to be more like animals.

“It’s our aspect, bro. The next step in evolution,” said the jock, his voice husky. His black and brown scales weren’t smooth like Amy’s, and they came up from under the front of his shirt to wrap around his throat. “It’s forced evolution, man, giving us the best of the whole planet.”

His eyes were yellow.

“But we’re not just *taking* from the animals,” Adam said. I couldn’t see his mod from where I sat. “We’re becoming like them, a part of them, and we can’t sit idly by while they’re being destroyed to give fashion victims a pretty new look to go with their shoes.”

“You should have to pass a test or something, before you can get modded,” a girl with dark skin and even darker spots running up her arms, down her legs. “It should be, like, a *law*.”

“We don’t need laws, Cherie. We’re going to take down the machine,” Adam said with a grin.

“What machine is that?” I asked.

“The jungle factories,” he answered back. “In Brazil, in Ecuador, places like that, these med companies are rounding up the animals and dissecting them, like a shop chopping up bikes for spare parts.”

I didn’t think that was right, and said so. “The *Journal’s* Business section had a write-up on HerpTech last week. They make snake and lizard skin grafts and do gene stripping for mods. All of their material is grown in a sterile lab. They don’t use real animals.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” a petite brunette snapped back. She was sitting at Adam’s feet too, her left arm wrapped loosely around his leg. “Do you know how much money companies like that have set aside just to bribe journalists?”

“That doesn’t make sense. It’s cheaper to grow samples in a lab than it is to set up a factory in South America.”

“Not if you want the latest mods on the market,” Adam shot back, and grinned. “You can’t grow something you don’t have, and we all want to buy the newest thing, don’t we? That’s what our culture’s about, chopping up something or someone else for profit.” The others murmured their assent, and I felt like I’d walked into a conversation that was already finished.

“Bobby, Adam’s found the factory. He’s got contacts down there, and we know where it is,” Amy said. “We can do something about it.”

“What can we do?” I asked. “We’re juniors in college, Amy. We’re not even ready to graduate yet.”

“What can we do?” Adam asked sharply. “We can stop them, *Bobby*,” he answered himself, saying my name like it was an unpleasant aftertaste. “We have the money, the time, and the desire to get it done.” He leaned back in his chair with that damn grin on his face.

“You mean you have your parent’s money,” I replied, “and if you skip classes you have the time. Yeah, you’re a regular guerrilla warrior.”

“Does he have a gorilla mod now?” another one of the girls asked quietly. Her friends shushed her.

“You’re free to leave any time you like, Bobby,” Adam snapped, “or anytime I’d like you to leave. Don’t forget that.”

Amy looked at me sadly.

“Please stay, Bobby. You could help us.” Her eyebrows crinkled together and I thought she might cry. I’d never seen her cry before, and I didn’t want to now. Adam tilted his head in her direction and raised one eyebrow, asking, without asking, if I was in.

I nodded.

“Fine. What’s plan?”

It was simple enough for us to charter a plane down to Brazil. Todd (that was the big guy’s name) offered to borrow his dad’s plane, and one of the Li girls did too, but Adam said we should be untraceable, unexpected, and buying tickets made us part of the herd.

“A bunch of us are going to Costa Rica,” I lied to my father, when he asked why I needed him to courier my passport and some paper cash.

“Do you have time for that, son?” he asked. My mother, jacked into the call as well, added, “Don’t you have tests coming up?”

"I'm ahead in my labwork and I've already read all of the books that were assigned for my Post-Democratic European Consortium class. I'll be fine," I assured them.

"Can't you go over the summer?" Mom asked. "I don't like the idea of you leaving school in the middle of a semester."

"Who's going on this trip, Robert? Do I know their parents?" my father asked. I sighed as quietly as possible.

"Yes dear, that's a great idea. We'll call the parents and set up a little vacation for after finals," Mom added.

"I... I don't know her parents, Mom," I said, wondering how I would tell Amy that I couldn't go after all.

"A girl?" Mom asked quietly. "Oh."

"If Robert's certain that it won't impact his coursework I think we should let him enjoy himself, Shelly," my father said. "Remember, you and I met in college."

Mom giggled, my father said something about a camping trip and a capsized boat, Mom actually laughed, and I'm pretty sure they were halfway to the bedroom before they realized I was still on the line. Which is how I ended up on a commercial jet flying into the Mexico City industrial complex.

I didn't see much of it, just the towers rising above the permasmog, same as you'd see on a postcard. The airport is located far enough outside the city, what used to be a real human city anyway, that it's technically not part of Mexico City anymore, but it was closest. A group of engineers sat in the row in front of me, and I ended up overhearing part of the history lesson / virtual tour they paid for. It showed on their seat-back screens, not mine, but the narrator's voice carried enough that I could make out bits about the migration from the jungles and into the cities, and how the still-declining population meant space for corporations to move large production facilities in. A bunch about about tax breaks.

I didn't care.

The airport was surrounded by apartment buildings and shops, the people in front of me were saying. They were getting ready to do a six-month job in the city and would be living here, near the airport, but eventually we were off the plane and I lost them in the crowd. I had no interest in MC itself, but the idea of a hot meal in one of the nearby cafes sounded nice. I glanced around,

spotting the other kids milling about in the lounge, carefully ignoring each other.

Amy looked every bit the vacationing college coed, in a bright blue tank top, khaki cargo shorts, and blue trainers that matched her shirt – brand new, all of it. She leaned against a pillar, trying to stop herself from looking in Adam's direction, and failing, over and over again.

We weren't supposed to talk to each other. That was King Adam's plan. Blend in, be discreet, be stealthy, like some kind of prep school ninja squad that wasn't old enough to drink yet. We all moved at roughly the same time, toward a handful of food carts, waiting for the one plane to take us into Brazil.

Adam and I met each other's gaze, just once, and I glanced down at his khaki cargo shorts – the same as what I had on, and Amy, and every other person except Cherie, who was wearing capri sweat pants.

He sighed at the same time I did. *Right*, I thought. *We're really going to blend in.*

As it turned out, we did. We matched perfectly with everyone else boarding the tiny airplane that would take us the rest of the way, because we were the only ones on it.

“Are you joking?” Adam said in an angry whisper, once we were aboard. The solitary flight attendant hadn't even bothered assigning seats, so we grouped together in the middle of plane. “Todd, why are we the only ones here?”

The big guy looked confused. “I don't know. Why are we?” he asked. Adam punched a seat and shook his head.

“How are we supposed to get in and out without drawing suspicion to ourselves when we're the only people on this airplane?” he said, louder.

“Oh come on,” I answered, rolling my eyes. “A bunch of college kids, from the same college mind you, just happen to end up travelling into the jungles of Brazil at the same time, and you honestly thought no one would notice us? You could have filled this plane with workers and locals and you know what? We would have still stood out.”

“You can turn back any time, little man,” Adam snarled at me. “You don't need to question my plans. My plans got us this far.”

“Did your plans ever include telling us to not all wear the same pair of shorts?” I snapped. “We look like missionaries.” I slouched backward in my seat,

clutching my backpack on my lap. It contained my one spare set of clothes, money, passport, and the find-me tracker my dad had insisted on sending with me. The tracker looked like black plastic disk, not much bigger than a coin, with a button on one side and a light on the other, meant to flash when the tracker was activated. It felt like proof of something I didn't want to think about.

I let the rest of them talk over the plan a few more times. They ignored me, even Amy, but I told myself didn't care about that either. I didn't want to care, anyway, which was almost the same thing.

The man waiting for us outside of the airport was obviously expecting something else, because he pulled Adam aside and spoke in short, explosive sentences, emphasized with several jabs of his hand in our direction. I didn't understand the language – Spanish? Portuguese? I suddenly realized I had no idea what they spoke here – but Adam's defiant “It's who we are, man!” made me self-conscious.

“As if the shorts weren't bad enough. Amy, look around!”

She did, grinning like a pixie. “I know, isn't it amazing? We're closer to nature already. Closer to the planet.”

“That's not what I mean. Look at us, compared to everyone else. Body modding with animal genes isn't exactly popular down here.” I studied the street vendors and spotting what I needed, grabbed her elbow. “C'mon, this way.”

She jerked her arm free. “What are you doing?”

“I'm buying us hats,” I said, pointing. “Cover up and stay out of the sun, too.”

“It's dishonest to hide who we are inside, Bobby. I thought you understood that.”

“It's safer. Be who you are, please, but don't die because of it.”

“If that's what it takes,” she said, turning away. I pushed through the spectators that were starting to gather around us and manage to pay far too much for a faded blue cap with a red-faced cartoon man on it. He had a feather behind his head, and I don't know, it seemed appropriate. I felt like a cartoon version of myself, scrambling to get back to reality. The kid in front the table didn't try to haggle me up, and vigorously suggested every other item in his stall,

even putting a pair of sunglasses on my face before I could stop him. I handed them back.

“Do you have a map?” I asked. “Uh, ‘mapa?’” The kid nodded and held up one hand as he stepped next door to banter with his neighbor.

“Bobby, let’s go!” Adam yelled. “Hustle or get left behind.” I swore, running back across the street to join the others already piling into an ancient van. Just as I stepped up into it, I felt something tugging at my backpack.

“Hey, back off!” I yelled, but it was only the street vendor.

“Mapa!” he declared with a grin, handing over a folded piece of plastipaper. I gave him the change in my pocket and he ran off, hooting.

“Guess that was enough,” I mumbled, taking the only empty seat left, next to Tony. Amy was up front, sitting on Adam’s lap. “Great,” I sighed.

Tony leaned over. “What is that?” he asked.

“Map, I think.” I unfolded it. “Old but, it might come in handy.”

“You’re smart, Bobby,” Tony said. “Dumb as a bag of rocks, but, smart, too.”

I thanked him, he nodded, and sat back, the longest conversation we had ever had, already over.

I woke up so stiff I could barely move, my head on the big guy’s shoulder and both arms wrapped tight around my pack. It was dark outside, but I think it was the silence that woke me. The van’s sputtering engine wasn’t running.

We’d stopped.

When the van rumbled back to life and drove away, it was the seven of us: Adam, Amy, Tony, Cherie, me, and the two Li girls I’d thought were twins until I’d noticed they weren’t the same height, and then finally figured out weren’t sisters at all when I’d spotted them making out in the airplane. Their feathers were patterned exactly the same: yellow just at the top of their foreheads; red and white poking out between strands of their identical long black hair; blue on the edges of their forearms. They looked like tropical birds, to me. Maybe the only ones who fit in here.

“Where?” Tony asked. Adam pointed him toward the jungle, and Tony started walking. Cherie followed. Adam took Amy’s pack from her and headed out, with her right on his heels.

“C’mon, little bird,” one of the Li girls said to me. “Don’t get left behind.”

By the time we stopped, Amy couldn't walk any further, and Cherie had fallen asleep 30 minutes before. Tony carried her, until Adam finally agreed to make camp. We were sweating, freezing, wandering in the dark, and I didn't even have the energy to be sarcastic about it. Somehow we got tents up. Adam spiked a sonic Keep-Away he swore would repel predators while I wobbled unsteadily. Warm hands pulled me inside a tent, took off my shoes, and put me into a sleeping bag. I reached for Amy but fell asleep before I could find her.

When I opened my eyes again, it was light, and I wasn't in Amy's tent.

"Good morning," a girl whispered. It was the taller of the Li girls, who was propped up on one elbow, the other arm around her sleeping girlfriend. "You feeling okay?"

I rolled over to face her, and and nodded. "You put me to bed?" I asked quietly.

She smiled. "This one helped, but yeah. You were asleep on your feet."

"Thanks."

She looked down at the other girl, that smile still on her face, and I could see they looked nothing alike. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Samantha. She's Melanie. Yes, I've heard the rumors. No, we're not sisters, we're not related, we're not even the same ethnicity, really, but we're both from Sacramento and we have the same last name, so Housing thought we were, and put us in the same room."

"Computer error in your favor," Melanie mumbled, eyes still closed.

"Yours, too. Ready to get up?" Samantha asked.

"Not even a little bit." The girls snuggled closer to each other.

"I'm gonna, uh... Go," I said, sitting up. "Um..."

"Shorts and shoes by the door, top bag," Samantha whispered. "Save us some breakfast."

I found my stuff in a zipseal, popped the vent and let air back in. As the bag inflated, it opened. Everything, including my socks, were bone dry, insect-free, and deodorized. I may have grabbed an ancient, second-hand, map at the last minute, but I hadn't thought to bring any of these.

Outside, the others were sitting around a tiny campfire. Cherie and Amy shared a fallen log, and were looking through a small pile of tin cans, while Adam and Tony seemed to be having a disagreement about a half-opened, mud-covered crate.

“Food?” I asked as I walked over to them.

“More like historical artifacts,” Cherie said. “This stuff’s just ingredients. You have to cook it.”

“So?”

“So? We’re in the jungle. We’re supposed to have camp food. Self-heating, pre-mixed, gourmet meals. *It’ll be like we’re on vacation*, right, Tony?”

The big guy shrugged. “Sorry, baby.”

“Just shut up and cook it, Cherie,” Adam snapped. “I built you a fire.”

“That’s great. You wanna build me a sauté pan and a can-opener, too?”

Adam stepped toward her, but Tony stopped him with one hand. “No, man.” They turned back to the crate. “I don’t think any of that is here. We got taken.”

“I can help,” I said to Cherie. “Let’s see what you got.” I crouched down, putting myself between Adam and the girls, and picked up a can. “What’s got him so tense?” I whispered. Cherie opened her mouth to reply but Amy interrupted with:

“Can’t you just be part of the group, Bobby? For once, be on Adam’s side.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” I shot back.

“Are you?” she asked. “Doesn’t look like it to me.” She stood and stomped away, and I very nearly managed to keep myself from watching her go.

Almost.

20 minutes later, breakfast was served. “Come get it now, before I eat mine and yours too,” Cherie said loudly.

“How did you do it?” Tony asked her.

“Bobby did it,” she told him. “He cut the lids off with a laser pen, cut a little hole in the side, and made a handle out of the lid. Put it in the hole, hold the can over the fire, and it cooks!”

“My dad and I went camping when I was little,” I explained. “Like, real camping. Oh, we have to save some for Samantha and Melanie.”

Amy frowned. “You’re making friends?”

“Well, you know, those girls are very friendly,” I said pointedly.

“We’re coming, we’re coming!” Melanie called out. Laughing, she and Samantha were somehow tangled up in the doorway to our tent, but not really, like a play fight that the tent happened to be interrupting. I was jealous that

they actually seemed to be having a good time. Free at last, they jogged over to us.

“Ooh,” Samantha moaned appreciatively as I handed them both forks and cans of warm chicken stew. They sat down on either side of me.

“Were you saying something about our Bobby here?” Melanie asked Amy.

“Just didn't know you three were close,” she replied, poking her stew with a fork instead of eating it.

“Well, we certainly are now,” Melanie said. “The kind of close where we had to help him find his shorts this morning.”

I coughed on mouthful of clam chowder.

Amy swore something rude under her breath.

“Snake,” Samantha hissed back, as if that were worse.

“Listen up,” Adam said. “We're not far, and we need to move.” He outlined his plan, which basically involved leaving every bit of tech behind (“so their sensors don't spot us”) and walking up to the front gate. I resisted the urge to point out a sneak attack doesn't usually involve waving hello to the guards, but I hadn't considered what our other options could be. Hadn't considered much about this trip, except that Amy was going on it.

“Maybe it's time to go home,” I said. “We could start a letter writing campaign. Deface some billboards.” There was a pause, but Adam went on like no one had spoken.

“We're going to make them hear us,” he said. “March in there, demand answers, shut the place down!” The murmurs of assent were quieter than they had been back in Laney, but it was enough to make me see I'd be the only one headed home if I didn't stay with the group.

We dropped all of our electronic equipment – screens, tabs, phone patches, even my laser pen – into one of Samantha's zipseals. I was at the end of the line, and she looked at me curiously when I dropped the tracker in last.

“My dad made me bring it. Look, if this goes wrong... bring Melanie back here and activate it, okay?”

She nodded. “You're a good guy when you're not being an idiot,” she said.

“So I hear.”

Stripped of everything but clothes and shoes, without even water bottles or backpacks, I felt lighter and less protected at the same time. We walked mostly in silence, listening to the sounds of wildlife I'd been too tired to notice the day

before. The two or three mile hike seemed to be in a straight line, more or less, and when we found the clearing, we were just about at the front gate. The building it protected was gray, two stories high, windowless, and massive. There had to be hundreds of people at work inside.

I was more worried about the armed guards, though. They saw us, and didn't seem to care.

Their leader strolled up the gate as we got closer. "You lost, kids?" he yelled out to us.

"We're here to speak to the scientists," Adam said, stopping only a few feet from the 15 foot high fence. "What you're doing to the animals is wrong, and we're not going to let you do it anymore."

"You are mistaken, friend. Here we study the effects of global warning on the plants. No animals."

"You're lying!" Adam screamed. "You're all liars!"

"Adam!" Amy cried, running to him.

"Could we speak to someone?" Melanie asked. "Take a tour? We came a long way."

"You can't keep us out," Adam said, shrugging off Amy's attempt to pull him back from the gate. "We'll stay here as long as it takes. We'll protest. We'll call the news. Everyone will know what you're doing."

The guard laughed. "Okay, okay. We'll let you in. Are there more of you?"

"What? No." Adam unclenched his fists, took a deep breath. "It doesn't matter how many of us there are. We have a *right* to be here. You have to let us in."

"Yes, absolutely. Just one moment while I get authorization." The guard walked away from the gate, raising one arm as he did so and waving his hand in a circle.

Tony grunted, a small noise I barely heard. He collapsed as the **pop** sound registered in my brain. Cherie screamed but Tony didn't move at all. Adam wobbled, blood pouring from the hole in his shirt, and as he fell I wondered whether his shirt was red the whole time he'd been wearing it, or if it had been white before. I couldn't remember, and I didn't want to turn him over to check the back.

Then Melanie was pulling me away and the sound came rushing back into the moment – shouting and gunfire – so we ran.

At the edge of the clearing, Amy screamed, and fell.

“Get my dad,” I told Samantha, who was leaning on Melanie with one hand across her stomach. I bolted back to Amy, got my arm under hers, and half-lifted, half-dragged her into the jungle. The gate was opening, a screeching mechanical sound, and I could hear men yelling behind us, so I pick a direction I thought was halfway between the camp and the building.

At the time, I thought I was giving all four of us a better chance.

She was so light when I'd first grabbed her, as if her bones were adapted from a bird's and I wondered if there was a mod for that too, but she got heavier as we stumbled for what felt like hours. We kept tripping over vines, slipping on fallen leaves. Each step became slower, until Amy couldn't stay upright anymore. I pulled her along with me for another few minutes.

“Stop, Bobby. Just stop,” she whispered. I spotted some low branches at the base of gigantic tree and we sank into a pile under them.

For a while, we just breathed.

“What was Adam's modification?” I asked, finally.

“What?” She blinked several times, forcing her eyes open.

“I never knew.”

She sighed. “His mod rejected. He went in four times, kept trying different clinics, but they didn't take. He's allergic.”

“No, that can't be.”

“It's how he knows, Bobby. He knew the mods weren't sterile, hypoallergenic, lab samples. If they were, he'd have had every part of his animal self on display. He has such a strong soul.” She shifted, grimacing, so I pulled her on to my lap as she fumbled to open her shirt.

“There's a lot of reasons that have nothing-” I started, but the fabric of Amy's shit, matted with dried blood, was stuck to her skin, so she yanked harder, ripping it free. Fresh blood bubbled up from the hole in her shoulder.

“Put that back!” I slapped my hand on top of hers, pressing down.

Her blood seeped through my fingers.

“This is what I want, Bobby,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. “This is where I need to be.” She coughed then, a delicate little sound.

“What about what I need?”

She wriggled her hand free of mine, but I kept applying pressure. She looked at me with those green eyes, bright against the impossibly white skin of her face, paler than I'd ever seen her before. "I don't know what that is."

The sounds of the jungle came rushing back to me as her eyes closed. I hadn't realized how much I'd blocked out until that moment. Birds squawked, beasts roared, insects skittered across leaves, down trees, over my shoes. The press of life and movement pushed the breath out of me and I froze, locked together with the body of the most delicious girl in the world, for I don't know how long.

The changing light affected me more than the stinging ants. I brushed them off me, off Amy, and looked up at the darkening sky. In the distance, I heard a rush of noise – something was coming.

"Amy, don't die, please," I begged. "Please, Amy, this isn't where I need to be. I need to go home." She smiled a little, and lifted her hand to my chest.

"We are home," she said softly.

Her hand wavered, and fell.

"Amy," I said. "How do I get home? Please, just tell me... Please."

She didn't answer.